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**LATIN AMERICA'S LEFT TURNS:
BEYOND GOOD AND BAD**

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ABSTRACT

In rapid succession leftwing parties have been elected to government in some of the most important countries in the Latin American region. I challenge the view that there are two distinct variants of the left—one populist, the other social democratic—and argue that variation on the left reflects the diverse conditions under which these forces emerge and evolve. I outline common features shared by the left in Latin America; suggest how the concept of populism and analysis of social movements can help explain this variation; and show how the left's commitment to egalitarianism, balancing markets, and, in some cases, appeals to the constituent power of the people enabled it to benefited from disillusionment with the results of neoliberalism, the poor performance of democratic governments in Latin America, and the evolving international context.

Introduction

In rapid succession, leftwing parties and leaders have been elected to government in some of the most important countries in the Latin American region. Although the underlying social forces at work began earlier, the electoral shifts started with the election of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, followed by the 1999-2000 election of President Ricardo Lagos, who led the *Partido Socialista de Chile* (PS, or Socialist Party of Chile, a member of the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia*, or Coalition of Parties for Democracy) to victory in Chile. The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT, or Workers' Party) leader Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva won election in Brazil in 2002, and was re-elected to a second term in office in October 2006. In the Southern Cone, leftwing Peronist leader Nestor Kirchner (of the *Partido Justicialista*) was elected in Argentina in 2003, followed by Tabaré Vázquez who led the *Frente Amplio* (FA, or Broad Front) to victory in Uruguay in 2004.

In December 2005 former coca union leader Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia on the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS, or Movement toward Socialism) ticket. Socialist leader Michelle Bachelet, successor to Ricardo Lagos, won a runoff election in Chile in January 2006. Rafael Correa placed second in the first round of presidential balloting in Ecuador on October 15, and then won a runoff against Alvaro Noboa on November 26. On November 5, Daniel Ortega, the leader of the Sandinistas, won the presidential election in Nicaragua. Chávez was re-elected by a substantial lead for a new six-year term in the presidential elections of December 2006. Kirchner stepped down and was replaced by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was elected in 2007. Fernando Lugo, a radical former Catholic Bishop, won the presidency of Paraguay in April 2008. Finally, Morales not only survived but increased his support in a recall referendum in August 2008.

Left-wing leaders also mounted impressive electoral challenges in Peru and Mexico. Ollanta Humala, of the *Unión Por el Perú* (Union for Peru, or UPP) won the first round of the election in Peru, only to be narrowly defeated in a runoff by Alan García Pérez of the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA, American Popular Revolutionary Alliance).¹ Andres Manuel López Obrador (often colloquially known as AMLO) substantially increased the vote for the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD, or Party of the Democratic Revolution) in July 2006 elections in Mexico.

The election of so many leftwing leaders and parties has prompted a lively debate over the variety of types of progressive forces in the region and the reasons for their emergence or resurgence.² One view holds that there are at least two distinct variants, or ‘species,’ of the left—one populist, the other social democratic.³ I argue that variation among the forces of the left reflects the diverse conditions under which they emerge and evolve. In general, the

disenchantment with neoliberalism, the poor performance of democratic governments, and the waning of United States' influence in the Western Hemisphere, have created opportunities for the left throughout the region. Progressive forces vary, however, in their approaches to mobilising constituents, their willingness to use state power to temper the marketplace, and the degree to which they challenge constituted power by appealing to the constituent power of the people.

Beyond the Right Vs. Wrong Left Shibboleth

Most observers agree that the various left wing parties, movements, and leaders in Latin America share a common commitment to egalitarianism; a willingness to use the state to balance market forces; and a belief in the importance of popular participation. For Kenneth M. Roberts, for example, 'a commitment to using state power and/or popular participation to alleviate socioeconomic inequalities and protect individuals and groups against market insecurities' are the 'defining features of the political left'.⁴ Matthew R. Cleary defines the left as any 'political movement with historical antecedents in communist and socialist political parties, grassroots social movements, populist social organizations, or other political forces that traditionally have had antisystemic, revolutionary, or transformative objectives'.⁵ According to Hector E. Schamis, 'all left-wing parties in Latin America invoke the aspiration for a more egalitarian capitalism and a more inclusive political system...'⁶

These interpretations vary in emphasis, but each suggests that Latin American leftwing forces repudiate inequality, unfettered markets, and the exclusion of marginalised groups. In contrast to the neoliberal faith in trickle-down economics, the left is defined by a commitment to the idea that neither full citizenship nor high levels of human development can be achieved

without overcoming extreme poverty and inequality, and that the barriers to participation created by discrimination, neglect, and other legacies of colonialism, often exacerbated by neoliberal policies, constitute an intolerable limit on democratic life. There is, however, less agreement on how to characterize differences within the left. Schamis notes that ‘the political landscape is far more diverse’ than the ‘similar discourse’ of the left in Latin America might suggest.⁷

To capture both similarities and differences, I propose to define the Latin American lefts as the leaders, parties and movements that seek to ameliorate inequality in its diverse manifestations, and promote social inclusion, either through bottom-up mobilization by grassroots organizations, top-down policy initiatives by personalist leaders, or legislation by parliamentary parties; they advocate the use of state power to attenuate the effects of markets, either on behalf of broad multi-class coalitions or in response to demands from specific social classes, sectors, and groups; and they promote transformation in state-society relations through popular participation, sometimes challenging underlying structures of domination with appeals to *lo popular*, class, citizenship, and occasionally ethnicity. Although some leaders reject or downplay representative features of democracy, and seek to supplant liberal and republican institutions with alternative forms of grassroots participation, while others uphold civil, political, and social citizenship within existing legal and constitutional arrangements, all share a commitment to electoral democracy.

