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Author

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Publication Date

2023-12-11

Peer reviewed

LATIN AMERICA Faces the Twenty-First Century

Reconstructing a Social Justice Agenda

edited by

Susanne Jonas & Edward J. McCaughan

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Published in 1994 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301-2877, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Latin America faces the twenty-first century: reconstructing a social justice agenda / edited by Susanne Jonas and Edward J. McCaughan. p. cm. Includes index. ISBN 0-8133-8687-X — ISBN 0-8133-8688-8 (pbk.) 1. Democracy—Latin America. 2. Latin America—Politics and

. 3. Latin America—Social policy. 4. Latin government—1980-America—Economic policy. 5. Social justice. I. Jonas, Susanne, . II. McCaughan, Ed, 1950-JL966.L358 1994

980.03'9-dc20

94-2804 CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1 8 7 6 10

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7. Ethnic Politics and the Popular Movement

Guillermo Delgado-P.

OR A LONG TIME, POPULAR MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN AT THE CENTER OF political arenas in Latin America. The political culture of the 90's, however, is challenging "centers" and "arenas," decentering and overtly questioning traditional popular movements, whose participants are surprised by ethnic and gender demands. It is my belief that a total process of decolonization is necessary before new political entities can appreciate the force of ethnic, gender, and class demands as they become the new generators of Latin American political life. This article will reflect on the politics of recent coalitions and forces that remain outside traditional party politicking.

I. The Pachakuti

The end of this century coincides with a noticeable collapse of traditional paradigms, atomization of ideas and systems, and disbelief in conventional politics, as well as with the emergence of decentralized forces—each demanding social justice or participatory democracy amidst forceful neoliberal programs that have deepened poverty throughout Latin America. Among these are 40 million indigenous people of the Americas, who have organized to demand territorial and human rights, a total process of decolonization, autonomy, and self-determination. As traditional forms of political mediation have lost appeal (e.g., the number of voters has dropped in recent national elections), these people continue to strive for basic human demands that have been belittled or left unaddressed by nation-states, unions, and political parties. For example, Guatemala and Bolivia contain the largest indigenous populations of the Americas, each surpassing 50 percent of its national population.

Indigenous peoples in the Andean world today define this moment of redefinition through the concept of *Pachakuti*, literally, the turning about of the times. In Quechuan and Aymaran thought, it means a change of direction. The Andeans believe we are now experiencing such a wave of upheaval and turn of direction, which has been kept as a prophecy in the oral traditions of their culture.

On October 12, 1992, a Bolivian newspaper printed a headline that asked, "And the *Pachakuti* ...?" This headline referred to the widely expected turning

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itself with its total dogmas. Both are undergoing a process of transformation. One appears dead, maybe changing; the other one is alive but also changing" (Cordera, 1992: 36, my translation).

The *Pachakuti* can also be seen as the space where different levels of problems, debates, and political stands over organizing are taking place, amid the recent encounters of the Indigenous, Popular, and Black Resistance movement. This space is known as the Spanish American/Latino-Chicano/Brazilian world, a new region indeed. It is the place where we run into harsh realities that have to do with the consequences of the "discovery" 500 years ago. The distortions are visible images where we encounter the return of debt-peonage, a system the *New York Times* labeled "modern slavery." It can be found especially in Brazil (where the number of indebted peons increased from 597 in 1989 to 16,442 in 1992), amid the remnants of *fazenda* landowners, unscrupulous capitalists who have been turning the forest into pastures for cattle, depleting the land without long-term concern. It is here that *Pachakuti* expresses Latin America's chaotic and subservient position regarding the powers that be and the desperation of its disenfranchised people struggling and anguished by its history.

In these spaces of struggle, however, we find a decentralized clash of political interests. Recent literature on "new social movements" sees political actors deconcentrating power. But within this process of constructing a new political morality, and in relation to indigenous peoples, there are remnants of colonial practices that distort and impede new political developments, such as the attempts to organize indigenous, black, and popular alliances that ignore crucial historical divergences. Yet as history and prophecy put together these "marginal peoples without history," Indian voices emerged, forcing the nation-states and civil societies to remember the colonial past that is not so distant and that still is, in a certain way, present. Or as the Aymarans, with their long-term collective memory, put it: "There is no future without looking at the past." Amidst these voices are those of the oldest inhabitants of the continent.

