An Essay on an Open Window

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The present essay addresses four main issues: the situation of the Latin American left as a whole in 1991; what has happened with that left ever since; what its current situation is; what its prospects are.

The context chosen is 1991 due to the disappearance of the Soviet Union, which we will discuss below.

However, before doing so, it need be reminded that the downfall of the Soviet Union itself brought an attempt initiated in 1917 to an end; this attempt originally consisted in seizing power in a country where capitalist development was but in its early stages and embarking on the socialist transition, in the hope that this would give rise to revolutions in those countries where capitalism was further developed. These revolutions would, in turn, advance the socialist transition in Russia itself.

But it so happened that in the decades following October 1917 no revolution succeeded in capitalist developed countries.

Quite the opposite, a shift to the Right took place, especially in Germany. Against all expectations, the socialist movement in advanced countries was unable to aid the socialist movement in less developed countries.

Indeed, were we to make an overall balance of World War II and its consequences, it would not be far from the truth to claim that the implications tracing back to the very existence of the Soviet Union saved the bourgeois parliamentary democracy, helped establish the so-called welfare state, encouraged the creation of an international cartel under the United States' leadership and, all in all, helped capitalism live “golden years” of expansion which eventually resulted in the advent of a new capitalist stage: the one we live nowadays.

According to the Soviet Union, the “socialist camp” born after World War II did not fulfill the role expected out of revolutions in developed countries in favor of the revolutionary Russia of 1917. China and the popular democracies in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Albania, German Democratic Republic and Bulgaria) were, basically, also countries in early stages of capitalist development.

Therefore, when considered in all its extent, the effort of the so-called socialist camp triggered the generalisation of a pattern of industrial development already being superseded in capitalist countries, all in the context of a political system questioned –both internally and externally– by sectors of the working classes themselves.

Similarly –had it all gone along the expected track– the idea that in the long run the so-called socialist camp would be able to compete with and defeat the capitalist camp was not all that far-fetched; but today it is evident that it would only have been feasible if capitalism itself had not undergone a qualitative transformation. That is, if capitalism had kept to the paradigms existing in 1917 it could have been eclipsed by the socialism brought into existence by that year's revolution.

Still, the "capitalist camp" ensuing from World War II was a tough opponent, among other reasons, because an intense development of capitalist forces of production was brought forth by the inter-empire alliance against the USSR and by the macroeconomic consequences of the welfare state, combined with the ongoing imperialism. That is to say that the emergence and existence of a socialist camp prompted capitalism to be altered in a way that enabled it –in the medium run– to defeat that very socialist camp.

The Soviet Union and her allies neither achieved nor surpassed the levels of development experienced by advanced capitalist countries, except in specific compartmentalised segments and/or segments with high social cost, such as the armaments industry.

Within this context, the role of the crisis in the 1970s diverged from that of the crisis in the 1930s.

In the thirties, classic, imperialistic capitalism endured a "crisis of maturity" coupled with a dispute for hegemony, dating from the late 19th century and which had already led to World War I, between capitalist countries.

World War II, the enlargement of the socialist camp, the dawn of the welfare state, decolonization, and the spread of democracy (bourgeois and popular) are traceable to that crisis in the 1930s.

The crisis in the 1970s was already one of the milestones in the transition between two stages of capitalism: from the stage of classic,

imperialistic capitalism (1895–1945) into the neoliberal, imperialistic capitalism we live in today.

The crisis of the 1970s was, above all, a reaction of capitalism against the conditions of a period (1945–1970) when the power of Labour and the power of Capital were relatively balanced. This reaction could have been frustrated, or even prevented from happening at all, had the socialdemocratic and communist currents acted otherwise either during the post-WWII period or during the crisis in the 1970s or even in subsequent years.

The fact is that socialdemocracy in Western Europe and Soviet-type communism –as well as Latin American national developmentalism and African and Asian nationalisms– were forged in the heat of battle against, and partial victories over, classic imperialistic capitalism.

Partly successful though they were in the struggle against capitalism and old-school imperialism, the aforementioned movements were unable to attain the same degree of success when confronted with the type of capitalism that arose in the wake of the crisis in the seventies.

More precisely, a variant, Chinese communism, opted for a strategic change (such change can be portrayed as a strategic withdrawal, like taking a step back so as to leap forward) and today –after thirty years– China displays results that are impressive when its economic power is assessed; but it sustains distinct political and geopolitical complications.

