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Pyrrhic Victories: The Fall and Rise of the Left Turns

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All victories are Pyrrhic, to a greater or lesser extent. That is, no victory is ever complete; victors always have to concede something to the vanquished. At the very least, for instance, those who emerge victorious from a political (or other) struggle either depend upon or, worse still, have to make do without the recognition on the part of the vanquished that they have indeed won. Either, that is, the losing side sign, metaphorically or otherwise, the equivalent of some kind of document of surrender, in which case they have retained the power to determine that the struggle is indeed at an end. And this retained power forces an acknowledgement, on the part of the winners, that their victory cannot be total even if the surrender is unconditional. Or, worse still, the losers do not sign such a document, either because they refuse to acknowledge defeat or because they will not or cannot acknowledge the victors and the legitimacy of their victory. In which case, symbolically and perhaps not just symbolically, the struggle continues and victory remains elusive for the victors. All this is of course merely a variant of Hegel's famous dialectic of master and slave, itself the foundation of much postcolonial theory: either the master (the colonizer, would-be hegemon) depends upon recognition from the slave (the colonized, would-be subaltern). Or, worse still, something escapes and he has to make do without it. And in fact something *always* escapes, which leads to the frustration of any and every project for hegemony, stuck between the demand for recognition, which would be a

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form of defeat in any case, and the reality of its withdrawal, its stubborn subaltern betrayal, which makes even that defeat elusive.

None of which is to say there are not in fact winners and losers, that (say) by some kind of postcolonial ruse the colonized emerge victorious from the violent clash that is colonial rule, whether that be thanks to their mastery of mimicry, their destabilization of the signs of power, or some similar conceptual subterfuge. No. Pyrrhic victories are still victories. The toll they take on the vanquished is always worse than the toll taken on the victors, at least in the short run. (And by contrast in the long run, as John Maynard Keynes reminds us, "we are *all* dead"[3]. But the point is that the winning side is always frustrated by the means by which it wins: it desperately wants a hegemony that is forever unattainable. For the outcome of any struggle is always only determined posthegemonically.

So let us take for granted that, with the "Left Turns" or "marea rosada," the Latin American Left won, in some not insignificant sense. From Venezuela to Argentina, Bolivia to Brazil, it took over the levers of state power, which is nothing to be sniffed at. Taking advantage of this victory, as well as of other contingencies such as a favorable geopolitical climate, the exhaustion of their immediate enemies, and an unanticipated commodities boom, left-leaning governments of different stripes have had almost unprecedented freedom to experiment with a variety of progressive political, economic, and social solutions to some (at least) of the problems that have long ailed the region. They helped write new constitutions that threatened dramatically to improve participation and do away with some of the entrenched hierarchies of the creole republics. They ploughed money into diverse schemes to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, and improve public services for those who most need them. And they presided over a series of reforms that increased the visibility and improved the social and legal rights of women, gays and lesbians, indigenous peoples, and others who have historically been marginalized and oppressed. In other words, there is no point denying that the Left Turns have indeed constituted an almost unprecedented achievement on the part of the Latin American Left, even at the same

[3] Cited in Vincent Barnett, *John Maynard Keynes* (London: Routledge, 2013), 153.

time we insist that they did not go far enough, that in some way they could never have gone far enough.

But equally, we can take it as given that nothing in these victories depended on anything like "hegemony." And indeed, that the more that these regimes sought hegemony, the more frustrated they were bound to become. But the fact that they ultimately (or even initially) failed to become hegemonic is not in itself the marker or symptom, let alone the cause, of their downfall. Rather, defeat was already inscribed in the moment of their triumph: in the ways in which they were more or less forced, upon assuming state power, to turn against the movements that established them in that power, and to find that (reciprocally) those movements then sooner or later abandoned them and escaped the scene. Or in the ways in which, as a condition of gaining state sovereignty, they had to bear the burden of renewing or sustaining a social pact that was always fictive and perpetually in crisis, and as such they had to do the dirty work for which their bourgeois opponents were no longer fit for purpose. And perhaps most damagingly, at least in the short to medium turn, in the ways in which as a result they became increasingly dependent on the elusive powers of sovereignty itself, and so became fixated on charismatic leaders that soon outstayed their welcome and misread the true sources of whatever power they had indeed won.