No other sector in the hemisphere has been as consistently silenced and disavowed as indigenous peoples. Throughout Latin America's history, the colonial legacy and the subsequent nation-state formation have systematically undermined the historical presence of indigenous peoples, killing them, betraying, ignoring, co-opting, tricking, and forcing them into the most degrading levels of existence. This process started with the sudden and radical depopulation because of new diseases to which indigenous peoples were not immune; only today, after five centuries of martyrdom, are these populations again reaching their original numbers.² And in places such as Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala, Chile, and Mexico, several indigenous peoples are still going through this process. The existence of violence within every culture only highlights the ethnocidal form that Western violence has used against indigenous peoples. With the acquiescence of local governments, it has been in the old New World that ethnocidal violence has reached unimaginable levels.

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If colonialism is the burden that Latin America must bear, it is obvious that in order to contest it, there must be a body and a voice that is anticolonialist. The Creole anticolonialism of the 1800s fell short, for it was against Spain and, with less intensity, against Portugal (monarchies were twice advocated, by Maximiliano and Carlota in Mexico and just recently in Brazil). That was a generational, Oedipal conflict rather than a truly liberating one. Inheritors of the conquerors became imitators of their ancestors, and the colonized mestizo or ladino, updated remnants of the past, transformed themselves into the current managers of Latin America's debt. It was no coincidence that during the 19th century, takeovers of indigenous lands reached the worst level of commodification.

The anticolonialism of indigenous peoples, however, needed (and needs) to be consistent against conquerors, Creoles, and the mestizo by-product of the Americas alike. "As scholars of colonialism and imperialism have argued recently, the avant garde taking up of the terms colonization and decolonization by 'First World' theorists intent on dislodging the certitudes of the old subject of Western humanism does an injustice to, effectively occludes, very real colonial practices in specific geographical locations and historical periods" (Smith and Watson, 1992: xv). The history of anticolonial behavior on the part of indigenous peoples has been expressed through their distrust of colonial authority and neocolonial nation-states. Only some co-opted indigenous "leaders" survived, having lost historical perspectives of fundamental struggles over territory and dignity. But generations of indigenous peoples retrieve and decolonize their histories. They continue to do so, their political expressions classified and labeled by Western scholars studying "revolts," "uprisings," "messianic movements," "nativistic movements," "jacqueries," and "prepolitical movements." It is not that indigenous peoples withdraw from their historical responsibility. As these labels tell us, they were consistently resistant, and they remain so.

The nationalistic and eventually populist discourse of the nation-state in Latin America, as well as the urban-intellectual Creole *indigenista* current of the early 1900s, gradually lost its credibility by 1950. *Indigenismo* and populist discourses that for a long time attempted to speak for indigenous peoples—taking Indian voices away—had almost run into a crisis of representativity. In the late 1950s, indigenous leaders emerged with a broader goal. This was registered by historians who confirmed indigenous attempts to build an autonomous movement of hemispheric dimensions. By the 1960s and 1970s, the indigenous population was comparable in numbers to the population Columbus had run into when he got lost and bumped into the Abya Yala, or Continent of Life, which he thought was India. An "Indianist" current made its way into political life, including several unsuccessful attempts at creating political parties. Several of these were quickly co-opted by nationalist political parties, churches, or remnants of *neo-indigenista* followers who cheered the "glorious indigenous past." Certainly, however, they were not about to accept new leaders who pressed ether

nic demands or who called for the reconstruction of indigenous nations against the nation-states' forced assimilation of native populations.