Hence, the demise of the USSR and of Eastern European popular democracies is attributable to one of the battles embedded in a larger process, namely, to the transition between two stages of capitalism: from classic imperialistic to neoliberal imperialistic.

It is apparent that it was a battle of paramount strategic significance, although some of its implications are only now coming to light. Actually, part of the phenomena that took place after 1991 was already under way in the eighties and was expedited –although not created *per se*– by the fall of the USSR.

If we survey the worldwide correlation of powers from the viewpoint of social classes, the periods immediately preceding and following 1991 can be deemed as a defeat of the working classes.

This defeat can be objectively appraised in terms of working hours per day, relative value of wages, working conditions, public service provision and real democracy.

From the standpoint of ideas, in the period last above mentioned we lived at the peak of individualism to the detriment of public, social and collective ideals, in parallel with the offensive launched by pro-capitalist ideas and the retreat –often a rout– of anti-capitalist ideas.

In the field of politics, right-wing parties strengthened and several left-wing parties shifted to center-right positions. As for the military, the global balance tilted towards NATO and, particularly, the United States.

The situation did change somewhat –if considered comprehensively– after twenty years, but not greatly. Neoliberal capitalism went into a period of crisis, inter-capitalist conflicts heightened, some neoliberal tenets are longer no attributed their past credibility. Furthermore, in some regions of the world, anti-capitalist ideas recovered lost ground.

Nonetheless, when it comes to examining objective living conditions of the working classes all over the world, we find that inequalities today are greater than they were in the 1970s, the 1980s or in 1991.

We also find a different working class.

First, it has been growing: there are more proletarians now in the world than there were in 1970, 1980 or 1991. Secondly, the working class today is more widely interconnected, whether due to objective links between production processes, or due to consumption of goods produced in distant places. Thirdly –paradoxical as it may be–, the working class is subjectively more fragmented either because of material living conditions (let us compare, for example, the cleaning staff working in malls and the people who shop there), or because of changes in work places. Advanced as communications technology is, this fragmentation can be perceived even after the advent of Internet (truth be told, the democratic and integrative potential Internet offers is thwarted by its disintegrating and anti-democratic potential).

In other words: the offensive launched by capitalism after the crisis in the 1970s against the working class lost some of its momentum. In some places, part of the lost ground was regained by the proletariat. But the setting still remains much of a wasteland.

In the field of ideologies, this translates into tremendous confusion and theoretical deficit.

Let it be said that, from an ideological and theoretical stance, the current anti-capitalist movement differs greatly from the one in progress between the 1970s and 1991.

During that period, despite the existence of many a "dissident group", anti-capitalism was still under the hegemony of a distinct current: Soviet-type Marxism.

The cornerstone of this type of Marxism was the belief that it was possible to build socialism taking an underdeveloped capitalism as a starting point. Based on that belief, a set of other theses was developed dealing with the process of the construction of socialism; one stood out: "democracy under the party's control".

It stood to reason: if objective conditions do not promote the construction of socialism, it needs to be compensated with massive doses of "subjective conditions"; that may eventually mean imposing upon the majority (of society) the point of view of the minority (not the point of view of the working class but the point of view of a minority within the working class itself).

The dissolution of the USSR dismantled Soviet-type Marxism.

It does not mean that everything done on its behalf was a mistake, or that is lacked historical value, that it should not be vindicated, or that it was not the actually existing alternative (what could be termed "the lesser evil") in certain circumstances.

When we talk about the dismantling of Soviet-type Marxism, we mean the failure of one of its key ideas: that it was possible to build socialism taking an underdeveloped capitalism as a starting point. This idea took on several shapes, like "Socialism in One Country" which led to some confusion –persisting today– between what socialist transition is and what communism is.

This confusion is grounded, among other things, on the following fact: during the Soviet experience, for assorted reasons, the attempt was made –with varying degrees of intensity and success– to eliminate private ownership and capitalist markets from the socialist transition; in fact, that

could only have occurred at a step further down the process of transition to communism.

In practice, it was an endeavour to socialize the relationships between production processes in a context of underdeveloped productive forces by adhering to communist forms at a time when there was not enough economic content.

The ideology born from this endeavour merged Marxism, interests representing the most favoured social ranks within each of the countries of the so-called social camp, and the realpolitik of the socialist states.

