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## The Contemporary Lefts in Latin America: Responses to the *No Alternative*

### Introduction

In 1999, Robert Cox contributed to the academic discussion on global societies as follows: “*At the end of the century, there is a world-wide problem of repairing or building political societies, of constructing a sense of identity between people and political authorities. There is a wide political space between constituted authority and the practical life of people*”<sup>1</sup>. According to his interpretation, this global dialectics was born as a result of a clash of two processes. Firstly, the so-called top-down process that was hegemonic and neoliberal. Secondly, the so-called bottom-up process that was formed of the civil society and the excluded. This had, in part, influenced on the fragmentation and bifurcation of politics and the society; creating multiple layers of authority, which the previously mentioned bottom-up process aimed to challenge.

Since the 1990’s to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, then, this global dialectics appeared to be particularly visible in the Latin American continent. Despite the triumph of democracy and peace in the last decades, and all the ideologies of development, it seemed that the progress had been rather symbolic than concrete there. The democratic systems appeared to promise more than the reality offered, hardly integrating the citizens to participate and decide. Instead, the continent was swept by neoliberal economic policies that left behind a majority of poor and excluded. Therefore, according to the North American Congress for Latin America (NACLA), for example, the greatest contradiction in Latin America today, is the division between the subordinate classes and the dominant classes: those who can purposefully participate in the societal institutions, and those, who are included only on occasion or not at all<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, it could be argued that Latin America has functioned as a scene and an arena for these contemporary political processes that are worldwide. It could be argued that it is in Latin America where these phenomena have also been ripped off their masks.

However, not only to uncover their harsh and bare realities, but also to raise responses to what we commonly know as *No Alternative* or the *tina*-thinking (“There Is No Alternative”, initiated by Margaret Thatcher referring to the capitalist and neoliberal world-system). Regardless that these so-called bottom-up processes are broad and wide in their goals and modes of action, they have at least two things in common: 1) adjusting

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<sup>1</sup> Cox Robert W (1999), *Civil Society at the turn of the millennium: prospects for an alternative world order*, *Review of International Studies* 25, pp. 3-28

<sup>2</sup> North-American Congress for Latin America NACLA (March/April 2005), *Report: Social Movements, Building from the ground up*, Introduction, [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org)

and networking into movements that are global in character and which intend to challenge the world politics often called as “neoliberal” 2) their role in the society as impetus for change.

Therefore, the aim of this piece of work is to evaluate the sort of responses these bottom-up processes represent towards the *No Alternative* in Latin America. The latter is, the said top-down process; hegemonic and neoliberal. For analytical reasons, this essay will refer to the different bottom-up processes under a banner of “Contemporary Lefts”. Although the intention of this article is not to make an account for the historical developments of the Lefts in Latin America, but rather, an evaluation of what sort of responses they represent towards democracy and world order in a contemporary sense, the concept of Contemporary Lefts has been used for the following reasons. Firstly, the concept of “Left” refers to the actors and processes that aim to challenge the hegemonic *status quo*, and they share similar demands, which are, for example, the demands to change the neoliberal world system and the request for more equal, participatory democracy. Secondly, the word “contemporary” stems from the difference considered with the “Old Left” of Latin America. Since we talk about very recent processes, there are no exact definitions available in the literature. However, the following could be argued:

The Contemporary Lefts are more about *movement*, and less about orthodoxy than the “Old Left” from 1980’s and before. This is especially in comparison with the previous Communist movements of Latin America that strictly followed their theories and ideologies. The Contemporary Lefts, instead, do not form a historical presentation but consider themselves as communities in action. However, the Contemporary Lefts do not represent the traditional revolutionary guerrilla-movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s either, as they are not national liberation movements in an attempt to gain state power, trying to install themselves as revolutionary armies and eventually turn into another hegemony. Instead, the movements are more about strengthening civil society and considering the role of people, including the new cleavages: the indigenous and the minorities. In this sense, the Contemporary Lefts contribute to a kind of synthesis and pragmatism. Finally, the difference to the reformist-populist mass parties of Latin America is the most difficult to define as the new left-minded governments have only started their processes. However, in comparison with the *peronismo* of Argentina, for example, although the President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela has been accused of populism, the previous governments have rarely talked about socialism and started to construct a parallel state system from below. All in all, it is argued that the Contemporary Lefts do challenge the way that the Lefts have functioned in Latin America before, although the conceptual and historical definitions are still under work.<sup>3</sup>

To continue, the article will then divide the Contemporary Lefts into three actors: 1) the movements of alternative 2) the left-minded governments and parties, and 3) the so-

<sup>3</sup> Various sources, see for example: Rodríguez Araujo Octavio (2002), *Izquierdas e Izquierdismo: de la Primera Internacional a Porto Alegre*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores: México; Castañeda Jorge (2003), *La utopia desarmada*, Ariel; Lievesley Geraldine (2005), *The Latin American Left, participatory democracy and popular movements: Can the relationship work?* Working Paper: Manchester Metropolitan University/ Department of Politics and Philosophy; García Márquez Gabriel and Pombo Roberto interview of Subcomandante Marcos (2001), *The Punch Card and the Hourglass*, *The New Left Review* Number 9, May/June 2001, available online: <http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR9.shtml>

called Critical School of Enquiry of Latin America; the compound of various researchers and intellectuals intending to challenge the *tina*-thinking. To make sure, these three actors do not form any clearly defined branches but in reality are very much intertwined.

Firstly, however, this article will outline the elements and characteristics of the world into which the Contemporary Lefts are looking for an alternative. This will take a global perspective since it is argued that what is essential in Political Science in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is the way that globalisation and other phenomena have changed the notion of *political*. That is, for instance: in the contemporary world, what is *political* is not only limited to nation-states or state-actors nor those who directly seek state power. However, it does not automatically presume or indicate that World Politics today is simply run by global governance or multilateral deals, either, even if we wish so, but it does consider and apply the stretched notion of what consists of political as an analytical approach. Obviously, the recognition of the shift into a world with boundaries of different nature, or the boundlessness altogether, does not facilitate the complexities we experience in Political Sciences, but it does shed a better light to the political realities we live in, its processes, phenomena and structures. In this way, Political Science becomes a tool to unfold concepts and to create them in its analysis. We need to take globality as an analytical approach as to capture political events and processes; the forms of power and power relations they are folding into. It is not only relations between or within states but phenomena and structures that characterise World Politics today.

