

The Latin American Left Today: 'Socialism is a Search for a Fully Democratic Society'

Marta Harnecker

Marta Harnecker Cerdá, born in Chile, is a sociologist and popular educator. She has published more than 80 works. The focus of her current work is socialism of the 21st century and organizing people in power. Her most widely read book is Los conceptos elementales del materialismo histórico (Fundamental Concepts of Historical Materialism). In 2008, she wrote a book on Bolivia's Movement Toward Socialism (MAS-IPSP), the political instrument led by Evo Morales, which emerged from social movements. Since the 1960s, she has collaborated with social and political movements of Latin America. She is now an advisor to the government of Venezuela. She is interviewed here by Edwin Herrera Salinas.

Edwin Herrera Salinas: What is the characteristic of the Latin American left today?

Marta Harnecker: Twenty years ago, when the Berlin Wall fell, there was no revolution foreseeable on the horizon. However, it didn't take long before a process began to emerge in Latin America with Hugo Chávez. We have gone on to form governments with anti-neoliberal programs, though not all of them are putting an anti-neoliberal economics in practice.

We have created a new left. A majority of victories are not due to political parties, except in the case of Brazil with the Workers' Party. In general, it has been due to either charismatic figures who reflect the popular sentiment that rejects the system or, in many cases, social movements that have emerged from resistance to neoliberalism and that have been the base of these new governments.

The governments that have done most to guarantee that there will be a real process of change to an alternative society are the ones that are supported by organized peoples, for the correlation of forces is not idyllic. We have a very important enemy who is far from dead. It is preoccupied by the war in Iraq, but the power of the empire is very strong and is seeking to hold back this seemingly unstoppable process.

And what is happening to political thought?

What's happening is a renovation of left-wing thought. The ideas of revolutions that we used to defend in the 1970s and 1980s, in practice, have not materialized. So, left-wing thought has had to open itself up to new realities and search for new interpretations. It has had to develop more flexibility in order to understand that

revolutionary processes, for example, can begin by simply winning administrative power.

The transitions that we are making are not classical ones, where revolutionaries seize state power and make and unmake everything from there. Today we are first conquering the administration and making advances from there.

Would you say that we are riding a revolutionary wave?

I believe that, yes, we are in a process of that kind. That there will be ebbs and flows, too, is true. It's interesting to look at the situation in Chile. Here we lost, but it was one of the least advanced processes. Chile always privileged its relation with the United States; the socialist left was not capable of understanding the necessary links that we have to have in this region and betted on bilateral treaties.

During the era of [dictator] Augusto Pinochet national industry was dismantled, and the left didn't know how to work with people. The left went about getting itself into the leadership, political spaces, the political class, while the right went to work among people.

What role do you assign to Bolivia in this context?

I was in Bolivia a year and half ago. The situation was completely different then: people were in struggle and there were regional battles. Now I think you have made an enormous advance, when it comes to conquering the spaces of administrative power.

The correlation of forces in the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, the forces of separatism that were defeated, and the success of moderate and intelligent economic policy have demonstrated to the people that, with the nationalization of basic resources, it is possible to build social programs and help the most defenceless sectors.

There is also something cultural, moral. The Bolivian people is what often doesn't show up in statistics: a people achieving dignity. Here, it's like Cuba, where many journalists were expecting to see the fall of Cuban socialism through the domino effect, which didn't happen because dignity matters to the Cuban people more than food.

I heard of improvements in Bolivia, but there still remain large pockets of poverty. Nevertheless, even the poorest citizens feel

dignified thanks to the type of government that has had to understand, given Evo Morales' style, that its strength lies in organized people.

For me, it's like a symbol of what our governments ought to be in the face of difficulties. Instead of compromising and turning the process into top-down decision making, the government receives support from the organized power of people who give it the strength to continue advancing. We must understand that popular pressure is necessary to transform the state, which means we mustn't be afraid of popular pressure, we mustn't be afraid just because there sometimes are strikes against the bureaucratic deviations of the state.

Lenin, before his death, said that the bureaucratic deviations of the state were such that the popular movement had the right to go on strike against it, to perfect the proletarian state. This type of pressure is different from destructive strikes. Social movements must understand their constructive role and, if they choose to apply pressure, do so to build, not to destroy.

Do you believe that Bolivians can conquer power, not just the administration?