It was for these and other reasons that Soviet-type Marxism was a school of theory that hampered –rather than helped– the development of the Marxist analysis of reality and the strategy to be implemented, both in developed capitalist countries and countries with underdeveloped capitalism.

However, the dismantling of Soviet-type Marxism –including the dismantling of its newspapers, publishing houses and schools– far from being an aid, unequivocally damaged the body of Marxist, non-Marxist socialist, and non-socialist anti-capitalist traditions.

Among other reasons, because it contributed to shatter the belief –which until then was shared by hundreds of millions of people– that the world was on the road to Socialism, that Capitalism represents a historical period that will eventually come to an end, that the main goal of the working classes lies in the struggle for a new society, and other similar ideas.

This belief rested –and still does– on very solid scientific grounds; but modern science points to what the possible trends of historical development are. It is through political struggle that these trends are to materialize. And the intensity of this political struggle was contingent on how motivated hundreds of millions of militants were. For decades, these militants failed to distinguish the struggle for socialism from the movement in the USSR. And faced with the end of the latter, they concluded that the former had ended, too.

The dismantling of Soviet-type Marxism did not culminate in, neither was it followed by, the strengthening of dissenting currents also inspired by Marxism.

The best known of these currents, Trotskyism, arose out of the criticism made against Socialism in One Country; inevitably, it ended up focusing its critique on the political dimensions of the phenomenon (the so-called Stalinism, bureaucracy, the crisis of direction, etc.).

This development of Trotskyan criticism was partly a logical outcome: Soviet-type socialism withstood and consolidated its hegemony within the Left for decades on end, thus outwardly disproving the historical frailty of that which was, indeed, its chief problem, the objective limits to the attempt to build socialism taking an underdeveloped capitalism as a starting point.

This led the actually existing Trotskyism not to pay duly attention to structural weaknesses of real socialism, pinning instead all hopes on the possibility of success of a "political revolution" that would adjust the course of the "true revolution hijacked by the Stalinist bureaucracy".

By doing so, the very fundamentals of their critique against "Socialism in One Country" were contradicted. For if all that was needed was a political revolution, the emphasis was placed on subjectivity, not on objective limits. As it is generally known, actually existing political revolutions ultimately paved the way to capitalism in its full range.

That is, when subjectivity came on stage it reasserted the objective limits: rather than a leap to heaven, it was a plunge into hell.

Although somewhat of a Trotskyian bias has become hegemonic among those who critique Soviet-type Marxism, the Trotskyian tradition has not established itself as the theoretical core that could serve today as the source either to critique 20th century Socialism, or to discuss the socialist strategy in the 21st century; a different approach would be –and will be– needed to appropriately address first, the relationship between capitalist development and socialist transition and secondly, the consequences derived from this in the struggle for power, even within the framework of capitalism.

Eurocommunism failed as an alternative as well. Leaving aside all political mistakes that may have been made by parties along the lines of eurocommunism, the attempt to peacefully segue from the European "organized capitalism" –operative in the 1950s and 1960s– to a "renewed socialism" was faced with a dilemma stemming from its very origin: those societies displayed a fickle balance between the socialist and capitalist "camps", between the bourgeoisie and the workers of each country and, finally, between the level of wealth produced in each country and the wealth obtained from the periphery.

The endeavour to shift from the welfare state to the socialist transition upset that fickle balance, thus destabilising democratic freedoms, which were the premise on which a peaceful transition was predicated. Let us recall Operation Gladio.

Neither did the dismantling of Soviet-type Marxism cause the theoretical strengthening of those socialdemocratic currents issued from a common core in 1875.

After 1914, socialdemocracy strained to survive, as was evident in its two bastions: Germany and Austria. Its success following World War II was, to some extent, collateral to the existence of the USSR. The welfare state and "organised capitalism" could have hardly existed without it. Later events support this interpretation; the disappearance of the USSR destroyed the economic, social and political bases of that socialdemocracy.

Socialdemocracy and organised capitalism lived through their golden ages simultaneously. One and the other relied largely on the existence of the USSR. Once the latter had fallen, the former fell down, too, although more slowly than Soviet communism.

What about the Chinese? They seem to have learnt from the Soviet experience and preferred instead to resort to a strategic retreat by making significant allowances to capitalism. Partly due to these concessions (sometimes argued not to be concessions but conversions) Chinese Marxism is less appealing worldwide than what Soviet-type Marxism was in its heyday in all its variants, including the Maoist one.

