



## The Extreme Right in Brazil and Lessons for Renewing the Left in Latin America

By **Alberto Acosta and Eduardo Gudynas**

The victory of the extreme right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil's presidential elections and the fall of the Workers Party are having a profound impact on the rest of the countries of Latin America. These dramatic events require close analysis on the left— to learn from what happened and avoid being shut out as an option for change, and to prevent further victories of the ultra-right.



This article offers some reflections to this end. We won't repeat the information circulating these days or the simplistic explanations of what happened in Brazil, whether it's from those who see an imperialist plot allied with the most conservative forces in Brazil, or those who blame everything on the Workers Party, or those who naively believe that Bolsonaro's victory was simply the result of propaganda. Our objective is, rather, to encourage reflection in other Latin American countries and to identify lessons that promote a renewal of the left and prevent similar phenomenon like Bolsonaro in neighboring countries.

### 1. Progressivism and the Left: They're different

Throughout Latin America, diverse conservative political groups are actively maneuvering to discredit any alternative from the left. In Brazil, they blurred severe democratic—not just economic— crises, such as Venezuela and Nicaragua, with the crisis of government of the Workers Party (PT by its Portuguese initials). They hammered in the message that leftist options are impossible, fatally stained with corruption and even blood, and a raft of other criticisms.

But the Brazilian crisis itself demonstrates the urgency of insisting that progressivism is different from the left. Progressivism is a different political regime, centered on developmentalism, in which intensive use of natural resources finance the State. The State then initiates compensatory social programs that reduce demands for economic justice to economic assistance, at the same time increasing political controls on civil society. Unlike the left, these and other objectives emphasize the role of “progress” as one of the main political pillars (1).

The PT brand of progressivism made a point of differentiating itself from the left, where it was born. The party never hid this change, but rather presented it as a positive attribute. The first crucial lesson then, is that the left and progressivism are not the same.

## **2. Sensitivity to the Moods of the People**

The government of Lula da Silva repeatedly presented itself as the example of the so-called “new left” in all of Latin America and the world. Many groups in different countries viewed it as an example, especially in the global north. They claimed that electoral victories like Dilma Rousseff’s proved that the majority of “the people” were on the left. When, in a relatively rapid chain of events, the PT lost control of the government, Rousseff was removed from office, and a little-known and corrupt rightwing politician, Michel Temer, was installed in the presidency (who was also part of the PT coalition) they were left without explanations. Although the process was plagued by abuses of the court system on the part of conservative and corrupt groups, the reversal shocked participants and observers alike.

Bolsonaro’s victory dramatically accentuated the shift. His win revealed that Brazilian society is much more conservative than most thought, and that the same “people” who before applauded progressivism now rejected the PT. Many, in fact, openly celebrated a candidate whose speeches had a fascist tone.

Here is the other lesson: we must be cautious in using categories like “the people” and be sensitive in assessing prevailing thoughts and sensibilities.

## **3. An Outright Right and Progressivism Pretending to be Left**

Another lesson stands out: the risks of a program built on conservative sectors or ideas to win elections. This refers to strategies that posit that first you have to “win” the elections and then, once holding the reins of power, “change” the State and society. The PT employed this tactic, for example, when it built a political coalition with the center-right Brazilian Democratic Party Movement (Partido Movimento Democrático Brasileiro-PMDB) to achieve “governability” and lent its support to developmentalist extractivism. This is precisely one of the aspects that characterize progressivism and differentiate it from the left.

Brazil fell into a trap where the governing progressivism sought to appear left, while the new right did not hide or pretend to be anything but what it was. Bolsonaro openly criticizes blacks and indigenous peoples, he is proudly homophobic and misogynist, he jokes about executing leftwing militants and defends torture and dictatorship.

## **4. Developmentalism: Nothing New and Showing Signs of Senility**

Lula and Dilma’s strategy were called “new developmentalism”, based on the export of raw materials by expanding the appropriation of natural resources, depending on the exploitation of these as the central economic strategy and seeking to attract foreign investment. This is an idea repeated in all countries governed by progressivism, from Argentina to Venezuela.

