

AGAINST the DAY

**Social Movements in Latin America**

Verónica Gago and Diego Sztulwark, Editors

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The Temporality of Social Struggle at the End  
of the “Progressive” Cycle in Latin America

**Beyond the End of a Cycle**

When political thought, detached from the pulse of revolt by the force of events, attempts to grasp only analytically the reasons for the decline of the political cycle, it risks falling into a sterile historicism. Such a perspective might be able to account for the historical conditions of the phenomena but is unable to comprehend what happens to real subjectivities, specifically, the practices and thoughts of those who remain willing to break with and go beyond the consensus of the era. Hence, the greatest intellectual challenge of the moment is to approach the complex set of mutations experienced in Latin America without yielding to the calls for order and normalization that make invisible the networks of resistance present in the region’s heterogeneous territory.

After a long decade of successive social crises and the “progressive” renewal of governmental lineups in various countries on the continent, there are different perspectives on what has been referred to as the end of an era or the conclusion of a cycle. This conclusion is associated with those governments in some cases being voted out of power and in other cases simply no longer being capable of deploying the tools that formerly granted them their progressive or popular status, which demonstrates the precarity of the apparatuses of social inclusion that they created.

Indeed, current events compel a reading to that effect. The 2015 elections in Argentina and Venezuela have accelerated the dynamics that were already present in the 2014 presidential elections in Brazil: the constitution

of an entirely conservative business-securitist type political block that tests a new articulation of the landscape configured during the period of the governments that arrived in power after intense popular revolts.

However, the image of an “end of cycle” is not entirely appropriate<sup>1</sup> because it seeks to understand regional process in terms of pure closure at the level of governments without considering the layered character of the South American political reality: the plurality of dimensions in which both continuities and discontinuities are at play, referring to deeper logics than those referenced by the political system. Three levels stand out for taking into account this heterogeneity. First, there is the regional level: the experience of the last long decade of governments that attempted to deploy non-neoliberal political policies never managed to dominate the entire region. On the other hand, particularly at the level of articulation between finance and the social, a set of continuities is produced that become obscured when the division between progressive and conservative governments is made absolute. Second, there is the national level: each one of these experiences must be considered at the sub-regional level and especially at apparently national levels, given that there are fundamental historical differences. Third, there is the level of temporal sequences: it is oversimplifying to accept a periodization from the exclusive consideration of the duration of certain governments—for example, those of the “progressive” mark—at the expense of other temporalities that determine the political game and that, ultimately, are vital for complexly considering the processes under way.

In this regard, we are most interested in focusing on popular practices and their relationships with a horizon of conflicts and struggles that are obscured in analyses that moralize these electoral defeats with reasoning grounded in paternalistic progressivism (e.g., “the poor don’t recognize the benefits they have received”) or corporate fatalism (e.g., lamentations that the autonomy of the political ultimately cannot withstand the powers that be, such as the media and corporations).

From our perspective, this type of analysis demonstrates the last rhetorical effect of Ernesto Laclau’s populist theory: a decade of tiresome pedagogy about the discursive character of politics and the notion of the people constituted around Lacanian lack not only inoculated political practice with abstraction but also led to confusion when the “floating signifier” was hegemonized by the Right. The political defeat thus reveals the incomplete and lazy character of the theoretical maneuver of populism compared to the complex and variegated materiality of the contemporary popular.

### Neodevelopmentalism and Neoliberalism

During these so-called progressive governments' period of greater opening and experimentation, that is, the period when a diverse set of social movements led them out of the crisis of the neoliberal model of the 1990s, the official discourses acquired a notable push and capacity for questioning to the authority of the previous cycle. The previous cycle had been characterized first by repressive military dictatorships and later by democratic governments forced to apply recipes of the "Washington Consensus" (opening to imports, indebtedness, structural adjustment, privatizations).

Thus a new political will emerged with a neo-developmental tone based on a rhetoric of growth with social inclusion that even prompted a debate over its "postneoliberal" character (Mezzadra and Sztulwark 2015). In practice, that political will combined a process of the concentration of political decision-making in the hands of the state with a relative openness to popular forces. Its neo-developmental vocation was mixed with three enduring trends: insertion into the world market in a neo-extractivist way, micropolitics organized around neoliberal conditions of social bonds, and the financial sector's never completely reversed and particularly relaunched hegemony in the mode of accumulation.

From the perspective of recent struggles, we can see how neo-development and neoliberalism are far from being mutually exclusive or constitutive of a simple binarism, as perhaps they were in the past. On the contrary, we have seen true zones of indiscernibility and even complementarity, where elements of both rationalities are mixed in variable proportions. These transactions occur in the presence of a certain voluntarist ignorance in which the persistence of neoliberal conditions is denied (reducing neoliberalism to that "from above"), as in all of that which in the developmentalist order ends up promoting and constituting the premises for the relaunching of neoliberal reason (Gago 2014).

