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The Veins of Latin America Are More Open Than Ever

Miguel Amorós

November 2017

*“The abyss does not stop us: when the water is falling
over the precipice it is most beautiful.”*

Ricardo Flores Magón

Miguel Amorós

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In the present stage of capitalist globalization, the territory is undergoing a violent re-adaptation on a world scale. The immediate victim of the abrupt acceleration of economic activity is the territory. Not only is it subjected to large-scale infrastructure projects and intensive urbanization, but, more generally, it is becoming the source of industrially exploitable resources and therefore the indispensable driver of the economy. As a result, its residents are confronted by the complete destruction of their habitat and their way of life. In a predominantly financial economy, the territory is nothing but capital, which entails the disappearance from its environs of any activity that is not subordinate to private economic profit. Not even life itself, whether public or private, is ruled by collective necessities, but by the interests of the political-economic

elite that is expropriating the territory's resources. The territory is being transformed into a kind of diffuse factory that tends to function like a modern business, with high technology and a small labor force, reproducing social antagonisms at the highest level in the form of environmental problems, ecological crises, resource depletion, the forced relocation of populations and, in the countries with large and vital traditional agricultural sectors, these issues incorporated into the battle over the agrarian question by their peasant classes; these are novel aspects that make it possible to present the social question more veraciously. Theoretical critique must keep this in mind if it wants to avoid idealism and dogmatism.

The territory has become the principal means of production; extractivism is nothing but the capitalist reflection of this reality. The financial-industrial order cannot impose its rule without the massive exploitation of the territory in the form of multiple development programs. Postmodern consumer society would not be what it is today without bulldozers and tunnel boring machines. The construction of highways, ports, dams and fish farms, nuclear power plants, wind farms and photovoltaic installations, prospecting for minerals, natural gas and petroleum, monoculture croplands, industrial reforestation and bio-fuel plantations, mass tourism, etc., are some illustrative examples of the new development-oriented phase bound up with the consolidation of the global market. "Extractivism" is a political neologism used to refer to the pillaging of the territory. National governments, modeled according to its requirements and led by a powerful class that takes advantage of the situation to enhance its power and profit, do not hesitate to sacrifice the territory, deport its inhabitants, eliminate its culture, devastate the environment, contaminate the soil, air and water, and endanger the health and threaten the very survival of all. Extractivism characterizes a particularly obsessive and addictive stage of productivist and consumerist society, features that constitute the ideological core of the thought of

the ruling class. Nothing matters to the extractivist mentality except short-term economic profit; long-term consequences are not its concern. As a result, entire regions are mutilated and carved into pieces by infrastructure projects that are implemented in accordance with the requirements of the market, while the impoverished populations flee from the ravaged countryside to crowd together in the pestilential outskirts of the mega-cities, where they are exposed to, and imitate, the domestication of the urban masses in systematic consumption. “Development” is development by and for others, the oligarchy, its intermediaries and the beneficiaries of its patronage networks, and corresponds to an artificial, atomized, harmful way of life, subject to planned obsolescence.

During the last twenty years, the elites of the Latin American countries have eagerly adopted economic plans that prioritize the export of raw materials—primarily food, wood pulp, minerals, bio-fuels and hydrocarbons—favoring foreign investment and paving the way for the penetration of multinational corporations. They have embraced a kind of worldwide partition of the territory in order to rapidly overcome the various stages of industrial backwardness of their countries and to profitably insert themselves into the global Market. The territory has been carved up into zones, divided according to its productive specializations based on development plans elaborated in the big cities. What is particularly striking about this trend was that many of its protagonists do not belong to the traditional ruling classes, but to “left-wing” parties and coalitions that were calling for state regulation of extractive industries. The growth of the state apparatus is another common characteristic of today’s capitalist system, hardly affected by a neoliberal orthodoxy that is never put into practice, as it is a source of much-sought after jobs. If there is one thing that characterizes the stage of globalization it is the fusion of the State and Capital. State and Capital are the two sides of the same coin, just like politics and economics. The leftists rose to po-