In turn, however, the various recent victories of an insurgent Right, achieved in very disparate circumstances (from impeachment in Brazil to electoral victory in Argentina to, say, internal drift in Uruguay) are also in some way Pyrrhic, conceding something to the forces that they replace. So the apparent defeat of the Left across the region—or the "end of the progressive cycle" as this dossier puts it—is far from ushering in some kind of posthegemonic age, let alone the renewed hegemony of the Right. After all, the very phrase "posthegemonic age" is quite strictly meaningless, assuming as it does some kind of "hegemonic age" that might have preceded it. But the series of crises and transitions, from Caracas to Montevideo, Brasilia to Buenos Aires, does offer an opportunity to draw up a balance of forces, of victories in defeats and defeats in victories on all sides. It allows an assessment of what the Left has achieved, and the multiple ways in which the struggle (as always) continues.

The Left Turns won, in the first place, because they capitalized on a striking series of social mobilizations that, as Bruno Cava observes, date back to Venezuela's *Caracazo* of 1989 and include also the water and gas wars in Bolivia or Argentina's crisis of December 2001. Cava calls these "democratic mobilizations," which I think goes too far. There was nothing particularly "democratic" about the*Caracazo*, for instance. If anything, coming so soon after the triumphant inauguration of Carlos Andrés Pérez as Venezuelan president in the wake of elections that had been substantially free and fair (and attracted a turnout of over 80% of the electorate), the riots of February 1989 might better be described as *anti*democratic. Or rather, as with the subsequent so-called *Argentinazo* twelve years later, which popularized the slogan "¡Que se vayan todos!" ("All of them out!"), they might better still be characterized as expressing that gap between politics per se (democratic or otherwise) and existence itself that Alberto Moreiras, among others, conceptualizes in terms of infrapolitics.[4] For what was most striking about the majority of these protests was the way in which they simply did not fit within any conventional notion of the political, and did not appear to be the expression of any recognized (or recognizable) political actor. And yet they exerted immense pressure upon political processes, not least on the fiction of a social pact upon which the political compact depended--in Venezuela quite literally, as the *Caracazo* exposed the threadbare nature of the "Pact of Punto Fijo," but the impact of these various mobilizations was just as striking elsewhere. They forced a reimagining of the political and as such (and Hugo Chávez himself was one of the first to realize this) expressed a constituent power, a desire to re-found the political on new bases. But in each case, a kind of latency period followed the protests before any political organization or party could emerge or reconfigure themselves so as to capture this constituent energy, thus demonstrating that the mobilizations themselves were indeed not political in any meaningful sense of the term. It fell to the Left to re-cast them in political terms, by means of a constituent process that then created the

[4] See, for instance, "A Conversation with Alberto Moreiras regarding the Notion of Infrapolitics. With Alejandra Castillo, Jorge Álvarez Yágu¨ez, Maddalena Cerrato, Sam Steinberg, Ángel Octavio Alvarez Solís," trans. Jaime Rodríguez Matos with Sam Steinberg and Alberto Moreiras, *Transmodernity* 5.1 (2015), 142-158. Also, the publications in the Infrapolitical Deconstruction Collective's site ww.infrapolitica.wordpress.com

social identities and actors upon which the new regimes could base their own legitimacy.