If one recognizes that neoliberalism and neo-developmentalism co-exist, then both the discontinuities in regard to the classically neoliberal discourses of the 1990s, and their readjustment, based on a mixture of (economic, state, subjective) figures that once presented themselves as an alternative to the hegemony of the market and finance, become more clear.

A particularly notable field for thinking about this mixture of neoliberalism and neo-developmentalism is the expansion of consumption, especially popular consumption, inextricably linked to state subsidies and social

programs, apparatuses of indebtedness, and new forms of violence. The phenomenon of inclusion by access to consumption (that historically substitutes the experience of inclusion via the wage) is maintained by the state's capacity to pact with rentier—financial and exporting—capital. In this order of things, a part of that rent is captured by the state to encourage monetary circulation and a type of consumption based on nondurable goods. There violence related to the type of consumption that is thus encouraged is multifaceted, and all of the facets reveal the limits of a particular understanding of “social inclusion”:

1. The impossibility of questioning the neo-extractivist pattern that involves structural violence against communities, territory, and parameters of food consumption (as Jorge Millones notes in his discussion of Peru in this issue).
2. Generalization of the criteria by which all territories and relationships are subject to the dynamic of valorization and production of rent (as indicated in the case of ethnodevelopment as a financial mechanism targeting communities in Guatemala, analyzed by Gladys Tzul in this issue).
3. Dualization of the state: beside the democratic state's functions of public regulation, a “second” state proliferates (as Rita Segato argues in this issue) that operates according to the rentier dynamic, illegally regulating non-declared capital, networks of drug and human trafficking, and the production of spaces of hyper-exploitation of labor, also marking a direct genealogy with the historically patriarchal nature of the state.
4. The generalization of a paradigm of individuation that becomes intolerant of any other presence that interrupts the ideal of consumption, free movement, fluid communication, and stabilization of private space (as shown by the multiplication of lynchings in various countries on the continent).
5. The proliferation of racism, classism, and sexism as a result of the introjection of the neoliberal universe's notions of success and failure, which is exacerbated at the micropolitical level.
6. The segmentation of hierarchized spaces due to differential access to security, which promotes a “civil war” in defense of property, between peripheral neighborhoods and wealthy areas, but also within the more popular zones.

7. The increased use of private and public security forces to contain all those that under the influence of the stimulus of fulfillment through consumption have no way of legally guaranteeing that access (Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación Política 2014; Colectivo Juguetes Perdidos 2014).
8. The business world's use of submerged modes of life and work based on the rentier structure of accumulation to force modes of precaritization/hyper-exploitation (Huascar Salazar Lohman's analysis in this issue of the contemporary situation in Bolivia can be read from this perspective).

A fundamental aspect of this way of understanding inclusion through consumption and the new modes of violence it entails relates to mechanisms of financial exploitation. These mechanisms are linked to apparatuses of debt targeted toward the popular classes, through the multiplication of sources of unregulated credit (from which the large banking entities are split under legal and illegal procedures), that function as the basis and foundation of the dynamic of consumption.

As we have been suggesting, neoliberalism's persistence during the cycle of progressive governments is more visible when one goes from perceiving mutually exclusive poles to perceiving assemblages. This is also what happens with the dynamics of neo-extractivism. Far from refuting neo-developmentalism, the two dynamics permeate and mutually sustain one another. We are interested in deepening this focus to expand the critique of neoextractivism and turn its rationality into a way of understanding the hegemony of the rentier appropriation of social wealth more broadly. The rationality (the articulation of technical and financial infrastructure and accumulation via the global production of rent) involved in extractive economies that encompass much more than natural resources offer the possibility of understanding extraction as a more general operation of capital (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 2015). We also see this type of operation function in the rentier form of appropriating the value produced in social and urban networks, that is, as one of the prototypical forms of conceiving *social exploitation*, a term that tends to disappear in conventional and purely environmental critique of natural resources, as developed in Gago and Mezzadra (2015).

In turn, the critique of neo-extractivism that we propose contributes to expanding a less culturalist understanding of the phenomenon known as populism, focusing on the condition of the urban masses, not as a subsidized population but as exploited and therefore contributing to imagining forms of articulation between "rural" and "urban" struggles.

### From Analysis to the Perspective of Struggles

We want to link this analytical displacement to the perspective of movements and struggles traversing the social field. This convergence has various obstacles in the field of knowledge. One obstacle is a type of voluntarist politicization that constantly underestimates the difficulties and obstacles in the formation of popular forces and is suspicious of micropolitics as an *active rearguard*, to use Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2015) term. Another obstacle is the prestige of cynicism and the purely fetishized descriptions of social relations that complete the work of abstract totalization and make the functioning of capital coherent.