litical power with promises of social justice, the eradication of poverty, political rights, participation of excluded majorities, protection of nature, and, of course, national “development”. Therefore they had to try to make their environmental and social programs compatible with the usual economic dependence and export-oriented nature of their respective countries, that is, they had to promote extractivism and socialize its profits. They had to harmonize the pillaging and devastation of the territory with plans for economic aid, education, health care and jobs, all implemented in such a way as to benefit the loyal and satisfied members of political patronage networks. The rise in the price of raw materials on the world market gave them vast sums of money and contributed to the convergence of the various national governments with the big corporations engaged in resource extraction, thus consolidating the new progressive-extractivist caste, which is more than ready to sacrifice as many zones of “Mother Earth” as are needed to maintain the flow of capital that keeps it in power. In fact, the statist-export operation was crowned with success, making possible a gradual increase in consumer welfare, as measured by the number of cars, televisions, computers, jobs created, units of housing built, pensions, credit, subsidies, university appointments and medical insurance. As the “philanthropic ogre” grew, which is what Octavio Paz called the State, it was transformed into a business, with the concomitant “left-wing” corruption. The indisputable achievements in the fight against poverty that are responsible for an increase in a capacity for popular consumption that parallels the capacity of the extraction of resources, the authentic embodiment of Progress and “modernization”, have fostered bribery and corruption, coopted militants from the social movements, increased dependence on big capital and technology, lowered the level of social commitment and deprived individuals, groups and collectives of all autonomy. Minor inconveniences for today, in the name of a better, more Americanized tomorrow. And therefore victories that entrench the

revolution. In the countries where the peasant classes have not yet been defeated by capitalism such a revolution is possible.

desk-jockeys of the political-administrative bureaucracy and that foster the expansion of the most typical stabilizing element of the postmodern era produced by totalitarian technology and the steady decomposition of the human condition: the wage-earning middle class.

The new middle classes, composed for the most part of civil servants, white collar employees and professionals, owe their expansion to the tertiarization of the economy and the extension of the State bureaucracy. Their status is not due to their ownership of their means of production as was the case with the classic petit-bourgeoisie, but rather to their academic training that is both technical and ideological. The occupational spectrum comprised by these classes includes, among other professions, consultants, management, advertising, information services, elaboration and transmission of the ruling ideology, etc. The increase in the number of students is a better index of their social rise than the number of mobile phones “per capita”. These classes comprise more or less one-third of the population [in Latin America], less than half of their corresponding share of the population in Europe, Japan and the United States, where they are the most numerous classes. Due to their origins and social situations, the intermediate layers of wage-earners with college degrees, involved in unproductive labor, compose a relatively enlightened, technophilic, pro-development, pragmatic and liberal urban class. This class has a moderate mentality, tending towards accommodation with authority, and is not at all disposed to engage in conflict, prioritizing security above freedom when the stability of the institutions upon which its prosperity depends is in danger. As long as its capacity for consumption is maintained, or, as the economists say, “as long as domestic demand is maintained”, their private lives will be more important than their public lives, but when this class is adversely affected by free trade agreements or by economic crises it will bestir itself from its slumber and contaminate the

social movements, spearheading political initiatives that will take the form of new fronts and alliances. These classes are not characterized by their anti-capitalism, although they avow such convictions for electoral reasons; their goal is obviously not the emancipation of exploited humanity, or a free society of free producers, or much less the abolition of the State. Their goal is much more prosaic: the bailout of their own class, i.e., rescuing it from the fate of proletarianization by political-administrative means. In short, what distinguishes the revolt of the middle classes from the revolt of the peasants and proletarians is the former's demand for profound political changes and its utter lack of interest in promoting social changes of any kind.