Recapitulating, the dismantling of Soviet-type Marxism was not followed by the arrival of a different hegemonic tradition born at the very heart of the world's Left.

It was replaced not by plurality but by a vast confusion; enthusiasts of historical analogies are reminded of the socialist movement after the defeat of the revolutions in 1848.

It is worth remembering that it was exactly in the period between 1848 and 1895 –due to the combination of objective processes of capitalist development and ideological struggle both inside and outside the socialist movement– that the fundamental core of Marxist ideas was devised.

Paradoxically, while we witness this ideological confusion within the socialist movement, worldwide events taking place since the crisis in the seventies, and particularly after 1991, prove Marxism's founding principles correct, especially the idea that the increase in human productivity –promoted by capitalism– creates, at the same time, the material bases and the need for a different kind of society, organized around the collective appropriation of what is yielded by collective work.

It goes without saying that this different kind of society –we will keep calling it communist to tell it apart from the socialist transition aimed at communism– will not be, after all, a spontaneous byproduct of the capitalist society.

The "spontaneous" trend of capitalism involves inducing exploitation, uprising, and crisis, along with wars. As long as the working class, the class producing wealth through their labour, does not organise itself so as to transcend capitalism, this will continue to exist for quite some time, until it reaches its own limits destroying everything and everyone.

Overcoming capitalism as a means of production requires and depends upon a level of material development that would render exploitation completely anachronistic. In other words, it requires an increase in social productivity that would progressively "depreciate" the products of labour (that is, that would reduce to almost zero the working hours that are socially necessary) thus making it possible to pair maximum abundance and minimum labour.

When it comes to overcoming capitalism as a specific historical phenomenon, it all depends on the political struggle, that is to say, it depends on whether workers, the class that produces wealth, will rise as the hegemonic class and reorganise society. This entails a political process (revolution) and a political, socio-economic transition (socialism) to subsequently construct a different means of production (communism).

It is clear that the struggle to attain these aims calls for a marriage of awareness and organization, tactics and strategy, reform and revolution.

It is about fighting to surmount exploitation and oppression, traits of capitalism. As such, it is a struggle contemporary with capitalism.

On the other hand, it is about fighting to prevail over the society of classes, or to put it differently, to transcend a whole period of our history when one part of society exploits the labour of another. In this sense, this

struggle mirrors the struggles waged by the classes exploited by means of production pre-existing capitalism. And it is also identified with struggles waged within capitalism against mechanisms of oppression and exploitation that are not purely economic, such as racism, *machismo* and homophobia.

The utmost effort must be made for these struggles to be mutually reinforcing; but it is worth remembering that although these are connected, interdependent struggles, they are not one and the same. Struggles against racism, homophobia, *machismo*, generational conflicts and others have their own sources and call for their own battles and specific solutions.

All the above discussion rarely finds sound political translation in Oceania, Africa, Europe and the United States. In Latin America we are already witnessing several solid attempts to approach these subjects and embark upon a new socialist cycle, a debate and practical action which –as recently stated by historian Eric Hobsbawm– is largely attained by resorting to Marxist grammar.

This refers us back to the issues raised at the outset of this essay: the situation of the Latin American left as a whole in 1991; what has happened with that left ever since; what its current situation is; what its prospects are.

The Latin American left was globally defeated between the sixties and early seventies. The Cuban Revolution was blocked off; other popular, nationalist and revolutionary processes were defeated; Latin American *guerrillas* were unsuccessful; the experience of *Unidad Popular* ended tragically; and a significant portion of the continent was subjugated by dictatorships, both *de jure* and *de facto*.

Between the late seventies and early eighties there was a turning point, illustrated by the considerable social struggles in Brazil and the victory of the Sandinista *guerrilla*.

During the 1980s, dictatorships yield. They were replaced by restricted democracies increasingly influenced by neoliberalism.

Collor's triumph in Brazil (1989) and Chamorro's in Nicaragua (1990), among others, signalled the beginning of a decade of neoliberal hegemony.

It was in this context that in 1990, immediately before the dissolution of the USSR, a substantial part of the Latin American left decided to meet at a seminar that was conducive to the Sao Paulo Forum.