The challenge that we propose is to sustain an active cartographic practice, a mapping of conflicts and tensions that does not seek to simplify or erase the languages and problems that arise in the struggles themselves, either from the point of view of the critique that they deploy or in terms of how they understand a beyond to the current situation. However, that cartography will acquire strength only to the extent to which it problematizes modes of life without turning into a moral critique or nostalgic idealism. This implies exposing the concrete functioning of the infrastructure of popular welfare, in other words, the capacities of production and reproduction of "the social" that sometimes knows how to antagonize and produce disputes over political decision-making and sometimes retreats when faced with violence that it is not capable of confronting.

Perhaps this is where we can begin a new stage of investigation about what the popular is and how it functions today, the relationships between the popular and the common, the variations of the common, the possibilities of its composition, and its chances for becoming concrete affirmations in the current dispute over modes of life and their increasing exploitation.

### On Investigation

Our research activity in recent years has attempted to address the described political dynamic by inquiring into: (1) the reconstitution of modes of intensive labor exploitation in the submerged links of certain productive branches (as, for example, what occurs in agriculture or in textile workshops mostly involving migrant workers), (2) forms of properly financial exploitation (especially aimed at capturing rent from popular sectors and at intervening in the conflicts over land; Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación Política, Jara, and Sztulwark 2014; Revista Crisis y Mantén Céspedes 2012), (3) modes

of a renewed pedagogy of cruelty in prisons (Yo No Fui 2015), and (4) the multiple forms of territorialization of a new social conflict both as variables of the same form of rentier valorization that introduces violence and that has counterinsurgent slants at the continental level.

Some features of this relationship between the popular and the common can be recognized in the lines of investigation that we have developed in Argentina, but it must also be recognized that these lines of investigation have been undertaken in close collaboration and coinvestigation with collectives from other parts of South America (Gutiérrez Aguilar and Salazar Lohman 2015). Indeed, this relationship should be understood based on experiences in different Latin American countries, and, in particular, the resistance to the dispossession of social wealth recently started by the persistent anti-mining struggle in Peru (that Millones discusses in relation to challenges to the Conga Project), the dispute for the autonomy of uses and criteria by communities in Guatemala grappling with microfinance (that Tzul problematizes), a new geopolitical demarcation with respect to the neo-developmental advances that, in regions of Bolivia, for example, reach a depth that earlier neo-liberalism had not achieved (as Salazar argues), and the characterization of the phenomenon of social violence based on patriarchal features as a persistent motor of a defiant political right wing (as Segato explains in this issue).

Ultimately, we seek to read our present moment by exploding simplistic understandings that divide everything in terms of a unifying scene (opening/closure, success/failure) in order to rehabilitate the complexity of experience that activists in the region's historical struggles know well: a demanding, everyday, non-euphoric micropolitics that, however, is constructed as a concrete space for experimenting with procedures, forms of doing, producing, and valuing. It is on this plane where the winding construction, without any linear planning for how those historical accumulations are transformed into counterpowers, is confronted. However, it is from there that perceptions arise of what is unbearable, of the modes of weaving together a resistance and set of practical actions that raise the question again, in a situated way, of what constitutes political efficacy here and now.

### **Finance as a Battlefield of Subjectivity**

We chose to conceptualize this Latin American web based on an inquiry about the role of finance capital, starting not from its internal dynamic (and its technical aspects) but from its privileged connection to popular subjectivities. Thus posed, this field of investigation allows for understanding the



neoliberal historical process in a non-simplistic—neither economic nor politicist—way, taking into account both the articulation of the mode of capital accumulation and the world of strategies in which said popular subjectivities are determined.

This vector of investigation that relates finance and processes of constitution of popular subjectivities perhaps enables reading in terms of a changing but processual continuity of the reconfiguration of subjectivities that were previously categorized as excluded and are now interpellated and convoked, from their vitality, for a new mode of exploitation. Meanwhile, that interpellation accesses this battlefield between the popular world and finance to reframe the problem of equality as a premise, and not as a promise, as does the paternalism of progressivism and a certain Left. Thus, focusing on finance as a code of mobilization capable of generalizing a type of exploitation whose temporality accommodates itself to the desire and structure of the promise through a series of postponements that subordinate the possibilities of the here and now allows us to understand the rules that govern and the counter-conducts that emerge on this battlefield from a position of immanence. It is also in this way, to return to Segato, that we find the basis for new sovereignties in this financial capture, in the sense that Deleuze (2015) notes commenting on Foucault: that the formation of sovereignty is defined as much by carrying out “operations of extraction” (forms of exploitation) as by “decision over death” (which is increasingly developed as a “necropolitics”). A cartography of this type also seeks to understand the autonomous possibilities of the glimmers of popular vitalism and the concrete strategies that can limit the most aggressive moments of exploitative power.

#### Note

- 1 From this politicist optic, another effect is generated: in the situation of Bolivia and Ecuador everything would seem to depend on both government’s ability to achieve its indefinite reelection (something that has already failed in Rafael Correa’s case and that remains to be seen in Evo Morale’s more recent defeat in the February plebiscite) as the only way of avoiding the “end of the cycle.”

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