Questioning the nature of the State was a characteristic of the classes that sought to destroy every form of separate power. This is not the case with the civil society parties that represent the new middle class: their sacred dogma is that every social conflict has a political solution within the State. Thanks to their participation, the parliamentary regime will put the country back on track. The extended partiocracy will rectify the historical mistakes of the old political system and will resolve all crises. For the civil society movement, the social struggle is relegated to a secondary level, and this outlook therefore constitutes a factor promoting confusion, demobilization and the disintegration of class identity on a vast scale, insofar as it is not criticized and denounced by an authentically subversive movement. The tradition on which these civil society parties are based is Leninist because they pursue power and worship hierarchy, although they do not practice the conspiratorial methods of messianic sectarianism. They are the parties par excellence of the back-room deal: their weapons are electoral tactics, media posturing and political candidates, which are typically social democratic, all blended with a variably patriotic, folksy or charismatic rhetoric. They are not focused on agitation, but on "dialogue": they want to negotiate, not riot.

common resources. They show the inhabitants of the megacities that there are better alternatives to State control, nationalization, the privatization and sale of the territory, industrial food, the money economy, etc., and that a moral, solidarity-based, integrated economy is possible, an economy that would make it possible for society to be free and egalitarian, in equilibrium and without a State, de-urbanized and without a market. The active sympathy awakened by indigenous society among urban rebels has a dialectical repercussion on the former by enabling it to surpass its localism and orient itself towards universalist goals.

Along with the fact that they are a source of positive lessons, the best example set by the peasant communities is the extraordinary resistance mounted by the latter against the aggression of the agents of Progress and their repressive forces. The degree of ungovernability they display is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the State never hesitates to resort to terrorist procedures; peasant recalcitrance, in turn, has become a powerful stimulant for urban revolts. Assemblies, demonstrations, vigils, marches, highway blockades, barricades and occupations are tools that are simultaneously defensive and sociable, and have demonstrated an efficacy superior to conventional political methods in the neutralization of enemy forces and the peaceful deterrence of their destructive plans. It is clear that nothing can be achieved without the participation of the uprooted and vulnerable urban masses, the most numerous elements, which is why we must constantly build bridges between the countryside and the city, especially when freedom proceeds hand in hand with the disarmament of the State and with ruralization. The mega-city cannot be reduced to human dimensions, or, more accurately, the cities can never be what they once were, projects of self-governed life in common, without the recreation of urban communities of struggle, but the latter cannot be consolidated without the support of a peasant

ture of power and classes is defined from now on in relation to the territory. The revolutionary subject seems to be taking form around its defense, somewhat like the new class struggle in conditions of accelerated capitalism, which in a way is a mark of historical continuity: the peasant classes have always been present in every revolution on the continent, confronting power in their demands for land and autonomy. Thus, the history of the struggle for land has been, and still is, the history of the agrarian communities.

If repression is focused on traditional rural areas, for the most part the areas inhabited by indigenous peoples, this is due to the fact that they are immune to capitalism, and also to the fact that they can remove themselves from the sphere of the State. The Amerindians are a paradigmatic example of a society without conflict, coercion or violence, where labor is not sanctified, nor is power desired, and where social relations are reinforced instead. A society of equals, without hierarchy, with strong roots in the land, concerned with their patrimony, governed by a regime of reciprocity, outside the market, functioning autonomously, with hardly any interference from the established order. A society whose way of life is based on mutual obligations and revolves around ceremonies and festivals, the moments of the rejuvenation of communal bonds. In a non-individualist type of society, alien to private profit, the economy is a subordinate activity that obeys communal norms established by custom. Personal enrichment has no place in it, and is by no means the goal of exchange, since wealth is not conceived as an accumulation of goods, but as an abundance of relations. Outside of games, competition is therefore incomprehensible. It is not our intention to idealize a society based on tradition and customary law, or to return to pre-capitalist eras, but even a brief study of the topic already shows us collective practices of animal husbandry, gathering wild plants, irrigation, hunting, fishing and agriculture that are exemplary insofar as they display the balanced exploitation of

They are openly reformist; they do not want to abolish capitalism, but manage it. They promise that the economy, productivity and raw material exports would all prosper under their rule. They are Keynesians; they do not want a bureaucratic State capitalism, but a bureaucratic State that would reinvest part of the profits of capitalism in the preservation and extension of the middle class both in the mega-cities and the rural areas. They are therefore the modern incarnation of the myth of the “civilized” State, the paternalist State that is accessible to their candidates. Or, to put it another way: the State that mediates between the dangerous classes—the proletariat of the slums and the traditional peasantry—and the rationality of the Market. In a way, the populist States of Correa, Evo, Ollanta, Lula de Silva, Mújica and Bachelet. The current mission of the Latin American State, however, is only temporarily one of mediation, and whenever it springs into action it is visibly revealed to be the armed tentacle of the interests of transnational corporations. The wage-earning middle class then looks the other way because, although it is not the majority class in Latin America, its political weight is greater than in the other countries of the world and its interests are beginning to merge with those of international trade: its parties and fronts have had a taste of power, they have walked on the red carpet and they have hobbled with world leaders, and, as if this were not bad enough, their successful reinforcement of the partiocracy has become a model for civil society movements all over the world.