If mercantilism approved and encouraged a de facto law of land occupation, capitalistic encroachment on indigenous territories founded a strange legal formula: Indigenous peoples were entitled to sell but not to buy lands. In fact, monolingual laws were used to legalize land transfers, taking advantage of linguistic barriers that made comprehension of the legal process impossible. One thing was clear: Lands were taken away from the original settlers at a fast pace. Although haciendas, plantations, mines, and cattle ranches became the main mechanisms of land takeovers, capitalism was held back by traditional pockets of self-sufficient indigenous peasantries. Capital, however, initiated staggered invasions of those isolated pockets of "precapitalistic formations," and suddenly several ended up as mining camps, oil refineries, lumber companies, cattle ranches, cotton fields, and sugar plantations where indigenous peoples were forced into the bitter cycles of exploitation. These same processes originated landlessness, creating uprooted sharecroppers who were psychologically and culturally alienated and semiproletarianized—but who experienced no qualitative changes in their worldviews, which remain rooted in their traditions (Taussig, 1979). If indigenous communities survived in an autonomous manner, it was because their lands were not rich, or not yet important enough, to be taken away by the inevitable process of commodification.

In 1993, indigenous territories and pre-Columbian rights over them are—not surprisingly—scarce. It is rare that land belongs to indigenous inhabitants who either accept, reject, or reinvent capitalism on their terms. Thus, such capitalism, in the case of the pristine forests of the Amazon Basin, for example, has at last reached a stage that could lead us toward entropy if we do not implement a policy of sustainability to allow the earth to heal over the next five centuries, thereby reversing the negative politics carried on indigenous backs.

And so, at the end of the 20th century, indigenous peoples continue their fight for territory and dignity, two leitmotivs absent from the understanding or goals of political parties, nation-states and "popular movements."

II. Indigenous Peoples and the Popular Movement

If political parties demanded from indigenous peoples obedience to their rigid and patriarchal directions, nation-states and the church worked hard at issuing assimilationist policies to de-Indianize the surviving Native Americans of the continent. The leadership of the popular movements regarding indigenous peoples' issues was not far from either nation-state or political party goals, since these movements were formed under a class-based historical process.

What is "popular" about a movement? Other than an element of class that brings together popular movements, there is no clear definition. García Canclini (1989: 249) suggests that there are varieties of representatives, definitions, and

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strategies that "do not help us to define what it is that we will understand as *popular*." In Latin America popular movements were formed during different processes, changing over time, and used as cannon fodder by political parties, nation-states, and populist discourses. In this history popular is whatever has been excluded (*Ibid*.: 191) and, by default, whoever struggled against that exclusion.

From an indigenous point of reference, indigenous peoples' histories remain colonial when reduced to class. Class is not everything. Indigenous and black political thought cannot exist without their colonial history, for ignoring it would be to accept assimilation, de-Indianization, monoculture, homogeneity. Indigenous histories are not just about exclusion; above all they are about land. It is here that the concept of ethnicity enters Latin America's social discourse. It is a long-unaccepted category, as gender is, although existing de facto as part of a new epistemological outlook whose conceptual depth can no longer be denied as explanatory of social reality. Gender and ethnicity have become part of the socioconceptual and epistemological apparatus. The formations of these ideas and explanations have taken into consideration the response to official history and, along with it, to nation-states' monolithic nationalisms and oppressive class hierarchies and patriarchies.

In Latin America ethnic demands and gender-oriented demands (such as the frontal feminist attacks against authoritarianism and patriarchies of male-dominated hierarchies) have little to share with "popular movements" that are far removed from these new variables of struggle. Entrenched popular movement leaderships are not devoid of patriarchy, nationalism, paternalism, and *indigenismos*, and they are not necessarily feminist. In fact, history as only class struggle has run out of steam. It must yield to emerging forces that dynamize resistance, taking it to other levels, aiming at rejecting established regulatory mechanisms of power distribution. The problem emerges clearly as expressed by one Mexican scholar: "The extreme Left, devastated by the socialist crisis and the Cuban tribulations, can hardly aspire to be a majority; without doubt, not one fraction of the Left can do it alone. But if one is well placed to be able to do so, *it is the new (current inheritors of old populism) and the old Latin American social democracy*" (Castañeda, 1992: 55, 59, my emphasis).