This is also the central perspective and approach in this piece of work as it is argued that the Contemporary Lefts are in the process of challenging that *political*.

Secondly, the article will move to evaluating and comparing the three different actors of the Contemporary Lefts in Latin America. In the first case, it is argued that the movements of alternative provide a reflection of *an epoch of multiplicity*, especially in the axis: space – actor. In here, this work will take a special emphasis on the Zapatista Movement active in Mexico, the popular movement active in Bolivia, and the World Social Forum. In the second case, the recent rise of the left-minded governments and parties in Latin America is considered. It is argued that this actor represents probably the most controversial party in the Contemporary Lefts. Yet, they form an interesting and influential case in the vertical – horizontal axis, and in challenging relations between movements and states. In the third case, the named Critical School of Enquiry of Latin America is taken as to represent the more theoretical challenge of the *No Alternative*. It is argued in here that there is a tendency to emphasise and produce *Southern thinking* as an alternative to eurocentrism of Social Sciences<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Eurocentrism of Social Sciences as broadly defined by Edgardo Lander: the eurocentric construction thinks and organises the totality of time and space, of all the humanity, starting from its own experience, placing its historic-cultural speciality as a pattern of superior and universal reference. This also refers to the colonial and imperialist character of knowledge produced in the Social Sciences. In this sense, the Critical School of Enquiry intends to provide an alternative, especially in arguing against the universal nature of knowledge produced by eurocentrism. The School also argues that to look for alternatives for neoliberalism, the latter cannot be considered only as an economic theory but as a hegemonic discourse and a liberal worldview. Lander Edgardo (2005), *Ciencias sociales: saberes coloniales y eurocéntricos*, in Lander Edgardo et al (2005), *La Colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales, Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, CLACSO, pp. 11-41

Finally it will be concluded that even if the theoretical division of bottom-up and top-down process can be considered limited regarding the multiple clashing actors and structures, Cox's idea to analyse the contemporary world using Gramsci's thesis on hegemony and counter hegemony has value in explaining the current world order, globalisation and the driving forces<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the processes of the Contemporary Left in Latin America, starting from below, can offer "another" system to the hegemonic and that this "other" will provide us an important field of analysis to continue: questioning the idea of taking power and the division between conventional and unconventional action.

## **1. The Worldviews and the Challenge of *No Alternative*: how could it all be unfolded?**

The global dialectics and the two clashing processes – how can one enter them? This Chapter intends to explain and analyse how could these two be unfolded. Essentially, it is argued that the struggle of worldviews comes about through developments in democracy and the world order. According to various authors, the challenge for *No Alternative* stems from the crisis of the so-called Old Left and been obvious in Latin America in particular. Is the continent becoming more left-wing, and why?

### **Democracy: triumph and disillusion**

The beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed various processes. For one, there is the trend of 1990's and key tool for the analysis of the contemporary world – that is, the concept of democracy. This includes the "triumph of democracy" that started from the end of Cold War and the downfall of Communism<sup>6</sup>. More recently, the 'triumph' has also become to include the anthem for "global democracy" as a level above or beyond the nation-state<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, however, democracy has become a double-sided process whereby at the same time with democratisation and emphasis on institutional design, the new global civil society has emerged to criticise its eliteness, its liberal nature and deficits. Indeed, these numerous deficits (sometimes institutional, sometimes socio-economic) have resulted in growing *disillusion* on the way that democracy functions and ought to function. Indeed, at the same time with its "triumph", democracy has provoked major debates by asking what does political equality or citizenship mean and how far they should be taken<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> In here, it is important to highlight that the theoretical division of top-down and bottom-up process does not refer to spatial division only but rather *processes*, including those of territories, actors, spaces and structures. In the same way, it is noted that this theoretical division, sometimes referred as neo-gramscianist theory of hegemony and counter hegemony, works here only as an analytical tool. Rather as a tendency in itself in Latin America, it is used by analysts to explain different processes and realities of Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> Holden Barry (2000), *Global Democracy: Key Debates*, Routledge, p.1-2

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Phillips Anne (1999/2000), *Which Equalities Matter?* Polity Press, p. 16

Increasingly, there are struggles to consolidate democracy in parts of the world, and problems of legitimacy in others. In Western Europe and the United States, there has been a growing apathy in voting and limited participation, which have eroded the traditional parties. This would imply an erosion of the representative democratic systems. On the other hand, new groups have risen, particularly in the United States, to request for group rights and the so-called “identity politics”, which profoundly alters the character of representation<sup>9</sup>.

In the so-called Third World, the democratic systems have become fragmented and polarised. In Latin America in particular, there is increasing dissatisfaction and disillusion with the way that democracy works. According to Latinobarómetro: “*the problem is not so much the threat of renewed authoritarianism but the existence of distinct and in some ways diminished forms of democracy*”<sup>10</sup>. This has had some serious effects on legitimacy but also on the rise of new activism that has become to challenge the idea of liberal democracy.

Indeed, despite of the global democratisation process and the notable pro-democratic forces, the current form and content of democracy appear to have provoked either disillusion or vibrant civil society responses worldwide. Although democracy in its form has been extensively expanded in the era of globalisation, according to sceptics, the most powerful socio-political forces (such as the multinational corporations) escape the traditional boundaries and are not reachable by democratic politics<sup>11</sup>. In addition, although the institutions of global governance have emerged at the same time with the rise of global civil society, it must be noted that the poor majority of the population in the world are not able to participate on democratic politics at the global level.

According to Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John Stephens, democracy occurs when subordinated social groups achieve a state whereby they are able to transform the society so that the system is no longer simply an instrument to protect the dominant classes: democracy here represents a shift in the power balance within civil society<sup>12</sup>. According to Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora and Richard Wilson, there is little evidence to support the widespread assumption that formal electoral democratisation alone would bring about lasting progressive breakthrough in Third World societies<sup>13</sup>. In their opinion, democracy requires change in the balance of forces in society since concentration of economic power in the hands of small elite is a structural obstacle to democracy. In this view, democracy is impossible under the conditions of excessive capitalism with its extreme wealth and poverty.