A key advantage of this definition is that it avoids a tendency toward false dichotomies, such as those implicit in Castañeda’s description of the Latin American left as ‘that current of thought, politics, and policy that stresses social improvements over macroeconomic orthodoxy, egalitarian distribution of wealth over its creation, sovereignty over international cooperation, democracy (at least when in opposition, if not necessarily once in power) over governmental

effectiveness....⁸ This definition precludes social improvements *with* macroeconomic orthodoxy, egalitarian distribution of wealth *and* its creation, sovereignty *through* international cooperation, democracy *and* effectiveness. More problematic still is Castañeda's broader distinction between populist and social democratic lefts. In this taxonomy, social democrats are open-minded and modern, while populists are closed-minded and strident; the former respect democracy, the latter are irresponsible and abusive; the former operate within an orthodox market framework, the latter is statist; the former seeks good relations with the U.S. and hemispheric neighbors, the latter taunts the U.S. and seeks confrontation. Such distinctions make blunt instruments for analysis.

Castañeda's distinction illustrates the difficulties that arise when concepts as multidimensional as populism are attached to phenomena as diverse as Latin America's lefts. Yet it is an inescapable point of departure for assessing the contemporary debate on the left, for Castañeda's dichotomy results in a taxonomy of cases that appears to be broadly consistent with widely shared intuitions. It is, therefore, important to expose the flawed reasoning that leads to otherwise unobjectionable aspects of Castañeda's classification of cases.

According to Castañeda, 'populism has almost always been present almost everywhere in Latin America'.⁹ This ubiquity makes conceptual precision difficult. Unless the analyst defines what such an ambiguous term means, and Castañeda does not define populism so much as deploy it as a rhetorical device, highly disparate forces and trends tend to be lumped under the same rubric. The problem is compounded by the fact that Castañeda does not suggest that left-wing forces may share some or all of the features commonly associated with populism; he claims that populism *is* a left-wing tradition. In other words, leaders like Juan Perón, Getúlio Vargas, and Victor Raul Haya de la Torre represent 'the other Latin American left'.¹⁰ These were leaders

who, at certain historical junctures, pursued reactionary ends—one has only to think of Haya de la Torre’s alliance with Manuel Odría, Perón’s return to Argentina in the early 1970s, not to mention the fascist-inspired corporatist features of the *Estado Novo* under Vargas. None of this leads Castañeda to the obvious and quite conventional conclusion that populism is a Janus-faced tradition that is never unambiguously reactionary or progressive.

Leaving aside the difficulty of conflating populism and the left, a blind spot in Castañeda’s analysis is his neglect of indigenous movements. As a result, one of his most egregious mistakes made by Castañeda is to lump Hugo Chávez in the same category as Evo Morales. He is surely right to describe Chávez as a populist. Chávez is cut from the same cloth as Perón. His radical nationalism has its origins within the armed forces. Having failed to seize power by means of a coup in 1992, he successfully ran for office in 1998 and then used plebiscitary means to centralize and consolidate executive power. Chávez is a personalist leader who seeks to ameliorate inequality using state power on behalf of a broad multi-class coalition. He routinely attacks the ‘oligarchy’ associated with the Punto Fijo pact, using confrontational popular mobilization, albeit under the watchful guidance of the state, to keep his opponents off balance.¹¹ Evo Morales’ path to office, however, could not have been more different. He was brought to power by movements that, through grassroots mobilisation, seek redress for socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities.¹² Morales sought to use state power on behalf of a coalition that is both ethnic and class based to challenge long-standing structures of domination.

Whereas Chávez won office before mobilising his supporters, and his success has been largely based on promising to improve the lot of the poor within a resource-rich society, Morales was swept into power by indigenous social movements.¹³ As Cleary put it, ‘Chávez is the only sitting president who is unambiguously “populist”’.¹⁴ Morales represents something quite

distinct: he is the sitting president who owes his power most unambiguously to the support of a social movement. Bolivia could evolve in the direction of Venezuela in certain key respects, but drawing parallels between the two processes may be more misleading than illuminating.

Ironically, while Castañeda describes Morales as unambiguously populist, he equivocates on APRA under García. Yet the APRA party is an historic populist party, albeit one in a conservative phase. It relies on the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies, and on the undisputed leadership and personal charisma of Alan García, its current ‘historic’ leader and heir to Haya de la Torre. García won election in 2006 with a combination of appeals to the *pueblo* and reassurances to economic elites, the military, and the middle sectors. The formula was expressed in the slogan “responsible change.”

Castañeda’s analysis has been more influential in policy and academic circles than is justified by its insightfulness or accuracy. The distinction between populism and social democracy derives plausibility from differences between leaders in the region that are largely an artifact of the countries they govern. It is obvious that Chávez is more strident than Bachelet, and that Morales is more radical than Lula. Beyond the personal idiosyncrasies of the leaders, this reflects, however, differences between the Southern Cone and the Andes. As a result, even when analysts disagree with Castañeda, they often wind up appearing to accept or refine his classification of cases.

For example, Schamis lauds Castañeda for taking ‘a step in the right direction’ but argues for ‘further differentiation’ to ‘account for the various lefts that have emerged in Latin America’s recent past’.¹⁵ He distinguishes the left in countries with institutionalised party systems (Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay) from those where there are disjointed party politics (Argentina and Peru), and then adds a third category: the ‘petro-left’ (which occurs in oil producing countries like

Venezuela and Bolivia). Schamis's analysis has the merit of using differences in party systems to get at underlying sources of differentiation of the left, but he reinforces the tendency to lump Chávez and Morales together (albeit without appealing to a fuzzy notion of populism). When the focus on party systems is supplemented with an analysis of social movements, important differences emerge among all these cases.