In the three major attempts in Latin America to mix class/popular-oriented movements with ethnic/gendered ones, there have been more failures than successes. Since the Quito Declaration in 1990,³ the indigenous movement has consistently rejected the overwhelmingly male-oriented and patronizing attitude of leaders of the popular movement. Although there have been several instances where these politics were openly discussed, some indigenous confederations (16 in all) walked out of the second meeting of the Indigenous, Popular, and Black Resistance movement held in Xelajú, Guatemala (1991), and also the third one held in Managua, Nicaragua (1992), where the organizers attempted to control the Indian voice. Referring to dissident Indians, an official bulletin of the third conference reads, "How long are we going to pay attention to them?" (Bolettin Conference reads).

Continental, 1992: 10). This was in reference to CONIC, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations and Nations of the Continent, which met at the Second Continental Conference of Indigenous Organizations and Nations in 1993. It drafted the Temoaya Declaration as a follow-up to the Quito Declaration.

The campaigns of the Indigenous, Popular, and Black Resistance have resulted only in declarations with no other value than that of documenting the worsening situation of the Latin American dispossessed and in spotlighting the bitter sentiment held by *populares* against those who claim either gender or ethnicity, autonomy, and self-determination as the basis for launching their respective demands. Reflecting on this scene, Charles R. Hale (1991: 40) has written, "All that remains are two options that the Conference [at Xelajú] actually produced: outright division, allowing *indígenas* to hear their own voices while making it less likely that others will listen or change; or alternatively, a 'unified' campaign, where unity is little more than an empty slogan, shouted in unison by some, while those at the cultural margins look silently on."

This confrontation of indigenous representatives and populares in Latin America documents several levels of noncommunication—from the contradiction of landless peasantries that encroach on indigenous territories (e.g., throughout the Amazon Basin) to the right to exercise native religious freedoms despite the raised eyebrows of Catholic and Protestant churches in their endless varieties. In a stance that could seem intimidating, the popular movement rejects the ethnic and autonomous movements for being separatist and for failing to coincide completely with the popular movement, whose platform (national liberation, social justice and democracy, political and economic liberation, socialism) abandons demands for territory, human rights, and equality among peoples and races and between genders. It must be acknowledged, however, that indigenous peoples are not one entity. In my effort to understand the indigenous movement, I identify at least three major groups: bureaucratized Indians (e.g., the UN crowd, self-elected representatives, co-opted leaders, top-down selected ones); Indian representatives sponsored by nation-states, political parties, or churches (those still colonized who accept paternalisms); and self-determinative and autonomous Indians (those demanding a total process of decolonization).

Between 1990 and 1993, large groups of indigenous men and women advocating self-determination and autonomy and demanding that territories be returned to them have been organized by Quichua Peoples at Cotopaxi, Tungurahua, and Chimborazo and by the Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (Ecuador, members of CONAIE); and by the Mapuche Council for All Lands (Chile). Other such mobilizations include the Indigenous March for Land and Dignity of the Bolivian Amazon (CIDOB) and the Xi N'ich Zoque, Tzoltzil, Chol, Tojolabal, and Tzeltal Indigenous March of Mexico. The Kuna of Nusagandi, Madugandi, Kuna Yala, and the Guaymi Ng be-Bug l'e (Panama) organized armed defense of their territory against landless peasants and the nation-state. This same self-determinative and proautonomy branch has been extremely suc-

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cessful at reorganizing a continentwide, decentralized, panindigenous organization

But with few exceptions (such as in Ecuador), an "alliance" between indigenous peoples and popular movements does not seem to have worked. On the contrary, there have been cases where indigenous marchers begged so-called popular class organizations not to help but to allow them to achieve demands on their own, saying in effect, "This is our problem, not yours." When popular organizations asked, "What can we do to help you?" indigenous communities answered, "Nothing. You have already done a lot." Thus Xi N'ich arrived alone in Mexico City, "protected" only by priests who could not let go of their Las Casas paternalism. Before Xi N'ich reached El Zócalo, the city's central square, their leaders negotiated with the Mexican government. (Mexico is the cradle of *indigenismo* and its offspring, *neo-indigenismo*, a 100-year-old tradition that is alive and well.) Xi N'ich did not need negotiations but more autonomy and territory. The question is, Did anyone else in Mexico understand?

