

Global Right has no narrative for future

Born in Cochabamba in 1962, Álvaro García Linera was very young when he first drew close to Marxism and the struggles of the Aymara people. Moving to Mexico, where he graduated in mathematics in the early 1980s, he was influenced by the Guatemalan guerrilla movements fighting for the cause of indigenous population. After his return to Bolivia, he became one of the founders of the Túpac Katari Guerrilla Army, a political organization that combined Marxist class struggle with Katarist principles promoting indigenous emancipation. Held in a maximum-security prison between 1992 and 1997, he went on to teach sociology and to become an influential intellectual. Later joining Evo Morales's Movement for Socialism (MAS), Linera has been since 2006 vicepresident of the Plurinational State of Bolivia. He is one of the most original voices in the Latin American Left, whose works include *Value Form and Community Form* (1995) and *Plebeian Power* (2008). In this conversation with MARCELLO MUSTO, Associate Professor of Sociological Theory at York University, Toronto, Linera speaks about the situation of progressive forces in this and other parts of the world.

Q: Your political commitment is marked by an awareness that most Latin American communist organizations were incapable of speaking to the popular classes as a whole and occupied little more than a function of observers. In Bolivia, for example, their reliance on the most schematic and economistic Marxism-Leninism prevented them from recognizing the specificity of the indigenous question and placing it at the centre of their political activity. They saw native peoples as an indistinct "petty-bourgeois" peasant mass with no revolutionary potential. How did you come to realize that it was necessary to build something radically different from the Left that existed at the time?

Á: In Bolivia, food was produced by indigenous farmers, buildings and houses were built by indigenous workers, streets were cleaned by indigenous people, and the elite and the middle classes entrusted the care of their children to them. Yet the traditional Left seemed blind to this and occupied itself only with workers in large-scale industry, paying no attention to their ethnic identity. Though certainly important for work in the mines, they were a minority in comparison with indigenous workers, who were discriminated against and even more harshly exploited. From the late 1970s on, the Aymara population organized large mobilizations against the dictatorship as well as the democratic governments that arose after its fall. It did so proudly with its own language and symbols, operating through federated communities of campesinos and furthering the birth of a nation under indigenous leadership. It was a moment of social discovery.

Q. How did you respond to this?

A. I was a school student at the time, and this Indian insurgency made a great impression on me. It seemed clear that the discourse of social struggle in the classical Left, centered only on workers and bourgeois, was one-sided and unsustainable. It had to incorporate indigenous themes and to reflect on the agrarian community, or collective ownership of the land, as the basis for social organization. Moreover, to understand the women and men who made up the majority of the country and were demanding a different history and place in the world, it was necessary to go more deeply into the ethnic-national aspect of the problem of oppressed peoples. And for this, the schematism of Marxist textbooks seemed to me completely inadequate. It sent me in search of other references, from the store of Indianist ideas to the Marx whose writings on anticolonial struggles and the agrarian commune in Russia had enriched his analysis of oppressed nations.

Q. With the passing of time, the complexity of the subject of social transformation – which was so important in your political thinking and activity – has become an essential question for all progressive forces. As the vision of the proletariat as the only force capable of overthrowing capitalism has waned, and as the myth of the revolutionary vanguard has dissolved, what should be the new starting point for the Left?

A. The problem for the traditional Left is that it confused the concept of “the proletarian condition” with a specific historical form of wage labour. The former has spread everywhere and become a worldwide material condition. It is not true that the world of labour is disappearing – there have never been as many workers in the world, in every country. But this huge growth of the global workforce has happened at a time when all the existing trade union and political structures have been breaking up. More than at any time since the early nineteenth century, the working-class condition is once again a condition of and for capital. But now in such a way that the world of workers has become more complex, hybridized, nomadic and deterritorialized. Paradoxically, in an age when every aspect of human life has been commodified, everything seems to happen as if there were no longer any workers.

Q. What is the character of social struggles today? Are the difficulties that political and trade-union organizations face in organizing migrant, insecure and unskilled workers very different from those that existed in the time of twentieth century Fordist production?