The analysis of the underlying sources of differentiation of the left must encompass the analysis of social movements, especially indigenous movements, precisely because the social movement left is easily confused with populism: both tend to flourish in similar conditions. Panizza argues that the grassroots democratic tradition 'shares the populists' mistrust of political parties and liberal institutions, but instead of privileging the links between the people and the (populist) leader as the embodiment of the general will, it calls for a new politics based on new social actors'.¹⁶ Like populism, it tends to emerge where party systems have collapsed, parliamentary institutions are weak, and the rule of law is precarious. Yet populism and social movements are different, which makes it all the more imperative to define populism.

It is preferable to define populism, rather than 'drop the concept altogether'.¹⁷ Provided analysts are aware of the history of the concept, and consider the more nuanced definition it has been given in the recent literature, populism can be an extremely useful building block for theory. The term was originally defined as multi-class coalitions, typically led by a personalist leader, pursuing redistributive policies.¹⁸ In the 1990s, political scientists questioned the link between populism and specific economic policies.¹⁹ They pointed out that multi-class coalitions, led by personalist leaders, could advocate orthodox economic policies associated with neoliberalism. Examples included Argentina's Carlos Menem, Mexico's Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori, each of whom built mass support by attacking the political

class.²⁰ In Roberts' more political definition, populism is 'the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined *pueblo*, or "the people."²¹

In other words, populism is orthogonal to the left-right spectrum. It can be associated with neoliberalism, or with more redistributive policies. It may involve the use of state power to promote industrial development, or the restructuring of the state in favor of a pro-market orientation. It can be used to bring excluded groups into the political system, but it generally does so through top-down, patron-client political exchanges. By this definition, the opposite of populism is not social democracy. A more striking contrast with the top-down nature of populism is the bottom-up mobilisation of grassroots social movements. Although social movements may be captured by personalist leaders, they are often based on more horizontal organizational structures and seek to avoid patron-client relations by fostering organizational autonomy. In recent years, indigenous movements have emerged, along side the left, seeking ways to revitalize indigenous law and governance.²² The weakening of leftwing parties and working class organizations that was produced by neoliberal reforms paradoxically created opportunities for the emergence of these movements.²³ In some cases, notably Bolivia and Ecuador, and to a lesser extent Peru, ethnic mobilisation subsequently reinvigorated the left.

Beyond Trickle-Down Economics

By dichotomising the lefts into populism and social democracy, Castañeda's analysis hinders our understanding of the ways in which the shifts to the left in the past decade are, in part, the consequence of the failures of neoliberalism. As John French argues, 'the juxtaposition of the 'social democratic' against the 'populist' originated as a disciplinary move by neoliberals'.²⁴ It is

part of an effort to bolster the claim that markets and democracy go hand-in-hand, that they are mutually reinforcing, and that progress involves a convergence of economic and political liberalism. The distinction between ‘bad’ populists and ‘good’ social democrats is designed to drive home the case that ‘populists’ are illiberal and anti-market; while ‘social democrats’ respect markets, and regulate them through representative institutions.

If we classify the left in terms of those parties and leaders that accept the basic rules of capitalist democracy and those that do not, we miss one of the most important lessons of the last two decades in Latin America: that the policies of neoliberalism have largely failed to achieve sustained and shared prosperity. As Juan Pablo Luna argues, the liberal project in Latin America was undermined by the lack of a mutually reinforcing logic of democratization of social incorporation.²⁵ This is one of the main reasons for the growing influence of the left. On the whole, the commitment to egalitarianism, the willingness to use the state to balance market forces, and the emphasis on popular participation, placed the lefts in a good position to benefit from the gathering mood of frustration with the status quo. This does not mean the left turns will be enduring much less permanent; they could be reversed.²⁶ It does mean, however, that the shifts are more than cosmetic—especially if the lefts achieve deeper social incorporation.²⁷

The end of the Washington Consensus was followed by deepening doubts about the presumption, inherent in neoliberal thought, that the adoption of the ‘right policies’ would be sufficient to generate the growth necessary for sustained and shared prosperity. During the apogee of the Washington Consensus, the expectation of an economic takeoff allayed concerns about whether economic openness would increase the vulnerability of poor and marginalised sectors in the unfolding processes of global and regional integration. Optimism was gradually

lost as a result of modest economic performance during the 1980s and the external shocks caused by financial crises in some of the larger economies of the region in the 1990s.²⁸

Many of the leaders associated with the electoral shifts to the left since 1998 continue to favor market-oriented policies, and none advocate centrally controlled economies based on planning. The backlash against neoliberalism does not signal a rejection of markets, but a repudiation of the ideology that places markets at the center of the development model to the detriment of public institutions and their social context. Yet, as Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid and Igor Paunovic note, the consensus underpinning the neoliberal model has been replaced by a search for alternatives:

A key root behind the region's shift to the left is the disappointing result of the economic reforms – inspired by the Washington Consensus – implemented by previous governments. Indeed, after nearly two decades of drastic macroeconomic reforms favoring trade and financial liberalization, deregulation, and downsizing of the public sector, Latin America is still unable to enter a path of high and sustained economic expansion. Inflation has come down, but economic activity has been sluggish. In addition, in the last ten years, the region has suffered acute economic crises.²⁹

According to *Latinobarómetro*, in 1998, roughly two thirds of the public accepted the claim that 'the market economy is best for the country' in most of the countries of the region. That level of support fell to only one half by 2007, a decline of 14 percent. At the same time, there was a slight, but not as sharp, increase in the perception of the ability of the state to solve problems.³⁰