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<sup>9</sup> Various sources but see for example: Blaug Ricardo and Schwarzmantel John (2000), *Democracy: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press

<sup>10</sup> Lagos Marta (2001), “Between Stability and Crisis in Latin America: how people view democracy”, *Journal of Democracy* Vol 12/1, pp. 137-145, [www.latinobarometro.org](http://www.latinobarometro.org)

<sup>11</sup> Held cited in: Holden Barry (ed, 2000), *Global Democracy*, pp. 17-32

<sup>12</sup> Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens (1995) cited in Smith Peter (1995), *Latin America in Comparative Perspective: New Approaches to Methods and Analysis*, Westview Press

<sup>13</sup> Gills, Rocamora, Wilson (ed, 1993), *Low Intensity Democracy: political power in the new world order*, Pluto Press

In the contemporary societies, while the Western elites argue for the victory of actually existing democracies, the movements of alternative use the term to express a demand for a radical extension of democracy<sup>14</sup>. It is the paradox between the extension of formal democratic procedures (especially in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa) and the erosion of substantive democracy (the ability to participate in decisions affecting everyday life)<sup>15</sup>.

These factors also explain why democracy and democratisation have become key tools for the analysis of the contemporary world<sup>16</sup>. As David Held argues, democracy is the only grand or meta narrative that can legitimately frame and delimit the competing ‘narratives’ of the contemporary age<sup>17</sup>.

It seems that within this dialectics of democracy, there are also two sides that clash: hegemony and the rising counter hegemony as an alternative. However, as Stephen Gill argues, there is a ‘silent revolution’ within the civil society that is yet somewhat invisible and outside traditional conceptions of political action<sup>18</sup>. It is the bottom-up process of the apparently powerless against the hegemony. This takes place particularly in the Third World where widespread disillusionment and alienation may turn into taking responsibility for citizens’ own survival and beginning to exercise social choices, which reflect their own interests. Perhaps the examples of Porto Alegre in Brazil and the Zapatista movement in Mexico may be considered as differing results of ‘silent revolution’ having turned into action<sup>19</sup>.

### **Transition of World Order: top-down and bottom-up**

As described above, according to some authors, this dialectics within the democratic world – the triumph of democracy versus the disillusion - has a lot to do with the world order. That is, as previously outlined by Robert Cox, a conflict of a “top-down process” (hegemony, liberal democracy, the capitalist world system, the powerful) and a “bottom-up process” (counter-hegemony, collective action, civil society, social movements, the subordinates), which has created a wide political space between constituted authority and the practical life of people.

Immanuel Wallerstein, to take one, has argued that it is exactly liberalism and democracy that represent responses to the modern world-system, resulting also the resurgence of movements and the excluded<sup>20</sup>. This change on both sides has created bifurcation, multiple layers of authority and fragmentation. An era of chaos in the sense that there is a

<sup>14</sup> Kaldor Mary (2000), *Civilising Globalisation? The Implications of the Battle in Seattle*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29:1, pp. 105-114

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Grugel Jean (2000), *Democratisation: a critical introduction*, Palgrave, p. 3

<sup>17</sup> David Held cited in: Grugel Jean (2000), *Democratisation*, pp. 121-123

<sup>18</sup> Gill Stephen (1995), *Theorising the Interregnum: The Double Movement and Global Politics in the 1990's*, in *International Political Economy: Understanding Global Disorder*, Fernwood Publishing/Zed Books pp. 93-97

<sup>19</sup> Referring to: Teivainen Teivo (2002), *The World Social Forum and global democratisation: learning from Porto Alegre*, *Third World Quarterly* 23:4, pp. 621-632; and Morton Adam David (2002), *La Resurreccion del Maiz: Globalisation, Resistance and the Zapatistas*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31:1, pp. 27-54

disintegration of existing social arrangements and differentiation of systems, which advance in their own speed. Often, they are notably contradictory to each other.

According to Stephen Gill, the top-down process is culminated in the era of globalisation as to: “*the organised chaos of the interregnum*”<sup>21</sup>. For him, the contemporary hegemony is equated with the foundation and establishment of a system with relatively universal appeal, with mechanisms, which permit the institutionalisation of conflict and the weighting of subordinate interests in a transnational political settlement. He refers, like Cox, to the neo-liberal dominance in the current world order, including growing strength and positional power of neo-liberal ideas and their application in practices. The same applies to the organisational forms of key social institutions and the reconfiguration of material power relations and a redistribution of wealth. It is at the same time linked to the spread of laissez fair ideas and practices, and is sustained politically by a relatively affluent, politically active minority. For Gill, the global era is chaotic in the sense that disintegration of existing sets of social arrangements and state forms have become unsustainable. More fundamentally, such organised and institutional chaos stems from the increasingly liberalised economic structures of contemporary capitalism. Politically, it is a process whereby new constitutional and treaty arrangements are put in place to institutionalise the privileges of capital on a world scale. At the same time, especially the Third World, has become increasingly fragmented, divided and weakened, so that it can no longer be regarded as an autonomous actor in global politics.

Although the theory of bottom-up and top-down process can be perceived limited and too bipolar in profound analysis, it does offer a point of departure for the dialectics of the contemporary world politics; the structures, phenomena and processes. And certainly, it can play a role in helping to explain the challenge of *No Alternative*.

Having said that on the world order and hegemony –of which elements does the counter hegemony consist?