With the dissolution of the USSR a direct, material impact was felt in Cuba. On the rest of the countries, especially on their left wings, the impact was mainly ideological and political. But the disheartening effects that the crisis of socialism had on large segments of the Left in other regions of the world were lessened by the threatening proximity of the United States, the recent struggle against dictatorships and the battering against the rising neoliberalism, all seemingly acting as a "vaccine".

This does not mean that there were no defections, betrayals and ideological conversions. But when considered globally and comparatively, the Latin American left stood its ground much better than its European peer.

At least four facts account for this.

First: owing to our region's "place" in the labour division that was in effect during the classic imperialistic period, there was no socialdemocratic experience in our continent analogous to the welfare state that would materialise the belief that it was possible to reconcile capitalism, democracy and social welfare.

The movement that got the closest to that state of affairs (populism, especially in Argentina) was brutally and violently countered by oligarchies and by imperialism. Even where the Left fought under democratic, capitalist emblems, the actually existing bourgeoisie was generally a fierce opponent, so to speak.

This did not destroy illusions altogether, though. Yet the struggles in the eighties took on a much more radical bias that contributed to some of the –otherwise unattainable– successes of those who opposed neoliberalism.

Second: despite the mistakes and the limitations and, mainly, in spite of the setback caused by the combination of the American blockade and the collapse of the USSR, the brave Cuban Resistance avoided our having to look -in our own continent- on the depressing and disheartening scenario witnessed in several locations in Eastern Europe and in the USSR itself. Furthermore, certain characteristics of the Cuban society were, and still are, a positive differential for the impoverished worker in the vast majority of Latin American countries; this was generally not the case in Europe. Hence, it was easier for large segments of the Latin American left to continue to advocate socialism, to perceive national specificities, and to

uphold a more critical attitude towards supposedly universal models, especially foreign ones.

Third: Neoliberal hegemony, associated with the American predominance after the disappearance of the USSR, was immediately regarded as –and genuinely was– a hazard, not only to the lefts but also to Latin American national sovereignties and economic development. This allowed many regional left-wing organizations to compensate with nationalism and developmentalism what was otherwise lost or diluted in terms of socialist and revolutionary pragmatic content.

Fourth: the end of the USSR opened up a new horizon for expansion to capitalist powers, especially the United States and the newly-born European Union. A joining of forces in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East followed, along with a "systemic lack of concern" for the going-ons in the so-called Latin American backyard.

This does not account for the fact that the parties that were critical towards neoliberalism came to power from 1998 onwards in the region's prominent countries; but it does account for how swiftly they did.

Paradoxically, it was because of those victories that certain consequences stemming from both the end of the USSR and from the surfacing of neoliberal capitalism came to light. The Latin American left faced these implications at the exact time when it was starting to take office.

Let us start by the ideological implications. The lefts that came into power from 1998 on –but also those that established themselves as opposition, in some cases against the Right, in other cases even against progressive governments and Centre-Left– were not able to overcome the ideological confusion, nor were they able to solve the theoretical deficit that is evidenced in three fundamental fields: balancing the attempts to construct 20th century socialism; the evaluation of 21st century capitalism; the drawing up of a strategy fit for the new historical period.

The attempts to devise a theory of "21st century socialism" are still kaleidoscopical; the evaluation of neoliberal, imperialistic capitalism is but tentative; and the practical results exhibit the limits to the different strategies. The confusion is deepened by the influence of certain very active "schools" in the Left, such as developmentalism, stagism or movementism, not to mention a certain worship of martyrdom ("just a few,

but good fellows", "the worse, the better" and other sayings of the sort) clearly attributable to our region's deep-seated Christian roots.

Of course, the ideological confusion and the theoretical limitation do not pose such a serious problem when all is smooth sailing. In a sense, the opposite happens. A dose of ignorance about the material limits helps –since the "impossible" remains unknown– push the boundaries of what is possible.

But when there is headwind, theoretical clearness and ideological consistency become fundamental assets. And now, by mid-2012, we find ourselves at a moment of contradictory winds, as evidenced by the *coup d'etat* in Paraguay last June.

Let us consider now the political implications. The chief one resides in the fact that –except for a few rare exceptions– the body of Latin American lefts have incorporated to their strategic arsenal electoral competition, parliamentary action and government management.

That is to say, they have incorporated weapons typical of the socialdemocratic arsenal at the exact same time that in the Old Continent the progressive aspects of both the bourgeois electoral democracy and classic socialdemocracy are waning.