A similar process had taken place before, of course, in the ructions at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that led to the rise of populist regimes in much of the region. So it is no surprise that left-turn governments were continually characterized (for good or ill) as populist in one way or another. But the term is misleading, not least because it implies that they were little more than a throwback to some previous political form. In fact, however, the Left Turn was distinctly post-neoliberal, in that it involved attempts to deal or reconcile with specific problems (but also opportunities) that neoliberalism had put on the agenda. For the infrapolitical revolt was largely a response to the increasing colonization of everyday life and ordinary habits by political or commercial interests that is a feature of the neoliberal age. Remember that the *Caracazo* started as a protest against the rise in bus fares for commuters; the Cochabamba water war concerned the most basic of natural resources. In short, these were revolts against a particular form of biopolitics. The regimes that followed the revolts then had to negotiate with this new biopolitical horizon, whether by confronting (or allying with) more expansive forms of extraction, by adopting ever more immanent modes of communication and governance that tended to bypass established institutions, or by promoting a drastic enlargement of the domain of political conceptualization, attributing rights for instance to the natural environment. In this context, the rise to prominence of a notion such as "***buen vivir***" as a political concept is a revenge on (but also revenge of) biopolitics, in that it is a recasting of the relationship between politics and life itself that would have been inconceivable in any preceding, populist, era.

In other words, the Left Turns did not so much oppose or roll back the innovations in politics and economics that go by the name of neoliberalism, as instead build on and extend them, albeit in new, unforeseen directions. On the one hand, then, many left-wing governments of the past decade and a half have shown remarkable reverence for markets, including the stock markets. This led to a certain timidity in economic policy, visible perhaps above all in Brazil, but elsewhere, too. For all the desires for Socialism inscribed in left-wing parties' names or rhetoric, there was little sustained

attempt to transform the mode of production. This was true even in a country such as Argentina, where small but symbolically significant steps had been taken in that direction in the fall-out of the 2001 disturbances, for instance by workers at the various "occupied" factories. But such experiments were never really supported by the state. So it is unsurprising if in many cases (again, perhaps particularly in Brazil, as Salvador Schavelzon notes) the Left in power continued with many of the economic policies that they had inherited.

On the other hand, they introduced new programs (the *bolsa familia*, for instance) that sought more equitable ways to redistribute capital surpluses. Moreover, and in contrast to the populist developmentalist regimes of the 1940s and 1950s, on the whole the governments of the Left Turns spurned protectionism and Import Substitution Industrialization, instead embracing transnationalism but putting it to work in efforts (such as ALBA, the "Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America") to establish regional networks of mutual assistance and economic, political, and social integration. Consistently, then, rather than refusing or negating what had come to be the "common sense" of neoliberalism, left-wing governments chose rather to adapt or channel it to new ends. Or in Sergio Villalobos's words, "without opposing neoliberalism [they] tried to radically modify its logic and produce a more humane economy."

In short, the Left Turns were built on two foundations: an infrapolitical revolt, manifested in social protests and mobilizations; and habits of thought and behavior bequeathed by neoliberalism. These two elements coexisted, in more or less uneasy synchrony, paradoxically presided over by a reinvigorated state that in principle they both opposed. And as became clear, for example when indigenous protests threatened infrastructure construction that would benefit hydrocarbon extraction in Bolivia, when forced to choose ultimately the state would always favor free trade from which it could reap rents and secure its own precarious position.

At the heart of any reflection on the legacy of the Left Turns has then to be an analysis of what Villalobos terms the "question of the state form." Villalobos argues that in "post-neoliberalism" (which signifies anything but the demise of neoliberalism), the