## **The Question of “Left”**

According to various authors, these contemporary conflicts or processes are particularly linked to the “*left*” on the political spectrum. Firstly, it has been argued that the conflict is a result of the deep disillusion with the so-called Old Left, in all its three major variants: the Social democratic parties in the West, the Communist parties and the National Liberation movements in the Third World<sup>22</sup>. This has delegitimated the reformist centrist liberals and the state as an instrument of social transformation. It is the failure of Old Left to stanch the polarisation of world-system. According to Wallerstein, the effects include delegitimation of the reformist centrist liberalism as the ideology of geoculture, consideration of state as the instrument for social transformation, and

<sup>20</sup> Wallerstein Immanuel (1999), *The End of the world as we know it: Social Science for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 87

<sup>21</sup> Gill Stephen (1995), *Theorising the Interregnum: The Double Movement and Global Politics in the 1990’s*, in *International Political Economy: Understanding Global Disorder*, Fernwood Publishing/Zed Books, pp. 65-100

<sup>22</sup> Wallerstein Immanuel (1995), *After Liberalism*, The New Press

destruction of optimism about the inevitability of progress. Wallerstein argues that this collapse of Old Left has resulted in no canalisation of anger; the sort of collapse of “optimism and patience” of the world’s “dangerous classes”<sup>23</sup>.

At the same time, there is a rise of new collective action: protests of Seattle, new social movements, World Social Forum. There are, for instance, the non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) and the new social movements acting globally<sup>24</sup>. They are also the practitioners of ‘identity politics’, the representatives of the triumph of democracy that are concerned with single issues, such as peace, women, human rights, the environment, and new forms of protest. They are opposing the traditional party politics - the competitive elitism - and express very well their brand of non-party politics<sup>25</sup>. According to Mary Kaldor, the NGO’s function as the tamed social movements with a new policy agenda: they represent the “respectable opposition” to the hegemony. However, they have managed to create a “boomerang effect” whereby appeals to the international community bounce back and put some pressure on governments to tolerate certain activities<sup>26</sup>. For Kaldor, as for many others, the global political contestation of Seattle represented a bounce by the counter hegemony, and an expression of global civil society<sup>27</sup>. In Seattle, for the first time, the political presence of a range of new actors was taken seriously and generated debate about the nature of the global order<sup>28</sup>.

According to Mary Kaldor, then, the contemporary “Left” is divided into two blocks: the old left belongs to parochial redistributionalist cleavage that has been weak in collaborating with this new cosmopolitan redistributionalism (of new social movements etc) because they have favoured the strong state and been unable to go global. Variably, they have also cooperated with the hegemonic forces. Indeed, Kaldor states, what matters in future political struggles, is *the kind of coalitions that are made within different groupings within the bottom-up process*. For counter hegemony to gain position, it would then require a coalition between liberal globalisers and global civic networks. If the Old Left is able to network with global civic movements, they might be successful in gaining redistributional benefits.

## The Latin American Phenomenon

These processes –the contest on democracy, the questioning of world order, creation of new lefts or counter hegemony- would appear to take place in Latin America in particular and therefore forms an interesting field of analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Wallerstein Immanuel (1999), *The End of the World as we know it: Social Science for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, University of Minnesota Press

<sup>24</sup> Kaldor Mary (2003), *The Idea of Global Civil Society*, *International Affairs* 79:3, pp.588-590

<sup>25</sup> ‘Competitive elitism’ as defined by Held David (1996), *Models of Democracy*, Polity Press, the Chapter 5: “Competitive Elitism and the Technocratic Vision”

<sup>26</sup> Kaldor Mary (2003), *The Idea of Global Civil Society*, *International Affairs* 79:3, p. 587

<sup>27</sup> Kaldor Mary (2000), *Civilising Globalisation? The Implications of the Battle in Seattle*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29:1, pp. 105-114

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



According to a report of NACLA, one of the major contradictions in the Americas today is that between the included and the excluded - those who can regularly participate in the formal institutions of society, politics and the economy, and those who are able to do so only intermittently, or not at all<sup>29</sup>. They argue that what is significant, is the evaluation of *“the self-organization of the excluded into movements struggling for inclusion, and for the creation of ‘another world’ within which that inclusion is possible”*<sup>30</sup>.

Indeed, according to NACLA, despite the diversity of the various emerging and existing movements of Latin America, what unites them, is their common global perspective: *“their loose integration into a broader global movement fighting against a world order called ‘neoliberal’.” They have been drawn, that is, into global debates about democratic change, universal social justice and meaningful political participation*<sup>31</sup>. They take as examples the Brazil’s landless or the Mexico’s insurgent peasantry where the exclusion of vast segments of the population dates back to the Iberian Conquests of the Sixteenth Century. In other cases, as with the working poor in Argentina and Venezuela, exclusion has been built into contemporary urban structures. However, the NACLA argues, in all cases, it has been exacerbated to crisis proportions by the region’s current model of neoliberal social and economic development, a model premised upon the systematic exclusion of certain segments of the population from meaningful participation. In addition, although some of the popular movements have not by themselves created alternative policies, over the past 15 years or so, they have been *the impetus for change*.

As William Robinson puts it, whilst the policy of “democracy promotion” has become the eternal problem of how to maintain order and exercise effective social control in the face of popular pressures for change in Latin America, by the 1980’s it also had become clear to dominant groups, and especially to emergent transnational elites, that the old methods of political domination in Latin America would no longer work<sup>32</sup>. People were becoming integrated globally, and many engaged in mass mobilization as they saw their ways of life profoundly altered by capitalist development. Sweeping changes in social control were necessary if the emergent global order was to hold together. He concludes that nearly every Latin American country has experienced waves of spontaneous uprisings, including formation in the shantytowns of political protest movements among the urban poor, indigenous insurrections, resurgence of mass peasant movements and land invasions. Robinson also highlights that such actions fall often outside the formal institutions of the political system. Therefore, Latin America’s polyarchic regimes face growing crises of legitimacy and governability. There is a fundamental structural contradiction between global capitalism and the effort to maintain polyarchic political systems that require the hegemonic incorporation of a sufficiently broad social base.

These popular movements could be accounted as Contemporary Left as they all aim to challenge the contemporary world order and demand more egalitarian democracy.