I believe that they will, as they are gaining ground and, well, power is also in the hands of organized people. The socialism we want, which can be called socialism, communitarianism, full humanity, whatever, is a search for a fully democratic society, where individuals can develop themselves, where differences are respected, where, through the practice of struggle, through transformation, the culture of thought will change.

One of the greatest problems is that we are trying to build an alternative society with an inherited individualistic and clientelistic culture. Even our best cadre are influenced by this culture. So, it's a process of cultural transformation. Human beings change themselves through practice, not by decrees.

It is necessary to create spaces, or recognize already existing spaces, of participation, because the big problem of failed socialism was that people didn't feel themselves to be builders of a new society. They received grants, education, health care from the state, but they didn't feel that they were themselves building such a society.

What weaknesses do you see in the Bolivian process?

One of the problems is reflected in the leadership of cadre, accustomed as they are to thinking: when we take office, we change. We are democratic while working in a movement, but when we take office, we become authoritarian. We don't understand that, in the society we want to build, the state has to promote protagonism of people, rather than supplant their decision making. It happens in some left-wing governments: government officials think that it's up to them to solve problems for people, rather than understand that they must solve problems together with people.

If our government officials are to be wise, they must be pushed by popular initiatives so that the people can feel they are doing it themselves. The state's paternalism, in building socialism, may help at first, but we must create popular protagonism.

Can this weakness derive from not having cadre?

Of course it can. In my latest book, this idea is developed in the last chapter, called "El instrumento político que necesitamos para el siglo XXI" (The political instrument we need for the 21st century). The idea behind the term "political instrument" always seemed interesting to me. I insisted in 1999 that we use the term "political instrument" because "the party," in some cases, is a worn-out term. We were interested in creating an agency that is in accordance with the needs of the new society, rather than copying the schemas of already obsolete parties.

The party, classically, has been a group of cadre who, at bottom, are seeking to prepare themselves for taking political office, winning elections, with methods of work that we copied from the Bolshevik Party, which were democratic, not clandestine. We mechanically translated that structure.

The results of renovation of what used to be our political parties, or rather social movements that participate in this political construction, are now instruments that belong to social movements, like the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) [in Bolivia] or Pachakutik in Ecuador, which are instruments created by social movements themselves.

The leading instrument is not a party – varied as situations are – but a popular national front. It mustn't be forgotten that we come from the processes in which the left was in opposition, not in government, and one of the things that we are learning, with each local or national electoral victory, is that it's one thing to be the left in opposition and it's another thing to be the left in government.

Therefore we think that political instruments, whether they are fronts or whatever, must be the critical consciousness of the process. What happens often, or almost always, is that there arises a fusion of cadre in the government and cadre of the party. This is due to the shortage of cadre. We, as a group, are advocating in Venezuela for the necessity of public criticism which serves as a warning. If there are deviations, we have to have a chance to criticize them.

What, in your opinion, does public criticism consist of?

Even a little while ago, the left, including myself, thought that we should just wash our dirty laundry at home. In Cuba, for example, that was always the case, and when we talked to the press, it was said: "Listen, be careful, don't say things that give ammunition to the enemy." What happened in reality is that political education was greatly endangered, even in Cuba. In other words, the state, the political authority, corrupts if there is no control over it.

Therefore, I very much believe in communities exercising control. The absence of that means easy money and government officials, given various rationalizations, beginning to have a life apart, whether receiving a bigger salary, which doesn't happen often, or receiving a lot of gifts.

In Ignacio Ramonet's interview with Fidel, *Cien horas con Fidel Castro* (One hundred hours with Fidel Castro), the former Cuban president said: "In our country criticism and self-criticism are practiced in small groups, but it has grown stale. We need to practice criticism in classrooms, in public squares... The enemy will exploit it, but the revolution will benefit from it more than the enemy."

I am convinced that our government officials should see public criticism as something healthy. To be sure, norms of criticism should be made clear, too: for example, there should be major penalties for unsubstantiated criticisms, since in Venezuela the accusation of corruption is used against any political enemy, people getting destroyed without any evidence.

What is needed is a fundamental criticism, a criticism that presents a proposal. It is easy to criticize, but what is your own proposal? Each individual who criticizes should have a proposal. Otherwise, what's the point? Also, internal spaces should be exhausted first. If the government is open to hearing criticism and capable of reacting promptly, then there is no need to make it public.