The official workers movement has long been integrated into the system. In the past, economic exploitation provoked revolt in a chaotic labor market and a proletariat that was hostile to bourgeois values. Now, need no longer obliges the proletariat to demand a new society. Its praxis does not lead it to autonomy. As long as labor output does not decline, wages guarantee a certain amount of acquisitive power and public expenditures maintain social services, the behavior of the wage earning masses will never be either seditious or radical. Their

way of life flows submissively in the channels of domination. The mechanisms of social control are vigilant and are responsible for making sure this remains the case. Violent antagonism then shifts to the margins of the capitalist regime: the greatest contradiction is no longer the surplus value appropriated by the exploiting class, but social exclusion. The principal protagonists of the historical drama are no longer those who exist within the labor market and pitifully stagger along the paths of alienation, but the expelled, the dissidents and all those who resist entering or operating within the circuit of the commodity: those who situate themselves outside the “system” as enemies and outlaws. The way that they express their views on the social terrain is new, spontaneous, plural, creative and based on assemblies. Despite the obstacles mentioned above, protest needs to be articulated and defended, which is why it must learn how to name its adversaries, especially those within its own ranks, the old and discredited left, the new-style civil society movements and the populist factions. As for its enemies outside of its movement, the oligarchs of industry and finance, the neoliberal plutocracy, the big landowners, the executives working for the multinationals, etc., it already knows them well enough. Thus, this advanced protest will not be able to avoid this internal struggle, and only by bringing it to a successful conclusion can it confront the ruling classes with any chance for success. Then, it will be able to express the truth that it contains and its cause will be able to be transformed into the cause of all the oppressed. It will overflow the local boundaries that once limited it, it will leave its particularism behind and will be an example for the world.

The series of “Earth Summits”, beginning with the one held in Rio de Janeiro, have taken on the mission of reconciling economic growth and extractivism with the devastation of the territory, dissimulating the latter behind formulas for environmental investment. They are laying the first bricks in the wall of a “green” capitalism based on “sustainable development” and

an “energy transition”, which is equivalent to making the destruction of the natural and rural environment a source of profits by way of the creation of a market for ecological degradation. De-carbonization, restoration of parts of the countryside for tourism, controlled pollution, recycling, the desalinization of sea water, GMOs, the renewable energy industry, etc., are glaring examples of this qualitative leap towards the barbarism of the “sustainable” economy. However, wherever the brutality of development projects cannot be successfully dissimulated under the glittering mask of sustainability, conflict spreads. The green economy is more suited to industrialized countries without any real peasants. In Latin America, where the rural population is very large and even constitutes a majority of the population in many countries, the extractivist side of the market is clearly manifested in an unprecedented demand for territory. Eventually, an avalanche of new highways, tunnels, pipelines, tourism, plantations, mines, reservoirs, waste dumps and all the rest, precipitates a war against the peasantry, which is forced to mobilize for resistance and participate in self-defense and self-government. Numerous popular assemblies, indigenous communities, “circles”, “rounds”, defense committees, pickets and neighborhood movements, which co-exist with other citizens’ organizations that operate in a legalistic and vertical framework, form part of the multiple experiences of organization improvised to respond to the urgent needs imposed by the struggle against the privatization or the nationalization of the territory, in a struggle to preserve their identities and their cultures, which are in danger of being standardized, depopulated and commodified. The way they see it, man belongs to the land, rather than the land belonging to man, and this principle determines a lifestyle that is incompatible with capitalist development, whether or not it is “extractivist”. These widely-shared concerns have now affected the urban zones. Now that the territory has obtained an increasingly greater economic and political importance, the na-