<sup>29</sup> North-American Congress for Latin America NACLA (March/April 2005), Report: Social Movements, Building from the ground up, Introduction, [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson William I (2000), Polyarchy: Coercion’s New Face in Latin America, NACLA Nov/Dec 2000, [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org)

However, in their strategies and focuses, they vary greatly, creating a front of diverse and complex “lefts”. As Geraldine Lievesley pinpoints, what is now termed as a contemporary left is very different from that of 1950’s and 1960’s; that is, for example, the guerrillas and the great influence of Revolutions on one side, and the old leftist governmental parties praising conformism and reform on the other<sup>33</sup>. According to Lievesley, the contemporary lefts has risen exactly to criticise the Old Left for its concentration on electoral strategies, for failing to engage with the popular sectors and acting with them to attack the socio-economic and political status quo. However, to do this, he argued, the movements need to adopt strategies, which “*respond to the kind of world unbridled global capital is creating but they also have to relate to those political forces with which they share common features*”<sup>34</sup>.

## **2. The Contemporary Lefts in Latin America: An Epoch of Multiplicity and The Other Systems**

Bearing this in mind, if the contemporary state of democracy and the characteristics of World Politics can explain the emergence of the Contemporary Lefts, especially in Latin America, what sort of responses do they represent? What kind of prospects do they offer for the world in transition?

### **The Movements of Alternative<sup>35</sup>**

Although Latin America has a long history of protest and plenty of experience in defying political activity, the great potential of the contemporary movements of alternative lies in their capacity to renew, adapt and tune. This does not refer to adapting or tuning regarding the hegemonic world but rather to different circumstances that require confronting – including oneself. Since the collapse of Communism and the followed crisis of the Left, instead of referring to the usual death of Marxism, one could also argue for its certain type of re-writing; not abandoning nor continuing, but re-raising.

This course can be especially observed in the developments of the Zapatista movement, active in Southern state of Chiapas Mexico, which firstly seemed to apply traditional Marxism and new-Gramscianism into its agenda. From the very beginning the movement was related to the battle against neoliberalism as it launched its action on the day of the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in 1994. However, in the very early days of its existence, it applied the kind of traditional revolutionary, guerrilla action. This was essentially combined with a long-term preparation and planning, making some authors like Adam David Morton, refer to neo-Gramscianism; the “war of manoeuvre” and the “war of position”<sup>36</sup>. He argues that what made the Zapatistas Gramscian, was their first rapid assault against the state (the war of manoeuvre), and then

<sup>33</sup> Lievesley Geraldine (2005), *The Latin American Left, participatory democracy and popular movements: Can the relationship work?* Working Paper: Manchester Metropolitan University/ Department of Politics and Philosophy

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> The Movements of Alternative refer to the kind of social and popular movements that confront or oppose the neoliberal world order and request for a radical extension of democracy in their demands.

concentrating on a long-term, ideological struggle on the cultural front, building different forms of consciousness (war of position).

Yet only shortly afterwards the actual days of warfare, the Zapatistas worked towards a deeper process of challenging the neoliberal world order and especially state and party politics. In this way, they have become the example of counter hegemonic resistance for various actors and social movements. Rather than following the previous revolutionary route of taking state-power, they have preferred acting outside the state arena, and they are not clients of any parties. In this way, they have come about challenging the paradigms of traditional revolutionary strategies.

On the contrary, for the Zapatistas, the formal state power has never been an absolute value. Their action reaches below and above the state-level and the national democratic system. In their understanding, what is essential about the struggle against *No Alternative*, is to start from the resistance of the neoliberal and capitalist *thinking*. For this reason, the Zapatistas demonstrate a high consciousness on historical factors and symbolism.

To provide an example, the movement has refused to take part in the official political system, which they consider corrupt and based on charity. From their perspective, especially regarding their combination of ethnic identity and common class concerns, the society of charity has only created indisposition and exclusion, and therefore, the alternative should rather be born from *another* system: their own democratic system in the autonomous region in Chiapas whereby the trusted positions are recycled and the tasks of the community are those of everybody in their turn<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, the Zapatistas have also refused to announce or promote any ready recipe for world change and utopia. Instead, they argue that an efficient strategy plan and a fast-action tactic are not more than an example of the neoliberal model of society, and therefore ought to be resisted. Following the same mode, the Zapatistas have argued that their route could not be imported. Instead, their message has been: “*everybody can put into practice our tactics by listening, learning and becoming active in their own communities*”<sup>38</sup>.

At the moment, the Zapatistas have launched “the other campaign” (*La otra campaña*) that aims to learn about other similar struggles as theirs, and to build a common front against the neoliberal world order.

The other movements of alternative, some more some less influenced by the forerunner Zapatistas, have aimed to create their own set of tools of action and routes of influence.

<sup>36</sup> Morton Adam David (2002), *La Resurreccion del Maiz: Globalisation, Resistance and the Zapatistas*, Millennium: Journal of International Studies 31:1, pp. 27-54

<sup>37</sup> Martinez Manuel (2005): *Las Juntas de Buen Gobierno del Movimiento Zapatista. Una interpretación del proceso político*, Masters-thesis for the University of Salamanca, Spain.

<sup>38</sup> Morton Adam David (2002), *La Resurreccion del Maiz: Globalisation, Resistance and the Zapatistas*, Millennium: Journal of International Studies 31:1, pp. 27-54

One of them is the popular movement of Bolivia that has been built upon activism of the indigenous communities and the coca-growers (cocaleros) movement<sup>39</sup>. Bolivia is not only one of the poorest countries of Latin America but also one of the most experienced in political activism (counting only from the beginning of the Millennium: the war of water 2000, the war of cocaleros 2001-2002, the resistance of “Impuestazo” 2003, and the ouster of the President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada 2003)<sup>40</sup>. Precisely in May-June 2005, the political situation led into a broad protest in the Capital La Paz that resulted in the resignation of President Carlos Mesa<sup>41</sup> and in December 2005, the selection of the cocalero-leader, Evo Morales, as President.

The Bolivian popular movement of alternative is many-edged and it brings together many actors and identities - the indigenous in particular (as in the case of the Zapatistas). Especially during the last years, the popular movement displayed an indigenous centrality, representing the socio-economic and political realities of Bolivia where 62% of the population claims indigenous identity<sup>42</sup>. However, not only that, the popular movement has indicated solidarity among the urban residents, the miners, the small-scale coordinators of regional water distribution and students, to mention a few<sup>43</sup>.