More importantly, neoliberal policies had a polarising effect, and this polarisation, ironically, benefited the left. The polarisation was largely at the level of elites rather than masses, and was greatest not necessarily where neoliberal policies were most vigorously implemented, but rather where they were implemented in vulnerable institutional contexts with deep social cleavages. As Claudio Lomnitz put it, 'The neo-liberal era produced a deep fracture

in every Latin American country between the segments of the population that thrived under free trade and the shrinking state, and those that were put at risk. This fracture was visible everywhere except perhaps in Chile, the neo-liberal pioneer, where the special conditions of the Pinochet dictatorship made the fracture less visible and harder to discuss, and where there have since been unique gains in reducing poverty levels'. He goes on to suggest that: 'Everywhere else the rift was prominent, and it had many expressions: the two-tiered country; the "deep nation" versus the "fictional nation"; the oligarchy versus the pueblo. The fight was often represented as a contest about what is real and which side of the economy best represents it'.³¹

Neoliberal policies have only been sustainable politically to the extent that policy makers have been able to create a social base of support beyond the specific groups that benefit from privatisation, deregulation, liberalisation, and foreign investment promotion. The backlash against neoliberalism was as much a story of political failure as it one of economic disappointment. This failure was linked, in turn, to the inability of policy makers to undertake deeper institutional reforms to ensure that the benefits of macroeconomic openness and stability translated into opportunities for social mobility, access to public goods, and a stronger public commitment to welfare and equity.

In countries with strong preexisting public institutions – Uruguay, for example – market reforms have been less aggressive because of resistance to privatisation from clients who benefit from public goods supplied by state owned enterprises. These countries have, however, opened their economies in ways that have not jeopardized the welfare of their publics. The victory of the *Frente Amplio* was prefigured by a referendum against privatisation in 2003.

Chile, as Lomnitz notes, pursued a more aggressive export-oriented and market-led development strategy beginning with the Pinochet dictatorship. Even after the victory of the

‘No’ in 1989, and the transition from authoritarian rule, democratic governments have been loath to alter the economic model. But Chile’s experiment with market development benefited from the nation’s long history of building strong public institutions. Chile does not have the problems of corruption and cronyism that have hampered, for instance, Mexico’s efforts to liberalise. A strong commitment to transparency in business and government makes Chile less corrupt than some advanced capitalist nations. Under Lagos and Bachelet, Chile continued to make strong investments in public infrastructure and welfare, even as the market-oriented model has remained intact. Moreover, Chile has pursued constitutional changes that have altered the 1980 constitution to diminish the power of the armed forces.

Whether governed by the left or the right, Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica stand at the top of rankings of human development and the quality of democracy. By comparison, Mexico, long championed by Washington as a model for the rest of the region, has entered into a period of deep institutional, political, and social crisis. In spite of preferential access to the U.S. market under NAFTA, Mexico has experienced modest economic growth and has been unable to implement basic institutional reforms – like an overhaul of the tax system – needed to sustain market development and broaden its base.

Taking Power by Changing the Constitution

Liberalism lurks behind Castañeda’s distinction between ‘bad’ populists and ‘good’ social democrats.³² The essential difference between these ‘species’ is that populists are illiberal—that is, they reject free markets and representative democracy—while social democrats merely seek to regulate markets and advance the interests of the popular sectors within representative institutions. Yet this the dichotomy deflects our attention both from tensions inherent in liberal

democracy—the result of which can be which can be ruptures with established liberal arrangements leading to different kinds of democracies—while at the same time missing the remarkable degree to which Latin American lefts have proven committed to constitutionalising their political reforms within electoral democratic arrangements.

In the past, the options for Latin America's left were often posed in terms of the choice between reform and revolution. The revolutionary left sought social change by overthrowing the capitalist state, altering basic capitalist property rights, and placing control over the means of production in the hands of working people. The reformist left sought social improvements by legislating welfare programs and policies within the parameters of capitalist property relations, and by linking movements and mass parties within electoral democracy. Most of the contemporary Latin American lefts no longer regard the revolutionary overthrow of the state as a realistic option.³³ This does not mean that the lefts entirely eschew violence or fully accept established democratic rules. None of the recent definitions of the Latin American left cited above makes unequivocal adherence to the democratic rules of the game a defining criterion of membership in that category. Although most progressive forces espouse democracy of one sort or another, they vary in their willingness to abide by the established constitutional rules of the game.

The left is most likely to be radical, personalist, even militarist where the party system has collapsed, where mechanisms of representation (including clientelism) have broken down, where courts are held in contempt by the public, where corruption and cronyism are rampant, and where legislative institutions are seen as ineffectual or worse.³⁴ Thus, in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the left has convened constituent assemblies to re-write the constitution, and a faction of the PRD (not to mention the Zapatistas) has demanded the same in Mexico. The

interest in constitutional reform may be due to what Lomnitz calls ‘foundationalism,’ a desire to ‘return to an origin or founding moment, a second change at achieving some project previously derailed,’ but it also reflects the perception that neoliberal reforms were constitutionalised, undemocratically, through trade and investment agreement.³⁵

Underpinning the strategy of taking power by changing the constitution is a revival of the idea of constituent power. Languishing in jail after his failed 1992 coup attempt, Hugo Chavez contemplated taking his struggle for power onto enemy territory, and to seek office by means of election. But, for Chávez, this could not mean submitting to the Venezuela’s moribund democratic system. So he struck on the idea of constituent power as a form of revolutionary power, and, in an extended interview, he explained the distinction: ‘In France in 1789 constituent power exploded. This is the power to constitute a people against what is constituted, that simple’. ‘But this transformative power, as against the established, constituted power, has to be very great’. Chávez envisaged a process that would start with his election, to be followed by a plebiscite to convene a constituent assembly, which would then assume all power. The constituent assembly would be empowered to ‘demolish established power. Only then will it be a truly revolutionary’. It can ‘remove the president of the republic,’ said Chávez; ‘it can dissolve the national congress, the CSJ [supreme court], the tribunals, governors, it can dissolve the legislative assembly. That is to say, everything that is constituted power, it has the sovereign power, represented there, to dissolve it or ratify it’.³⁶