As for the Quechua, Achuar, and Shuar of Ecuador, the neoliberal state returns territories, withdraws, and invites faceless multinational oil corporations against which indigenous peoples must fight. The Mapuche are struggling to be recognized as a people who have their own history, one that is more ancient than Chile's.⁴ The Bolivian Amazonians obtained almost 1 million hectares of territory, but legislators move slowly while lumber companies keep depleting the forests despite laws that forbid them to do so. Laws have the double face of Janus when applied to indigenous peoples. In fact, in the Bolivian Amazon not long ago indigenous peoples were considered slaves, and in Brazil indigenous peoples are legally minors (personal communication with Eliane Potiguara, Geneva, 1992).

III. Indigenous Peoples and the Left

Under the wings of resistance movements, class-oriented movements have definitively lost their capacity to unite different forces. It is not surprising, for example, to see a former Bolivian guerrilla campaign as the running mate of his onetime torturer. (You may ask about the depth of such class struggles.) This is roughly an example of how people change. One cannot talk about a popular "movement" because it has all but lost its power; in the best of circumstances, popular movements were able to negotiate the cost and price of strikes. In the past a workers' strike could become a strategic tool that allowed the seizure of power, and so the force of the masses, at its best moment, sponsored several at tempts at triggering radical social change.

Today, however, several of these popular movements have gone askew as they fight for wages or democracy—anything but socialism—with the exception of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Terra (MST), landless Brazilian peasants who openly call for socialism. Yet the MST is led by Euro-Brazilian

men, and few (if any) women are in positions of power. Another, perhaps the worst, example of the current state of the "popular movements" was the Foro de São Paulo-92, which gathered more than 60 Latin American leftist political organizations in Managua. The Foro invited only 15 women, and no indigenous leaders were reported in attendance. Yet Daniel Ortega could say at the end of the meeting, "The Foro belongs to our people, the campesinos, the workers, the poor of Latin America—that is what we aspire to be" (García, 1992: 9). Dulce María Pereira, a leader of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) who attended the Foro, later said, "Nothing should be conceived without including half of society, which is the mother of the other half" (*Ibid.*: 8).

What amazed me was the Foro's passivity and its rather clinical prescription: "The search for popular and revolutionary alternatives takes place in the course of resistance to the neoliberal agenda. It requires the creation of spaces for popular power, the recomposition of the people's capacity for struggle" (Declaration of Managua, 1992). Far from Managua, in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, and Colombia, indigenous peoples are showing their "capacity for struggle" against transnational corporations. The state has been reduced to a mere intermediary of international investments, to doing capital's bidding. The popular movement remains observant, unable to understand the fight for land and territory, anguished by its divisionismo, still a believer in the nation-state (Zavaleta Mercado called it a "noumenon"), still a cheerleader of past heroes at a time when there is no space for heroes. Indigenous peoples see the world going through a debacle but believe in the concrete conservationist practices of indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples can offer positive contributions to selfsufficiency, self-determination, ecological/human sustainability and dignity. The urbanized popular movement cannot relate to these "rural" positions, and if it does, "rurals" must follow them.

Through CONAIE, indigenous peoples of Ecuador are struggling to halt a 1993 agrarian law that endorses transnational land takeover. In June 1993, Moxeño Indians of the Amazon Basin were fighting mahogany poachers on their territory, which is the size of Delaware. In what ways would the "popular movements" assume these demands? Concrete situations should force them to make workable alliances; however, until now, socialism and the seizure of power have been their main concerns. Generalized skepticism toward the established political parties will continue to erode these movements unless they immediately become critical of their past. Although intellectuals are still thinking about a Latin American socialism, the trend among indigenous, women's, and popular groups is to seek concrete, visible, communal, and decentralized solutions, flexibly and transnationally coordinated, rather than expecting "national" changes. The steadily eroding legitimacy of the state and transnational capital's open influence over the state's structural residue will inspire other forms of social demands different from traditional socialism.