Several reasons opened the path for the Left to annex electoral competition, parliamentary action and government management as key weapons. The reasons to be ascribed to the lefts are military-political defeat of the *guerrillas*, a decline in prejudices (whether justified or not) against the "bourgeois democracy", and the distinct dynamics that allowed for a more or less successful combination of social struggle and electoral struggle in each country.

However, so that those weapons could be fairly successfully used by the lefts since the late nineties until today, it is necessary to consider the relative change in attitude by the United States, by the rights and the local bourgeoisies, which in several countries had no means and/or motives to impose an electoral ban on the lefts.

With the initial elation gone, the different Latin American lefts ran into the limits resulting from what we may term electoral path. In all sorts of fashions –because the lefts, the processes and the political cultures are different– it was possible to discriminate state from government; the trying combination of representative democracy and direct democracy; the limits

to popular participation and social movements; the differences between revolutionary lawfulness and institutional lawfulness.

Moreover, the defense mechanisms of the bourgeois state –such as bureaucracy, justice, corruption and armed forces– are still efficiently operative in order to constrain progressive and left-wing governments.

Be as it may, more than ever before, it is clear today that the Latin American left needs a deeper insight into the regional and worldwide experiences that have resorted to electoral, parliamentary and governmental weapons as a means to attempt the socialist or socialdemocratic transformation of society.

The lack of clarity on that matter, or better yet, the different interpretations on the matter, have led since 1998 to bitter controversies within the Latin American left, between two extremes and its intermediate variants: those who wish to advance at a faster pace and those who fear to advance at pace faster than the correlation of strengths would allow.

The two previous matters go hand in hand with a third one, rather more complex, that involves grasping the historical period we live in and the conflicts at stake in Latin America.

As previously stated, the end of the USSR should be regarded within the context of transition between classic, imperialistic capitalism and neoliberal capitalism, which is also imperialistic but different from the former one.

Classic, imperialistic capitalism went through two stages: one branded by the inter-imperialistic ambition and another marked by the dispute between the "socialist camp" and the "imperialistic camp". During these two moments the contradictions internal to each country and those contradictions between metropolis and periphery coexisted –along with the contradictions mentioned above.

With the fall of the USSR, the dispute between "camps" disappeared, too. The inter-capitalist contradiction was heightened and a new variant stemmed from it: the dispute between the old, traditional centers (United States, European Union and Japan) and the new, emergent centers (like China and her allies, the so-called BRICS).

The dispute between these centers (old and new) and their corresponding peripheries acquires different shapes, just as the internal disputes within each country are different. It should be noted that they are,

essentially, inter-capitalist disputes: socialism still remains in a period of strategic defense.

In the case of Latin America, for example, the Left has been increasing its participation in governments and confronting neoliberalism –with more or less determination– for over ten years; but capitalism continues to be hegemonic everywhere.

This does not prevent some segments of the Left from labeling the political process under way in their respective countries with combative names (different variants of "revolution"), nor does it prevent other segments of the Left from "solving" the objective difficulties accusing the parties in office of lacking fighting spirit and purposefulness –which is often undoubtedly true. But beyond the betrayals, the voluntarism and aspirations, the truth seems to be as follows: even where the ruling left remains faithful to the socialist and communist purposes, the material conditions of the times we live in impose objective limits.

In essence, those limits constrain left-wing governments, even those politically more radical, to resort to capitalist methods so as to promote economic development, increase systemic productivity of economies, extend their control over national wealth, lessen external dependence and the power of transnational capital, particularly the financial one. Furthermore, these limits constrain the funding of social policies.

It is worth remembering that neoliberal, imperialistic capitalism was the cause of a backward step in Latin American economic development. One of the political consequences of that retrogression was the gradual dislocation, favorable to the left-wing opposition, of segments of the bourgeoisie and the middle ranks. This dislocation brought forth a victory at the ballot box for the current progressive and left-wing governments and engendered pluriclass-based governments genetically related to the defense of plural economies, with a wide predominance of private ownership in all its full range, including the most contradictory ones such as cooperative ownership and state capitalism.

It should be noted that this situation does not conflict with one of the conclusions to be drawn from the socialist experiences in the 20th century: the socialization of production relationships is dependent upon the socialization of production forces. And this, in turn, demands capitalist methods with a degree of intensity proportionally inverse to the previous level of economic development.