The idea of constituent versus constituted power is not an airy abstraction of political theory but an idea at work in progressive praxis in Latin America today. The distinction can be found in the classical social contract theories of Locke and Rousseau. It is at the heart of an unresolved dilemma of liberalism: that the people, the *demos*, are the source of all legitimate

authority, and, at the same time, the first expression of this authority is the constitution of power that becomes constituted power. This tension between concrete practices and institutions—the whole panoply of offices and roles that make up a system of government—and the sentiments and collective representation, the opinions and the public rituals, the social movements and civil society organizations that animate this system and give it life, is at the very heart of any democratic form of life. This is a tension within liberalism, but also one that speaks to liberalism's insufficiencies. And these insufficiencies must be kept in mind as we contemplate the current vogue for castigating the 'wrong' left as 'illiberal'.

In liberal democratic theory, the problem of limiting state power is central: tyranny of the majority is presumed to be a major danger when power is in the hands of the *demos*. In Latin America, however, the idea of a despotic majority using the state to expropriate or oppress minorities does not capture the central dilemmas of political life. More often, at least in the perception of subaltern classes, powerful minorities use a weak state to thwart to will of the majority. In the popular imagination, political institutions that are created by the constitutional order are seen as subject to capture and corruption by numerically tiny but powerful social forces—above all business, the political class, and sometimes the armed forces. Political leaders like Chávez, Correa, Morales, and Humala have succeeded, to a greater or lesser extent, in capturing popular support by offering a radically different view of democratic politics; not the advancement of popular interests within the legally constituted political order but the sundering of that order through constituent assemblies designed to wrest power from elites and return it to the people.

The idea that there is a tension between constituent and constituted power should not be used as another way of dichotomising the left, however, for the distinction is inherent in

democratic theory and practice. One might array leftwing forces on a spectrum from those contexts in which it governs through constituted power to those where the left appeals to the sovereignty of the people to take power by changing the constitution, but in all cases the tension is inescapable. Chile is, arguably, the country where constituted power is most strongly entrenched, yet its constitution was written under the Pinochet dictatorship and approved in a referendum held in 1980. Since constituent power rested in the hand of the military junta, Chile never had a properly democratic foundational moment. Manuel Antonio Garretón argues that Chile's authoritarian and neoliberal constitution and institutions, written by the Junta, produced in Chile an 'incomplete democracy' based on restricted citizenship: 'Conclusion of the "transition" to democracy does not mean that with fully democratic governments the political regime and society had reached democracy properly speaking. For this was an incomplete transition that gave rise to limited democracy of low quality, and one riddled with enclaves of authoritarianism.'³⁷ Chile is hardly an exemplary social democracy. It might better be described as a country in which a centre-left coalition administers a neoliberal economy within the framework of a low-intensity electoral democracy.

Bolivia lies at the other end of the spectrum. Morales was elected to office on the promise of nationalising Bolivia's oil and gas industry, a promise he made good on May Day of 2006.³⁸ The clear objective was to secure economic development opportunities for his supporters. Placing natural resources in the hands of a redistributive state would provide the material basis to sustain the economic livelihood of both indigenous-peasant and urban populations that backed the MAS, and whose economic base was precarious. Although the nationalisation of the hydrocarbon sector was among the most radical moves by any recent

government of the left in Latin America, the measure was entirely legal and consistent with Bolivian sovereignty.

To supply the legal framework for his political reforms, Morales convened a constituent assembly to rewrite the nation's constitution and, by so doing, he appealed to the sovereign power of the people to 're-found' the nation. This constitutional project was hotly criticised by Morales' opponents, who dismissed it as a crude attempt to create a new hegemonic order based on the dominance of formerly excluded groups. From a liberal standpoint, the process of constitutional reform fell short of guaranteeing full respect for constitutional principles like the separation of powers, due process, and the rule of law. Yet this objection rings hollow since previous democratic government violated the same liberal constitutional principles even as they failed to undertake the reforms necessary to achieve social inclusion and extend the social and economic rights of democratic citizenship. Moreover, the departmental prefects who countered Morales' constitutional reforms by initiating their own referenda on statutes of autonomy showed no greater concern for legality than the MAS government.

The misbehavior of previous governments or regime opponents should never give a sitting government a free pass to do as it pleases. On the contrary, the constitutional reform in Bolivia, as well as those of Ecuador and Venezuela, should be exposed to tough questions: Was the constitutional assembly truly sovereign, or was it an instrument of the executive? Did it limit itself to writing the constitution, or did it also pass ordinary legislation? Were the procedures for writing the constitution truly deliberative? Did the assembly reflect the plurality of the nation? Was it legitimate in relation to existing law? These questions point to problems arising from dilemmas inherent in constitution making. Yet by the criteria of the demanding standards they imply, one might argue that the Bolivian government exhibited a stronger commitment to

principles of constitutionalism than the governments of Venezuela under Chávez or Ecuador under Correa.