IV. Lessons for Resistance Politics

What are the lessons for current resistance politics? Demands must be reached at a decentralized level, forging flexible and temporary alliances to effectively enforce pressures on the system, rather than being determined top-down by the dictates of individual power seekers. As ethnic and gender demands come into Latin America's social consciousness, positive outcomes can fortify the future of tridimensional alliances (ethnicity, gender, class) on a basis of equality. First, however, it is necessary to work on decolonization, as autonomy reinforces the subjectivity of movements that, once decolonized, will be able to enter a dialogue under conditions of equality, subverting rather than accepting history's monolithic and reified structure. Only then can an ethnic-, gender-, and class-based movement work toward administering political power. This political power is the total dominion over communal space founded within a relation of equality. From this communal point of reference, and in association with a set of political commonalities, movements can become transnational indeed.

It is on this communal space where there are clear bases for creating transcommunal cadres as answers to transnational attacks. "To not develop such trans-communal cadres for the 21st century is to risk a weakened, divided, and conflicted marginalized general population confronted by a well-united ruling social bloc that is actually quite demographically diverse but which is separated by class and privilege from the rest of the America[s]" (Brown-Childs, 1993: 7). The answer lies in a dialogue among equals (across ethnic, gender, national, and language boundaries), decentralized but flexibly coordinated.

Successful movements of indigenous peoples, motivated by the same proautonomy ethos, have been able to discuss and rebuild their sense of being a whole despite language barriers. As a conclusion and self-criticism, I quote Jim O'Connor's question to me: "How do you get self-sufficiency, self-determination, in a world that global capital is making—without delinking indigenous material life, ecologies, and cultures from world capitalism?"

NOTES

- 1. This essay is based on a longer article, "Lo Etnico y lo Popular," that appeared in *Revista UNITAS* (La Paz) 12, September 1993: 90–105. This English version was presented at a heated Hemispheric Studies Faculty Research Group discussion at the University of California, Davis in June 1993. I would like to thank Stefano Varese, Carol A. Smith, Charles R. Hale, Rafael Varón, and graduate students of anthropology at UCD for their comments. I discussed some of these ideas with James O'Connor, editor of *Capitalism*, *Nature*, *Socialism*, and Philip D. Young and Winona La Duke of the International Studies Program, University of Oregon, and gained from their comments. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues Angela Warsitz of Berlin and Norma Klahn and Susanne Jonas, who provided sharp commentaries and editorial suggestions.
 - 2. However, there are several indigenous cultures undergoing an alarming process of extinction

- 3. The Continental Gathering, "500 Years of Indian Resistance," with representatives from 120 Indian nations, met in Quito, Ecuador, July 17–20, 1990. The gathering was organized by the Confederation of Indian People of Ecuador (CONAIE), the Organization of Indian Nations of Colombia (ONIC), and the South and Mesoamerican Indian Information Center (SAIIC) of Oakland, California. The Quito Declaration contains eight main demands. Number 4 reads, "We reject the manipulation of organizations which are linked to the dominant sectors of society and have no indigenous representation, who usurp our name for (their own) imperialist interests. ... We affirm our choice to strengthen our own organizations, without excluding or isolating ourselves from other popular struggles" (SAIIC, "Declaration of Quito," SAIIC Newsletter 5 (3-4) 1990: 21).
- 4. "Their efforts to establish a separate Mapuche nation, including their own flag, is an act that is in direct contradiction to Chilean national unity," said Enrique Krauss, Chilean minister of the interior. See "Mapuches Convicted for Occupying Land," *Abya Yala News* 7 (1-2) 1993: 22.

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