Indeed, the demands of the movement include especially autonomy and nationalisation of the natural resources (gas in particular), as well as large-scale waking of the political consciousness.

However, what makes the movement significant, too, is the scale and determination of its actions that do not always respect the opinion of its leaders either: during the summer of 2005, what drew attention in La Paz was, among others, the method of blocking the city by which the political space and power was forced into the hands of the protesters<sup>44</sup>. However, what is noteworthy, is the fact that this resort did not function as an ultimate goal or fundamental axis of strategy but rather, as a pillar in constructing a new, stronger mass movement<sup>45</sup> which, by now, have won elections selecting their preferred President Evo Morales.

Finally, another type of alternative is offered by the famous World Social Forum that was launched in Porto Alegre in 2001 as to create an opposing force for the World Economic Forum in Davos. Whereas the popular movement in Bolivia represents a political and social *actor*, the Social Forum could be characterised as a political and social *space* that stands for global resistance in an attempt to bring together different elements, from which

<sup>39</sup> Lievesley Geraldine (2005), The Latin American Left, participatory democracy and popular movements: Can the relationship work? Working Paper: Manchester Metropolitan University/ Department of Politics and Philosophy

<sup>40</sup> Carlos A. Aguirre Rojas (2005), Bolivia Rebelde. Las Lecciones de los sucesos de mayo y junio de 2005 en perspectiva histórica, Contrahistorias Número 5, Dossier: Chiapas y las nuevas resistencias Latinoamericanas, pp. 63-75

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> North-American Congress for Latin America NACLA (Nov/Dec 2004); The Roots of Rebellion: Insurgent Bolivia 1, by Hylton and Thompson, [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. See also: Carlos A. Aguirre Rojas (2005), Bolivia Rebelde

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to build a common front on one side, and from which to form one's own cocktail of activism for local struggles, on the other.

This way the World Social Forum has become both symbolically and concretely a horizontal, open space for change of world order, without representing anybody in particular, and without speaking in one common voice<sup>46</sup>. It represents the come-together of struggles against the imperialist and neoliberal world, with an idea that “Another world is possible”. As a speaker at the Caracas World Social Forum in January 2006 concluded: the World Social Forum has managed to offer evidence of oppression and situations of imperialism. Moreover, it has managed to put a “s” at the end of “an alternative”. That is: there is not just one alternative - there are many *alternatives*.

In this way, the World Social Forum also represents a contemporary left-wing process, curiously in a form of an encounter. It wishes to acknowledge the many-edginess of the contemporary Left, and to emphasize a horizontal nature between the actors. It is both a symbolical and concrete space for world change, without pretending to have a ready recipe to carry it out.

On the other hand, the World Social Forum has been composed of, and strongly contributed to, the kind of left-minded politics that believes in “*you must be the change you want to see*”<sup>47</sup>. This seems to have created a list of divisions whereby the former refers to the *preferred* nature of the Forum: shared space - hub, prefigurative politics - political culture, participatory ad hoc action - representation, horizontals - verticals, inside - outside<sup>48</sup> ...

These examples of Latin American movements present rather a reflection of *an epoch of multiplicity* than decay of the Left. They function in a horizontal mode, especially in the axis of actor – space. And they are characterised by an outlook that they do not necessarily need to find an exit for the contemporary dialectics but to enter them inside, instead.

## **The Left-minded Governments and Parties**

Supposedly the most controversial actor in the so-called Contemporary Left is also its most traditional wing: the governments and parties. Since the 1968 Revolution, a front of movements has directed its critique exactly towards the type of “Old Left”: the Social democratic parties and centre-left, which believed in the continuous progress and reform, the capacitating, the welfare state and even a possibility of some sort of social capitalism. However, these beliefs did not seem to materialise into a concrete outcome according to the expectations. Above all, the states began to rip down their responsibilities, resulting in

<sup>46</sup> See for instance: Teivainen Teivo (2002), *The World Social Forum and global democratisation: learning from Porto Alegre*, *Third World Quarterly* 23:4, pp. 621-632; and Patomäki and Teivainen (2004): *The World Social Forum: An Open Space or a Movement of Movements? Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol 21 (6), pp. 145-154

<sup>47</sup> Nunes Rodrigo (2005), *Networks, Open Spaces, Horizontality: Instantiations, Ephemera Forum*, Volume 5 (2), pp. 297-318, [www.ephemeraweb.org](http://www.ephemeraweb.org)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

a rise of informal self-help networks of citizens throughout the continent, which also functioned as arenas of political activation.

Regardless of this - and in some cases, actually for this reason - in the past years Latin America has witnessed an emergence of new, left-minded governments. Along the phenomenon, there has been a radical change in the discourse of some parties, whereas some have emerged into new ones. In both cases, these parties have attempted to be assimilated with the popular movements (or tried to accommodate them), creating a curious crossfire between conventional and unconventional activism<sup>49</sup>.

Therefore, the left-minded governments and parties can be perceived controversial, since as an actor, they represent the traditional way of pursuing their goals; taking the state power and attempting the transformation via governments. And controversial, because the contemporary left-wing processes in the form of social movements have come about as a critique of this same actor: the parties and the governments.

The most radical example may be Venezuela, where the elitist right-wing and centrist left-wing parties lost their support throughout the 1990's, and Hugo Chavez with his bolivarian circles and strong holds in the grassroot-level won the elections. The seven years of political process under the leadership of Chávez has been epochal, profound and polarising. The revolutionary machine has touched nearly every citizen and has not left anyone without an opinion.

On one side, the activity in local level and networking in the bolivarian circles and missions have been significant. The democratically elected Chávez has, despite the coup in 2002 and other outrages by the opposition, more or less democratically maintained in power; renewed the Constitution that is now readable in every street corner; and actively driven for the left-wing unity of the Latin American continent. On the other hand, the democratic opposition discussion has been absent, nationalism has been provoked to the extreme and Chávez has been accused of “colonel populism”<sup>50</sup>.