True, the process of constitutional change in Bolivia appears to have been driven by the executive, and it has tended toward the concentration of central governmental power; moreover, the pluralism of the constituent assembly was nullified by the way the final text was approved (by representatives of the MAS, in a military compound, and in the absence of non-MAS assembly members). But at least in Bolivia, unlike the other two cases, the congress continued to operate as the nation's legislature while the constituent assembly drafted a new constitution, and an attempt was made to reconcile the constitutional reform process with the existing legal order. Moreover, the MAS sought to negotiate with the opposition where possible and resort to plebiscitary solutions only when such negotiation failed. By contrast, the constituent assemblies in Venezuela and Ecuador, which were overwhelmingly composed of members of the incumbent parties, served as instruments of the executive. The real constituent power was Chávez and Correa. They used constituent assemblies to supplant sitting congresses over which they had no control, to draft constitutional texts made to measure, and they did so often in ways that often flagrantly disregarded the existing legal and constitutional order.³⁹

Competition to Polarisation

Dichotomising the left results in a misunderstanding of the nature of international alignments and conflicts in the Western Hemisphere, obscuring how radical postures can disguise pragmatism, or even quite traditional and conservative patterns of behavior. As a disciplinary move it perpetuates this polarisation, even as it casts itself as the foundation for a mature understanding of the region to help policy makers avoid unnecessary conflicts. In essence, the thesis, designed

above all for consumption by foreign policymakers in the United States, offers little more than a heuristic for dividing countries willing to sign trade agreements and pursue economic policies that are supported by Washington from those that are not. Armed with Castañeda's analysis, politicians and pundits from Condoleezza Rice to Ernesto Zedillo, Alvaro Vargas Llosa to Andres Oppenheimer, *The Economist* to *Foreign Affairs*, can discuss how Chávez, Morales, Castro and Ortega are the source of the hemisphere's problems rather than drawing lessons from two-decades of neoliberal restructuring and its effects. Ironically, this process of dividing for the purpose of rewarding and disciplining is exactly what has caused the polarisation in the hemisphere in the first place.

An article of neoliberal faith was that, as countries became more market-oriented and democratic, they would also become more pragmatic and cooperative in their dealings with one another. Thus, the spread of free markets and elections would herald an era of unprecedented integration and openness in the Western Hemisphere. The Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), launched in the Miami Summit of the Americas in 1994, shortly after NAFTA entered into force, was predicated on this expectation.

As the failures of neoliberalism became more obvious, however, the international context became more polarised, reflecting both domestic cleavages and the gulf between Latin America and the United States.⁴⁰ The logic underpinning hemispheric integration was competitive liberalization. Countries seeking access to the U.S. market and hoping to attract foreign investment were encouraged to compete with each other to create the conditions most favorable to multinational corporations. U.S. trade strategy was built around the idea that countries that pursued the 'right' policies would be rewarded with trade agreements that would ensure preferential market access and the free flow of goods, services, and capital. In return for access

to the U.S. market and capital, the region would 'lock-in' the policies favored by Washington. In some cases, these policies required constitutional amendments, or were given the same status as the constitution in domestic law.

The U.S. strategy of competitive liberalization did not contribute to integration but to the division between those countries willing to sign trade agreements with the U.S. and those that were not. Mexico and Chile were foremost among the supporters of expanding NAFTA, but the countries of MERCOSUR decided to build their own sub-regional grouping first. Venezuela spearheaded the ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas). The Andean Community of Nations was divided by the competition among blocs, with some countries (Colombia and Peru) pursuing free trade with the US, and others, Venezuela and Bolivia in particular, seeking alternatives.

The FTAA vision failed, at least according to the timetable initially proposed. In the Summit of the Americas held in Mar del Plata in Argentina in November 2005, which was originally the deadline for agreement, leaders could not even agree upon a deadline for completion of the FTAA. Chávez verbally 'buried' the deal. The failure was predictable. Hostility to the Bush administration was intensified by the invasion of Iraq and the so-called 'war' on terror. The U.S. approach to the promotion of democracy and human rights contributed to a pro-sovereignty backlash, especially after the attempted coup in Venezuela in 2002. The Venezuelan bid for a seat in the security council of the United Nations, and the competition this sparked with US-backed Guatemala, dramatised the polarisation of the region.

This polarisation blew back on domestic politics, often with unexpected consequences such as the internationalization of elections. Throughout 2005 and 2006 elections in Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador and Nicaragua were often seen as high-stakes contests in which the

outcome would reinforce or undermine the influence of United States or Venezuela. In a number of cases, Chávez publicly commented on the internal affairs of other nations, often in a highly partisan tone. The meddling did not always have the desired effect. In Peru, for example, Alan García brilliantly manipulated Chávez's efforts at interference. Although he probably would have won the 2006 presidential runoff election anyway, García's use of a dispute with Chávez made it easier for conservative voters to embrace a candidate they once detested. Right-wing candidates in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Mexico called their adversaries allies of Chávez; some leftwing candidates, notably Daniel Ortega, Evo Morales, and Ollanta Humala, welcomed Chávez's embrace.

Neoliberals have looked hard for evidence of divisions between the 'two lefts' but with mixed success. In general, however, relations between Chávez, Morales, Correa, and the more moderate leaders of the left, like Lula or Bachelet, have been cordial. The presumption that there would be a growing rift between Latin America's radical populists and responsible social democrats was belied by Brazil's measured response to the Bolivian nationalization of oil and gas, as well as the courteous diplomatic relations between Morales and Bachelet, and the aid of Chile and Brazil when Morales faced a major crisis following the August recall referendum in 2008. Brazil backed Venezuela's controversial bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council and the two countries worked together to create a bank of the south. Tensions between South American countries remained, but they were more likely to arise from national interests than ideological divisions between the so-called modern and archaic lefts.

Similarly, for those who imagined an axis from Havana through Caracas to La Paz, and for whom Evo Morales' radicalism was a product of the dark machinations of the Castro brothers and Hugo Chávez, it was a surprise to discover that Morales was nobody's puppet. Not only did

he reject Chávez's option of pulling out of the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), he sought closer ties between the CAN and the European Union. Morales' behavior was neither strident nor nostalgic, but perfectly consistent with Bolivian national interests.