A. The new working class is not unified mainly around labour issues. It does not yet have the strength to do this, and perhaps it will not have it for a long time to come. Social mobilizations no longer take place through classical forms of centralized working-class action, but rather through mixes of different trades, cross-sector issues, and flexible, fluid and changeable forms. We are talking of new forms of collective action thrown up by the workers, even if, in many cases, what emerges is less a labour identity than other, complementary features such as territorial conglomerates or groups demanding the right to healthcare, education or public transport. Instead of reproving these struggles because their forms differ from those of the past, the Left should pay attention to this social hybridity or heterogeneity – first of all, to understand the existing struggles and to articulate them with others at a local, national and international level. The subject of change is still “living labour”: workers who sell their labour power in multiple ways. But the organizational forms, discourses and identities are very different from the ones we knew in the twentieth century.

Q. Amid the social complexity of our times, do you think it is necessary to think anew about the concept of class?

A. Classes, identities, mobilized collectives are not abstractions: they are forms of collective experience of the world that are constructed on a wide scale. Just as they took contingent forms a hundred years ago, they are doing so again through unforeseen and often surprising routes and causes that are very different from those of the past. We should not confuse the concept of social class – a way of statistically classifying people on the basis of their property, resources, access to wealth, etc. – with the actual ways in which they group together on the basis of elective affinities, places of residence, shared problems and cultural characteristics. This is the real movement of the mobilized construction of classes, which only exceptionally coincides with the convergences exhibited in statistical data.

Q. From what you say, it is obvious that the way in which you relate to Marx – who you know very well and about whom you have written a great deal – is very different from that of Soviet Marxism. Do you think that a turn to the Marx of questions and doubts, found in the unfinished manuscripts

of his later years, may today be more fruitful than the assertions contained in his published pamphlets and books?

A. Textbook Marxism always seemed inadequate to me. So, I took the initiative of also delving into authors inspired by indigenist ideology, as well as other Marxists and another Marx who spoke to me of hybrid social identities. In this way, I discovered a Marx who taught me about colonial struggles, who spoke about agrarian communities, who kept trying to place the theme of oppressed nations on a solid foundation – a Marx on the margins, more plural and more abounding with questions than with answers. It was these questions that enabled me, over the years, to read differently the Grundrisse, the Manuscripts of 1861- 1863 and Capital and to find there elements of the genetic logic of capitalism that other authors, before and after Marx, failed to understand.

Q. In the last four years, almost everywhere in Latin America, governments have come to power that take their cue from reactionary ideologies and seek to reimpose a neoliberal economic agenda. The election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil is the most striking case in point. Is this sharp right turn likely to last a long time?

A. I think the big problem for the global Right is that it has no narrative for the future. The states that preached a free-market liturgy are now building walls against immigrants and goods, as if their presidents were latter-day feudal lords. Those who called for privatizations are now appealing to the very state they used to vilify, in the hope that it will save them from the burden of debts. And those who once favoured globalization and spoke of a world that would finally be one now clutch at the pretext of “continental security”. We are living in a state of planetary chaos, where it is difficult to foresee what the new Latin American Rights will look like in the future. Will they opt for globalization or protectionism? Will they follow policies of privatization or state intervention? They themselves do not know the answers to these questions, since they are sailing in a sea of confusion and can only express short-term views. These forces of the Right do not represent a future to which Latin American society can entrust its long-term expectations. On the contrary: they are bringing about a rise in injustices and inequalities. The only tangible future they can offer to new generations is one of anxiety and uncertainty.

Q. In many parts of the world, the sharp decline of traditional political parties has gone together with the rise of new political forces that, in their different ways, are challenging neoliberal globalization and the existing order. The “free market” is no longer seen as synonymous with development and democracy, as it mistakenly was after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the debate about alternatives to capitalism is once again arousing considerable interest. What should the Latin American Left be doing to turn things around and to open a new cycle of political involvement and emancipation?

A. The conditions exist for the development of a new progressive stage that will go beyond what was achieved in the last decade. In this context of great uncertainty, there is space for alternative proposals and a collective orientation to new horizons, based on the real involvement of people and the (ecologically sustainable) overcoming of social injustices. The great task for the Left, in overcoming the limits and errors of twentieth-century socialism, is to chart a new horizon that offers solutions to the actual questions that cause suffering to people. It would serve a new “principle of hope” – whatever name we give to it – which promulgates equality, social freedom, and universal rights and capacities as the basis for collective self-determination.

Translated by Patrick Camiller