However, beneath the surface, there appear to be a more profound process going on, making the division between *anti* and *pro* Chavistas blurred. According to the interview obtained in Caracas on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2006, Carlos Villegas Hernandez, a facilitator of the missions of Chávez, explained that there are at least two differing processes in Venezuela<sup>51</sup>:

Firstly, a political system that especially includes the party of Chávez that is often perceived populist, weak, personality-centred combined with an unknown and insecure

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<sup>49</sup> See for example: The North American Congress for Latin America NACLA (2005), Social Movements: building from ground up, March/April 2005, [www.nacla.org](http://www.nacla.org)

<sup>50</sup> See for instance: Carlos A. Aguirre Rojas (2005), Chiapas y los nuevos movimientos antisistémicos de América Latina. Entrevista a Immanuel Wallerstein. *Contrahistorias* Número 5, Dossier: Chiapas y las nuevas resistencias Latinoamericanas, pp. 101-123.

<sup>51</sup> An interview of the facilitator Carlos Villegas Hernández, carried out by the author in Caracas, Venezuela, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2006

continuity that appears to preoccupy a lot of Venezuelans: What if there is another coup? What if voter turnout diminishes?

And secondly, an informal system that includes significant missions and projects parallel to the formal state, with an objective to create *another*, preferably self-managing, *system* to replace the old one. As Carlos Villegas Hernandez argued in the interview, the two sides interweave and clash but keep carrying out a revolution, parallel to the state, in order to change radically and violently the formal state structures of Venezuela.

It seems, then, that the left-minded governments could challenge the old understanding of taking state power or acting through the governments. The Venezuelan case demonstrates something *parallel* to the formal systems, being interestingly comparative with the Zapatistas, too. Could the Bolivarian Revolution provide some revision to the state systems we have got used to talking about and ignored the actor by ranking it as “Old Left”?

And how about the other left-minded governments and parties in Latin America? Take for example the recently-elected President of Brazil, Luiz Ignacio Lula de la Silva, who has not survived without criticism, either. He has performed as a more moderate representative of the left-wing within the national polity. Elected by the support of the Workers Party, the left-minded President has been thanked for his active Brazilian diplomacy that has been extended also to Africa and Asia, however, he has also demonstrated a clear guideline to neoliberal economic policy. And what will the Bolivian President Evo Morales bring to the scene? Will he take the Venezuelan course of action? In similar vein, there are important left-minded governments in Chile and Uruguay, which are not analysed here, but which indeed represent significant contributions to the recent left-minded route of Latin America.

What do these left-minded governments and parties mean for Latin America? The so-far gained distinct victories could be summed up in three: 1) the new inter-governmental leftist cooperation 2) the fact that they have become elected democratically as a result of support of the popular movements and the subordinates and 3) their egalitarian missions and policies could bring about more inclusion.

However, their near future challenges could be shortly presented as follows: 1) in their discourse, they have adopted a strong element of alternative but the discourse on its own does not guarantee a long-term support, at least if implemented within the neoliberal program or authoritarian elements; 2) it is questionable to what extent they really reflect the societal dimensions and divisions; 3) the nature of politics has changed the most radical, or is the most radically present, in Latin America: the movements of alternative have demonstrated that the state power is *not* the only way to welfare any longer, and that the relationship between different political actors is actually rather *horizontal than vertical*. The latter may form as a greatest logical and functional challenge and friction between the parties and movements.

## The Critical School of Enquiry of Latin America

It might be risky business to refer to the “Critical School of Enquiry” of Latin America since nobody has ever called it so.

However, this paper argues that this vague grouping of intellectuals and academic thinkers, even if not easily defined, forms an active and significant part of the Contemporary Left of Latin America and therefore ought to be evaluated. On the other hand, it could be argued that a School does exist indeed because it is *produced* in the academic debates in Latin America. This includes especially the so-called *Southern Thinking* (“*Pensamiento del Sur*”). For these reasons, this article will raise the Critical School of Enquiry of Latin America as an actor of the Contemporary Lefts.

In the past decades, there has been an increase in the field of Critical Theory research that aims to challenge the concept of “eurocentrism”. That is: there is an intention to defy the Social and Political Science (including the field of International Relations) that have concentrated in producing knowledge of the so-called Western hemisphere solely, or contributed to a type of research that covers only the so-called Western perspectives<sup>52</sup>. There is a growing amount of literature that attempts to defy the historical “colonial nature of knowledge” and the focus on the Western hemisphere. These theories intend to provide their respective perspectives, such as those of the “other modernity”, the “otherness” as to affect the claimed eurocentrism of the Political Science, and in order to contribute to the understanding of the *Political* in the contemporary world.

As part of this, there has been a demand for knowledge and research outside Europe and the United States (or the so-called eurocentrism). This is due to different factors, for example: 1) the fact that there are some paramount political processes taking place outside Europe and United States into which the eurocentric theories cannot be applied and therefore there is a necessity for knowledge in Asia, Africa and Latin America, 2) the fact that there has been a rise of theories and analysis on political processes that have put the eurocentric Political and Social Science in a new, critical light: there is an increasing attention to the fact that the knowledge on Europe and the United States simply is not enough 3) the general crisis of Political and Social Sciences that searches for new ways to answer the questions of *political*, and in which the theories and analyses in Asia, Africa and Latin America have – and could - demonstrate a great potential.

Traditionally, this critical theory branch has especially concentrated on Africa, which has played an important role in “decolonising” the Social and Political Sciences. The African perspectives have especially focused on the concepts of new imperialism<sup>53</sup>. These authors, to mention examples only, include such names as Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon and Samir Amin.

<sup>52</sup> See for example: Gruffyd Jones Branwen (2005), *Africa and the Poverty of International Relations*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 26:6, pp. 987-1003. In here, the concept of Western hemisphere is simply taken to refer to Western world – North America and Europe – in Spanish referred as “Occidente”. This places emphasis on the Latin American Social Sciences as “Southern” as separated from the “Occidente”. Therefore, above it was shortly referred to the “*Pensamiento del Sur*” as to emphasise the intention of the Critical School to place itself within the “South”..