Morales' decision to nationalise oil and gas was a blow to Brazil's massive, largely state-owned oil company, PETROBRAS, and could well have produced a major schism with Brazil. Yet the expected division never materialized, as the Lula government took Bolivia's policies in stride. When Bolivia was on the brink of a potentially serious breakdown of domestic order in late 2008 as a result of violence in the aftermath of the presidential re-call referendum, Morales did not turn to the Organization of American States (OAS), where the United States (whose ambassador Morales expelled from Bolivia) was strongly represented, but to the Union of South American Nations (*Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*, or UNASUR). Bachelet convened UNASUR, and Lula played an active role bringing the government and opposition together to resolve the crisis. Remarkably, Morales received the diplomatic support of the president of Bolivia's historic adversary, Chile, and the leader of the neighboring country whose oil concession it had recently nationalised.

Conclusion

Contrary to Castañeda's thesis, there is common ground among progressive forces in Latin America, and the differences among them can best be understood by a more careful and nuanced treatment of the concepts of populism, social movements, constituent and constituted power. I have taken issue with the 'good' versus 'bad' lefts thesis because it ignores the systematic ways in which Latin American lefts reflect the nature of the societies in which they emerges. One might as well say there are 'good' and 'bad' countries.

Dichotomising the left serves a disciplinary purpose, however: to distract attention from the failures of neoliberalism, the poor performance of democratic governments, and the waning influence of the United States. Indeed, it perpetuates the analysis that led to neoliberal failures in the first place: the assumption that market reforms and democracy are mutually reinforcing and foster a more cooperative hemispheric system. Above all, it hinders our understanding of how the lefts' commitment to egalitarianism, balancing markets, and promoting participation has enabled them to benefit from disillusionment with the results of neoliberalism and the performance of democratic governments in Latin America.

It remains to be seen whether progressive forces can improve on the performance of neoliberalism. Shifts to the left are neither irreversible nor even likely to endure. On the contrary, the survival of the new governments of the left will depend on their ability to show that they can do more than their neoliberal predecessors to enhance equity, reform the state, and improve democratic participation. Still, it is too soon to dismiss the trends in the region as the 'left turn that wasn't'.⁴¹

Endnotes

¹ C.R. Balbi, 'El Fenómeno Humala y la Radicalización del Electorado Peruano', Paper presented at the Colloque: L'Amérique latine aux urnes, Institut Science Politique-IHEAL, Paris, France, 14-16 December 2006.

² See J.G. Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', *Foreign Affairs* 85(3) 2006: 28-43; M.R. Cleary, 'Explaining the Left's Resurgence', *Journal of Democracy* 17(4) 2006: 35-49; E. Hershberg, Eric and F. Rosen, 'Turning the Tide?' in Hershberg and Rosen, eds. *Latin America After Neoliberalism: Turning the Tide in the 21st Century?* New York: The New Press with North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), 2006; B. Arditì, 'Arguments about the Left turn(s) in Latin America: a post liberal politics?' *Latin American Research Review*, 43(3) 2008; C. Lomnitz, 'Latin America's Rebellion: Will the new left set a new agenda?' *Boston Review*. September/October 2006; J.C. Moreno-Brid and I. Paunovic, 'The Future of Economic Policy Making by Left-of-Center Governments in Latin America: Old Wine in New Bottles?' *Post-Autistic Economics Review*, 39(1) 2006, pp. 2-7; F. Panizza, 'Unarmed Utopia Revisted: The Resurgence of Left-of-Centre Politics in Latin America,' *Political Studies*, 53(4) 2005, pp.

716-734; K.M. Roberts, 'Latin America's Populist Revival', Unpublished ms. Department of Government, Cornell University, 2006; K.M. Roberts, 'From "The End of Politics" to a "New Left Turn": Populism, Social Democracy and Social Movements in Latin America'. Paper prepared for presentation at the University of Montreal Conference on 'Latin America: New Left? New Democracies?' March 29-30, 2007; H. Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions', *Journal of Democracy* 17(4) 2006, pp. 20-34; C.M. Vilas, 'The Left in South America and the Resurgence of National-Popular Regimes', in Hershberg and Rosen, eds. *Latin America After Neoliberalism: Turning the Tide in the 21st Century?* New York: The New Press with North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), 2006.

³ Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', pp. 28-43.

⁴ Roberts, 'Latin America's Populist Revival', 2006, p. 13.

⁵ Cleary, 'Explaining the Left's Resurgence', p. 36.

⁶ Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions', p. 20.

⁷ Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions', p. 20.

⁸ Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', p. 4.

⁹ Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', p. 3.

¹⁰ Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', p. 3.

¹¹ McCoy, Jennifer L. and David J. Myers, eds. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

¹² C. Toranzo Roca, *Rostros de la democracia: una Mirada mestiza*. La Paz, Bolivia: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-ILDIS, 2006.

¹³ This is not to deny that there is an important element of race consciousness in Chávez's discourse, or that race and class intersect and reinforce each other in Venezuela. See Barry Cannon, 'Class/Race Polarisation in Venezuela and the Electoral Success of Hugo Chávez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?' *Third World Quarterly*, 29(4) June 2008, pp. 731-748.

¹⁴ Cleary, 'Explaining the Left's Resurgence', p. 36.

¹⁵ Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions', p. 21.

¹⁶ Panizza, 'Unarmed Utopia Revisted', p. 722.

¹⁷ Schamis, 'Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions', p. 32.

¹⁸ In the Latin American context, the classic essay is T. Di Tella, 'Populism and Reform in Latin America' in C. Veliz ed. *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 47-74.