state may be weak by comparison to the military regime that first imposed so-called "structural adjustment" in a country such as Chile. But it continues to play a key role, in part thanks to its renewed capacity to recast popular protests in political terms, which is that of ensuring "the containment of the demands of social movements (through diverse forms of repressive and persuasive strategies)" and so "secur[ing] the macroeconomic space for flexible patterns of accumulation." If that sounds too much like a hegemonic project, with its characterization of politics in terms of "repressive and persuasive strategies"—the old dichotomy of coercion and/or consent—Gerardo Muñoz hints at the more properly posthegemonic workings both of the *marea rosada* and of what he calls the "New Right" as the latter steps up to "exploit […] popular cultures of identification and subjective desires that are no longer the monopoly of the populist affective machine." Muñoz observes that, in Argentina, Kirchnerismo "orchestrated a contemporary cultural rhythm that hinged on habits and rituals long established in the Peronist sentimental fabric." In other words, there's a certain continuity of dispositions and customs, that have little to do with ideology (and which indeed can be paired with very diverse ideological discourses), upon which the Left Turns and their successors both build. The state then benefits from and acts these ingrained habits.

This image of the state as the conductor of a variegated and diverse orchestra, wielding little more than the symbolic power of the baton to maintain a specific tempo and ensure resonance and (relative) harmony between very distinct forms of activity and expression, all of which are the fruit of long training and practice, is probably as good a picture as any of a posthegemonic form of leadership in which neither coercion nor consent are strictly at issue. (Pierre Bourdieu similarly liked to use images drawn from sport to illustrate the workings of the habitus and to disrupt the age-old debate about structure versus agency.[5] With the rise of the New Right, we may see (or hear) rather different rhythms—less of the frenetic bombast of a Hugo Chávez, for instance, with his injunctions for constant mobilization—but the basic

[5] "Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player. He quite naturally materializes at just the place the ball is about to fall, as if the ball were in command of him--but by that very fact, he is in command of the ball." Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 63.

principle of a state that seeks not to overwhelm but to orchestrate will no doubt remain in place. This is perhaps a literalization of the frequently-noted confusion of politics with entertainment, already anticipated to some extent in (what John Kraniauskas has called) Eva-Peronism, but whose latest apogee is surely Donald Trump's candidacy in the United States presidential elections.[6]

Yet this same conception of the state as orchestrator also rather undoes Muñoz's over-hasty reduction of the notion of the commons to, first, "communitarianism" and, second and more quickly still, identitarianism. What is common to an orchestra has little to nothing to do with the identities of those constituting it, however much they are fully invested and embodied in the collective. An orchestra is a machinic arrangement that has very disparate parts: brass and strings; French horns and cymbals; musicians at least notionally from very diverse backgrounds. What they have in common, beyond certain habits and experience, is a score and a mode of attention directed to the conductor. None of this depends upon identity. Hence what I think is an element of miscommunication in the interview between Muñoz and Maristella Svampa. When Muñoz moves from the "turn to the commons" to a question about the extent to which "the communitarian (identitarian) [can] be a democratic horizon of emancipation," he compresses many assumptions into a very short passage. No wonder that Svampa should wish to go more slowly, to re-open the conversation: "Concepts in the process of their construction tend to be disputed concepts. So there is a symbolic debate around the new horizon of concepts and a risk of their abuse." At the same time, in turn Svampa moves too quickly in her eagerness (following François Houtart) to associate "common goods with *the common good of humanity*, in the most general sense." If the most significant impact of the Left Turns (as both Muñoz and Svampa seem to agree) has been the shift to the common or commons as one of the key areas for political debate, conflict, and strategy, then their current decline, and the rise of a New Right that seeks now to inhabit this very same terrain,

[6] 4. "From the point of view of Eva Perón, the Peronist state may be approached as a peculiar combination of tactics and entertainment, in which, on the one hand, the military institution met a working class in the process of (Peronist) re-organisation and, on the other, the exercise of state power passed through the formats of the culture industries." John Kraniauskas, "Porno-Revolution: *El fiord* and the Eva-Peronist State," *Angelaki* 6.1 (April 2001), 147. Obviously, the key difference between Eva-Peronism and Trumpism is that it is business (specifically, property development) that takes the place of the military in this equation.

shows that there is nothing necessarily progressive or noble about the concept. In this sense, the better comparison is not between the commons and communitarianism but more simply with community. The weakness or blindspot of communitarians is that they believe all communities, intrinsically, to be of value. But (to put it most bluntly) everybody knows that some communities are better than others.