There should be a clear awareness in our countries that, if you are not behaving well, someone will expose your bad behaviour. It's like a moral pressure. Our history shows that being on the left doesn't make us saints. We have weaknesses, we can go astray.

The people must be alert, and critical intellect is very important. Intellectuals are not capable of mediating the correlation of forces: they have their schemas and sometimes are utopians at present; nevertheless, they reflect possibilities, and history often bears them out.

We are in an information world, and there's no hiding things. If we know how things are, so does the enemy. It would be better for us to be the first to bring up solutions to problems; that way, we deprive the enemy of a weapon. It seems to me that public criticism does us good, and our officials had better understand that, too, for sometimes they don't understand it; public criticism will help the process greatly, it will go a long way to combating corruption and bureaucracy.

Who can better watch whether something is going well or badly than the service user? For example, at a bakery, who can be a better watchdog than people who eat its bread and know how the bakery works? That is to say, people should have their say and chances to make local decisions.

Has there been an opportunity to talk about this issue of public criticism with our government officials?

I have not been able to talk with Evo. I'll talk to him about it as soon as I can. In any case what I said is in my latest book. In Venezuela, I'm part of a group making efforts in that direction. We weren't well understood by many, but we understand that the president has understood it.

We are in agreement on public criticism, though there was a moment when it seemed as if our heads could roll. Now it looks like they have understood us and are giving us another kind of possibilities, and I think that this is important. The socialism of the 21st century that we want to build is an immensely democratic society that has no fear of criticism.

We offer public criticism out of pain, not out of hatred or a desire to destroy. We do so because we want a society in which the revolutionary process triumphs, and when we see deficiencies, it pains us, because we want to build something better. It's not the same as right-wing criticism that seizes upon our weaknesses to destroy us. No. We criticize to be constructive, to solve problems.

The most marvelous thing that has happened to us is that, when we made our criticisms public in Venezuela, the people felt completely identified with us, a group of critics, because it was exactly what they were feeling but didn't know how to express it.

Who benefits from public criticism?

When I was editor of political journal *Chile Hoy* (Chile Today), I did a kind of public criticism. Sometimes intellectuals' or journalists' criticism is disliked because we are sometimes a little arrogant. But in *Chile Hoy*, we gave the microphone to organized people and communicated what they saw was going wrong with the process. Our journal put out the government's communiqués, too, but my passion was to get out the opinions of copper miners and organs of workers' power (*cordones industriales*).



So, I'm pleased to hear Evo Morales say, in his interview with Wálter Martínez of TeleSur, that it is necessary to learn to listen, for sometimes government officials don't listen or listen to only those around them, which can only lead to the government officials getting a false picture of the country.

I don't know if it's happening in this country, but in Venezuela, when Chávez announces that he is going to visit a place, they beautify the streets and houses where the president will pass, or turn on air-conditioning in the school that he will visit, and then, on the following day, they will come and get things back to what they were. Only an organized people and a society open to criticism can put a stop to these things.

Is public criticism accepted?

I'd be happy to have an argument about this topic. If there are *compañeros* who think that this is wrong, I'd be happy to hear them say so. But I know historical experiences. You know that Mao Zedong, for all his life, was concerned about bureaucratic deviations and corruption. He organized six or seven campaigns that didn't bear fruit because people who led them came from the party apparatus. They were bureaucrats who were trying to do things without getting criticized.

Then came the Cultural Revolution, which was an opening for public criticism, but a book by a Chinese man, who experienced

the Cultural Revolution, went to the United States, and then later returned to China has an analysis of how sectors of the party took the words of the leader to an extreme, caricatured his thought, and made it possible for it to be rejected. They did terrible things, such as cutting people's hair. They were the ones who wanted to destroy the process.

That is why there should be clear norms: we can't engage in an anarchic criticism, which is destructive. I learned from a Venezuelan community group who invited me to a meeting, where they said to me: "No one has the right to speak or propose unless the person takes responsibility for the proposal." That does away with blowhards who just love to talk on and on at meetings and never do anything.

The great virtue of Che, more than his guerrilla war and bravery in the face of imperialism, was the consistency between his thought and action. And that, for example, is what attracts the European youth. I was amazed, when I went to Europe for a commemoration of Che in 1987, to see how much he appealed to the youth. The secret wasn't that they loved to be guerrillas, too, but Che's consistency between thought and action. **R**

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