¹⁹ K.M. Roberts, 'Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case', *World Politics* 48 (October 1995), pp. 82-116; K.M. Roberts, 'Repolicizing Latin America: The Revival of Populist and Leftist Alternatives', *Woodrow Wilson Center Update on the Americas*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2007, pp. 1-11; K. Weyland, 'Populism in the Age of Neoliberalism', in Michael L. Conniff, ed. *Populism in Latin America*. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999: 181-185. Although economists often use populism to refer to unsustainable macroeconomic policies, often involving excessive spending and controls, Latin American leftist governments are generally pursuing fiscally responsible policies (see Moreno-Brid & Paunovic 'The Future of Economic Policy Making', 2006). Indeed, reducing vulnerability to international shocks through macroeconomic stability is a top priority for most leftist governments.

²⁰ Weyland, 'Populism in the Age of Neoliberalism', 1999.

- ²¹ Roberts, 'Latin America's Populist Revival', 2006, pp. 5-6.
- ²² F. Schiwy, "'*Todos Somos Presidentes/We Are All Presidents.*'" Bolivia and the question of the State'. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Left Turns: Progressive Parties, Insurgent Movements, and Alternative Policies in Latin America,' Simon Fraser University, April 18-19, 2008; R. Stahler-Sholk, 'Resisting Neoliberal Homogenization: The Zapatista Autonomy Movement', *Latin American Perspectives*. Issue XXX, 34(2) 2007, p. 1-16.
- ²³ D.L. Van Cott, *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 216.
- ²⁴ J. French, 'Understanding the Politics of Latin America's Plural Lefts (Chávez/Lula): Social Democracy, Populism, and Convergence on the Path to a Post-Neoliberal World'. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Left Turns: Progressive Parties, Insurgent Movements, and Alternative Policies in Latin America', Simon Fraser University, April 18-19, 2008, and published in this volume of *Third World Quarterly*.
- ²⁵ J.P. Luna, 'Left Turns as Paradigmatic Crises', in this issue.
- ²⁶ On this point, I am more cautious than Cleary 2006, 'Explaining the Left's Resurgence', pp. 46-48.
- ²⁷ R.B. Collier and D. Collier use the term 'initial incorporation' in the context of the labour movement to refer to the "first sustained and at least partially successful attempt by the state to legitimate and shape an institutionalized labor movement'. See their *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002, p. 783. Luna uses the term 'second incorporation crisis' to refer to the combination of socioeconomic exclusion and formal democratic inclusion that he argues gave rise to the left turns in Latin America. One might also speak of the challenge of incorporation of informal labour and indigenous peoples.
- ²⁸ Hershberg and Rosen eds. *Latin America After Neoliberalism*, 2006, pp. 10-11.
- ²⁹ Moreno-Brid and Paunovic, 'The Future of Economic Policy Making', p. 1.
- ³⁰ Latinobarómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro 2007*. Santiago de Chile: Corporación Latinobarómetro, pp. 27, 30.
- ³¹ Lomnitz, 'Latin America's Rebellion', 2006, p. 11.
- ³² Cameron, Maxwell A., Jon Beasley-Murray, and Eric Hershberg (2007). 'Left Turns: An Introduction'. Paper presented at a workshop on 'Left Turns: Progressive Parties, Insurgent Movements, and Alternative Policies in Latin America', Simon Fraser University, April 18-19, 2008.
- ³³ The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the most powerful armed group in the region, has achieved a low-level stalemate with the Colombian state.
- ³⁴ The rise of candidate-centred movements and parties is a notable consequence of the erosion of party systems. See Omar Sanchez, 'Transformation and Decay: the de-institutionalisation of party systems in South America', *Third World Quarterly*, 29 (2) March 2008, pp. 315-318.
- ³⁵ Lomnitz, 'Latin America's Rebellion', 2006, pp. 2-3
- ³⁶ A. Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el Comandante*. Caracas: Catedra "Pio Tamayo"/CEHA/IIES/FACES/UCV, 1998, pp. 528, 530, 533, 534.
- ³⁷ M.A. Carretón M. 'The Socio-Political Matriz and Economic Development in Chile', Discussion Paper Series Number Fifteen A. IPPG Programme Office, IDPM School of Environment & Decelopment, University of Manchester, October 2007, p. 15. See also

Garretón's *Incomplete Democracy: Political Democratization in Chile and Latin America*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003. The *Concertación* was loath to fundamentally change the constitutional order—much less create a constituent assembly to write a more democratic constitution. Moreover, Chile faced political problems that could be traced at best indirectly to authoritarian features of its constitution. Having survived in power longer than the dictatorship, by the time Bachelet was inaugurated the *Concertación* appeared bereft of new ideas and energy. Apathy and indifference, especially among youth, contributed to declining electoral turnout.

³⁸ J. Rochlin, 'Latin America's Left Turn and the New Strategic Landscape: the case of Bolivia', *Third World Quarterly*, 28(7) 2007, pp. 1330-1333.

³⁹ C.M. Conaghan, 'Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Presidency', *Journal of Democracy*, 19(2) April 2008, pp. 46-60; J. McCoy, 'Chavez and the End of "Partyarchy" in Venezuela', *Journal of Democracy*, 10(3) July 1999, pp. 64-77; J. Corrales and M. Penfold-Becerra, 'Venezuela: Crowding Out the Opposition', *Journal of Democracy*, 18(2) April 2007, pp. 99-113.

⁴⁰ See W.M. Leogrande, 'A Poverty of Imagination: George W. Bush's Policy in Latin America', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 39, 2007, pp. 355-385.

⁴¹ M. Naím, 'The Lost Continent', *Foreign Policy*, November/December 2006, p. 42.