At this point, all previously said can be summarized as follows. By 1991, the Latin American left had undergone a twofold process of defeat: first, the defeat of the *guerrilla* stage in the sixties and seventies; later, the defeat of the redemocratization stage in the eighties. Early on, the end of the USSR and the rise of neoliberalism highlighted the defeat although, eventually, a third stage with a different end result ensues: 1998 signals the beginning of a cycle of election victories that created a favorable correlation of forces in the region, that remains today.

In a first instance, internal and external conditions that made this cycle of victories possible allowed these governments to expand national sovereignty, political democracy, social welfare, and economic development for both their countries and their peoples. But basically, this was achieved by redistributing income differently, without altering the frameworks for either production or wealth distribution.

In a second instance, the limits exerted by the very framework of production and wealth distribution, stressed by other variables –political, ideological, strategic, economic, sociological, geopolitical– keep the levels of national sovereignty, political democracy, social welfare and economic development within boundaries much narrower than initially expected by the Left, whether in office or in opposition.

We are now in that second instance, which co-occurs with an international downturn that impacts on the region in two profound ways: on the one hand, it thoroughly complicates the situation of those economies dependent on international markets; on the other hand, it increases the pressure the metropolis wield on the region, thus putting an end to that period of a certain "strategic lack of concern" that led to some election victories.

Internal limitations and external change of scenery tend to further aggravate the conflict within each country, not only within lefts and rights, but also between social and political forces that comprise what we call the Left(s); they may also exacerbate some differences between regional governments.

Having said so: what are the prospects?

First, we should consider how macro variables we have no direct influence on can impact on the region: the pace and magnitude of the international crisis, the conflicts between the great powers, extent and repercussions of wars. Among macro variables, we foreground those

connected with the future of the United States: Will they regain their global hegemony? Will they focus their energy on their regional hegemony? Will they deplete their energy in the internal conflict unfolding in their own country?

Secondly, the behaviour of the Latin American bourgeoisie is to be considered, especially that of the transnationalized segments. How do they behave when faced with progressive and left-wing governments? What is their attitude regarding regional integration processes? How capable are they to compete against the metropolitan bourgeoisies and to strive to achieve a more substantial role in the world scene? The stability of the ballot box and the strength of pluriclass-based governments hinge on the bourgeoisie's "mood". Or, to reverse the terms, their "being in no mood" will radicalize the conditions of the class struggle both in the region and within each country.

Thirdly, the capacity and willingness of hegemonic left-wing segments –political parties, social movements, intelligentsia and governments– should be listed.

The question that arises is: How far and how fast are these hegemonic segments willing to go to push the boundaries of the current period? Will they be able to? To put matters in a different light, the question is whether they will make the most of this political landscape, unheard of in the history of the region, in order to enhance regional integration, national sovereignty, political democratization, and to promote social welfare and economic development. And above all, whether they will be able to alter the structural patterns of external dependency and concentration of ownership prevailing in the region for centuries now.

Taking these three significant dimensions of the problem into account, we can summarize the prospects: objective potentialities, subjective difficulties and time scarcity.

Objective potentialities: bearing negative alternatives in mind, the international scenario and the current conditions in Latin America, especially in South America, make two considerable positive alternatives feasible: a stage of capitalist development with socialdemocratic imprint and/or a new stage of construction of socialism.

As for this second alternative, we are –from a material stance– relatively better than Russia in 1917, than China in 1949, than Cuba in 1959 and better than Nicaragua in 1979.

Subjective difficulties: today, at the very core of Latin American lefts, those who have the will have no power, and those who do have the power have shown no will to adopt, neither promptly nor vigorously, the measures required to benefit from opportunities that not only the international situation but also the regional correlation of forces are opening up.

A fact not to be missed: there is neither the time nor the raw material to establish a new hegemonic left. Should our hegemonic left not seize this window of opportunity, it will be but a chance gone out the window.

Time is running out: as the international crisis progresses, there is a trend towards a growing instability that undermines the conditions for the regional left to act. The opportunity to fall back on elected governments to implement significant transformations in Latin American societies will not last forever. The window opened in the late nineties is not yet closed. But the gathering storm might just do so.

As a final word, I would like to reassert that the game is far from over; therefore, we should continue to work for the Latin American lefts –especially those in office and among them, the Brazilian left– do what they have to (and can) do. If that happens, we will successfully overcome the current period of strategic defense in the struggle for socialism. In short, the window remains open.

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