Some, perhaps most, communities are exclusionary in one way or another. They can be violent both towards other communities and towards those who have no community, as well as imposing various forms of internal hierarchy and oppression on their own members. In other words, there is no particular normative dimension to community. And perhaps we should say exactly the same thing about the commons. It is not unusual to see the common (or the commons) praised for some inherent virtue it is assumed to possess. But surely this is but a legacy of the fact that the initial stages of capitalism involved the enclosure and privatization of common land. Hence the somewhat nostalgic subsequent drive to "reclaim" the commons. But there is no need even to subscribe the notion of the "tragedy of the commons" to recognize that some commons are better than others. The so-called "common cold," for instance, or indeed any other endemic disease, is common, and yet hardly to be desired. And there are plenty of instances of common resources and the networks structured around them that are rightly denigrated: these days, for instance, the characteristic of decentralized Islamic terror is that it is organized around just such common sites of information and inflammation that any would-be jihadi can access. Or (to take another extreme) the databases and image collections of paedophile networks are likewise held in common and as far as possible at arm's length from any named individual. So we may want to fight to expand and preserve the commons, but not *all* commons, or not all equally.

No doubt it would be nice to live in a world with more certainties. A world in which there were straightforward virtues to champion and vices to condemn. Surely this is the attraction of the "decolonial" option in contemporary Latin American reflection: as soon as you have managed to categorize a given phenomenon according to the dichotomy colonizer/colonized, then effectively the work of thinking comes to a halt and a form of Puritanism takes over. The rest is either celebration or castigation. But

the decolonialists are not the only ones. For all his disagreements with them, John Beverley offers a similar gesture in his call to defend the Left Turns, and the achievement of left-wing governments in power.[7] But to point out that the victories of each and every such government are inevitably Pyrrhic is not "ultraleftism". It is simple realism, and a refusal to abdicate thought in the name of politics. Such abdications demean politics and thought alike.

But life is messier than that. And Diego Valeriano points us to the messy promise of what he calls "*runfla* capitalism" as one of the legacies of the past fifteen years. Valeriano explains that "Runfla capitalism entails a new superior stage of consumption, of popular stability that is both festive and inclusive. The 'good government,' parallel to this stage, was its necessary accomplice by unleashing a populist rhetoric that took great efforts in sustaining and fomenting its participation in this process." These "good governments" are now going or gone, but "*runfla* vitality" continues in the impure admixtures of forces, affects, and habits associated with "the youth, the thieves, the immigrants, the *cholas*" of (especially) metropolitan Latin America.

Surely there was already something of this vitality way back in the festive redistribution of stockpiled goods that characterized the *Caracazo*, the event that serves as the Ur-moment for the entire Left Turns cycle. And if something always escapes, then what escapes (in the dual sense both that it was not fully captured and that it was also produced or further fomented by) the *marea rosada* is perhaps precisely this irreverent, decidedly un-Puritan, transversal attitude to consumer culture that opens up a "micro-politics of life, where consumption, the feast, and the new conflict open worlds to come." If, as Michela Russo's reading of Ticio Escobar suggests, we are finally witnessing the full de-auratization of the aesthetic, for both good and ill, then any new options arise from the habits established in "that liminal zone where the political and the aesthetic" and, I would add, the economic "enter a threshold of indecidability." And where the New Right may discover that its victories, in turn, are as Pyrrhic as those of the Left half a generation ago is in the fact that the real

[7] John Beverley, *Latinamericanism After 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

subsumption of society by capital is far from being capital's ultimate triumph. If anything, the fact that capital is now invested in everything, everywhere, makes it more vulnerable than ever. Meanwhile, the players who currently play in tune with the state's sense of rhythm may sometime discover that they do not really need a conductor at all.