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



However, together with the rise of social movements and political activism in Latin America, also in the respective continent has witnessed a growth of some theories of alternative. These critical theories have raised especially issues such as: development, modernity, post-colonialism and globe-centrism, alternative economic models, the otherness, political participation and democracy, as well as the role of nature<sup>54</sup>. In the field of Political and Social Science, they have sought to challenge the way of understanding these concepts, as well as the methods used in the study of Social and Political Sciences. These include, to name only a few authors, such as: Enrique Dussel, Edgardo Lander, Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Carlos Aguirre Rojas and Raul Zibechi.

What kind of alternatives to the eurocentrism of Social Sciences can these theories offer? One categorisation could be offered by Maritza Montero, who sums up as follows<sup>55</sup>:

“In the first place, the concept of community and participation as well as popular knowledge as forms of constitution and perhaps as a product of knowledge of relation. Secondly, the idea of liberalisation through praxis, which assumes mobilisation of conscience, and a critical sense that carries out de-naturalisation of canonical forms to learn – construct – to be in the world. Thirdly, the redefinition of the role of the social researcher, the acknowledgement of the Other as him/herself and therefore, the object – subject of the research as a social actor and constructor of knowledge. Fourthly, the historical character, indeterminate, indefinite and relative to the knowledge. Fifthly, the perspectives of dependency and resistance. The tension between minorities and majorities, and alternative modes to do – know. Finally, the revision of methods and transformations provoked.”

This could be taken to indicate that the challenge of the so-called eurocentrism is possible and demonstrates a potential to improve the quality and scope of Social Sciences in Latin America. It could also bring about a more profound analysis, both historical and contemporary, of the realities in Latin America, and in the “South” in general.

Apparently, this outline functions only as a point of departure to the theme. However, it could indicate that the Critical School of Enquiry has the most visibly contributed in re-defining concepts and in this way, rip of some masks from the continent’s realities. It has attacked against the eurocentric way of perceiving the world and literally turned the world map upside-down. Whereas Africa discusses the issues of imperialism and Asia natural resources, the Latin American school agitates especially the idea(1)s of (post) development, (post) modernism, (post) otherness and colonialism – and in this way, it writes its own, and at the same time the rest of the world’s, history anew.

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<sup>54</sup> Various sources, see for example: Lander Edgardo et al (2005), *La Colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales, Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, CLACSO; Acosta Alberto (2000), *El desarrollo en la globalización: el reto de América Latina*, ILDIS: Editorial Nueva Sociedad

<sup>55</sup> Montero cited in: Lander Edgardo (2005), *Ciencias sociales: saberes coloniales y eurocéntricos*, in *La Colonialidad del saber*, pp. 27-28

## Conclusions and Continuities

This piece of work has used the analysis of the bottom-up and top-down processes outlined by Robert Cox in order to evaluate the kind of responses the Contemporary Lefts in Latin America can offer to the world of *No Alternative*. The latter was approached from a global perspective and explained through dialectics in democracy and world order, in particular. This also, in part, has explained how the Latin American continent had become a scene for those political processes and taken a shift towards left on the political spectrum. The importance of the Contemporary Lefts was considered in their global character, in their need to challenge the world which is often called “neoliberal”, and in their role in the society as an impetus for change.

In the first Chapter, the challenge of competing worldviews was underlined. Regarding democracy, the problems of representation, the radical extension of understanding of democracy and the possibility for citizens to exercise of their own choices outside the traditional conceptions of political action were raised. Regarding the transition of world order, especially the resurgence of the movements of the excluded was pointed out, focus was brought upon the left and the Latin American phenomenon.

Indeed, the article has argued that there is an observable process whereby the excluded pursue for the creation of “another world” within which the inclusion is possible. However, this seems to be taking place outside the formal institutions of the political systems.

In the second Chapter, these alternatives were evaluated and compared. As in the case of the Zapatistas, for example, what seems to be important in the struggles for an alternative, is the process of re-writing the old understandings of the *Political*, the history and modes of action. This is in order to not to *reproduce* the hegemonic way of thinking and acting. On the other hand, the popular movement of Bolivia and the World Social Forum clearly indicated that the movements of alternative represent multiple responses and prospects for the *No Alternative*. The former being considered an actor that combines various strategies and the latter being considered an open space for world change. However, what they all had in common, was the focus on autonomy and another system, in addition to the character that was not purely limited to the nation-state level.

Curiously enough, the case of Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution was demonstrating a combination of more traditional government action and party politics, and informal self-help networks transforming into a *parallel system* of the formal state. As in the case of the movements of alternative, this double-process represents a challenge of the traditional *Political*: the transformation of the role of the state, the emergence of Other Systems and Parallel Systems to the state and national democratic systems, and moreover and more importantly, the revision of the concept of *taking power*, both conventional and unconventional. This would form a significant continuity rather than conclusion:

There are not just state systems but *parallel* state systems – apparently built by the formal state system, apparently somewhat informally.... Is this the state-power as we used to understand it? Or is this just a nice icing on top of the concepts that have got transformed along the way? And what does this explain us about the idea of taking power?

The same line of continuity can be followed in the Critical School of Enquiry in Latin America that was essentially perceived as re-defining the eurocentric concepts and introducing a more theoretical *Other*: That is, the other way of knowing and doing, the other way of how we should know and why. Indeed, this is to argue that , it is absolutely crucial for the contemporary and historical world, for its political realities, and for Political Science that the production of knowledge consists of every corner of the globe.

These actors and factors underline that, despite the fact that the different Latin American cases may occasionally seem like diverging boats, the continent's Left as a whole is both richer in its voice and more horizontal in its actions than before. As usual, it is both a threat and a possibility. The Latin American realities as well as the fragmentation and bifurcation of political structures in their harsh totality have also created a basis for bottom-up and horizontal leftist processes that can scratch – and are scratching - deeper than the surface.

For *No Alternative*, it offers a whole scale of actors, discourses and methods of action. However, and perhaps foremost, it offers a space where each one can write anew what has been previously learnt, acknowledging the fact there is no one verity, or that there is already “another” system, process or structure living side by side the dominant, and that this “other” is based on something different – the way *we* do and know, and the way we *want to* do and know.

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