Under the strategy, Brazil did become the major mining and agricultural extractivist force in the continent. To do so, it accepted a subordinated form of insertion in the global market and a limited range of action for the state in sectors like industry.

All this is exactly the opposite of the goals of the left, which has always sought to move nations away from dependency on supplying raw materials. Extractivism also contributed to short-term profit-taking and encouraged clientelist practices, authoritarianism and corruption.

The limitations of these strategies were hidden in Brazil, like in other South American countries, by the juicy surpluses reaped during the period of high commodity prices. Although the social welfare programs took center stage, most of the bonanza was spent in other areas: subsidies and hand-outs to extractive industries, and support for some large corporations (the so-called national “champions”). This explains the fact that this “new developmentalism” was supported both by workers, who enjoyed access to credit, and by the business elite, who got state money to internationalize. Lula was applauded, for different reasons, in both the poor barrios and in the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The fall of international prices for raw materials revealed that the monthly stipends given out in Brazil to the poorest part of the population were undoubtedly important, but did not assure really overcoming poverty. The government didn’t confront the structures of inequality, the excessive concentration of wealth continued, and part of the financing to corporations was lost in corruption.

At the same time, the progressivist insistence on economic growth as the basis for development reinforced the myth of economic growth as a panacea that Bolsonaro took advantage of by presenting himself as the best man it. A Twenty-First Century left should dare to challenge the concept that economic growth is the key to development.

The lesson lies in recognizing that Brazil, like the rest of Latin American, suffered from a fundamental incapacity to transform its core development strategies. Brazil's dependence on raw materials deepened, with China as the main partner, causing serious effects of deindustrialization and leading to severe economic and financial fragility. The "new developmentalism", blinded by the idea of progress, isn't actually new at all. It is as old as the colonialism that gave birth to extractivism.

The left in the rest of the continent must assume the responsibility to seek real alternatives to developmentalism. It's not enough to have a radical discourse—if development practices repeat old patterns, intentionally or not, they will produce conventional public policies. That conventionality is precisely what characterizes progressivism and allows us to identify it and differentiate it from the left.

### **5. Clientelism or social justice?**

The "new developmentalism" imposes specific practices and uses economic, social and political instruments that are not neutral and indeed are contrary to the central precepts of the left. Probably the most well-known examples are the expansion of monocropping and mining. These practices cause a deterioration of democracy and rights. Clientelist social policies can relieve some aspects of this problem, but they do not build solid citizenship from which to defend basic rights.

In Brazil, the PT took advantage of circumstances to reduce poverty and attain other improvements, such as an increase in minimum wage, broadening formal-sector employment, expanding healthcare, etc., all of which are laudable. But much of this effort rested on charity programs and the commercialization of society and nature. Banking and credit exploded, and consumerism deepened, confusing having things with a real improvement in the quality of life (2). Progressivism forgot the basic principal of the left of de-commercializing life, a major concept in the protests against neoliberalism prevalent in the last century.

The idea of justice in Brazil was reduced to emphasizing certain forms of economic redistribution, while the rights of citizens of diverse communities, especially indigenous peoples, remained precarious. Brazil, for example, leads the world in assassinations of defenders of land and nature, according to Global Witness.

The left should not get stuck in these simplistic formulas. It is time to accept that social justice implies much more than redistribution, and that quality of life goes beyond economic growth. A renewed left should never tolerate the weakening, and much less the criminalization, of grassroots movements.

On the contrary, a true left should promote and strengthen autonomous popular organization within the framework of human rights and the rights of nature. And at all times and in all places— whether its Colombia or Peru or Venezuela or Nicaragua— it should defend those rights. This is even more necessary where the left holds power, even if that means losing an election since it is the only guarantee not only of conserving its democratic essence, but of retaking government.

### **6. Conservative Countryside and the Need for New Agricultural Models**

The experience in rural areas and with development strategies in agriculture, livestock and forestry development also provide lessons. Without a doubt, Bolsonaro won the presidency with the support of the ultraconservative rural sector that responded to his speeches against indigenous peoples, peasant farmers and the landless and even justified the use of armed violence.

The problem is that this "rural caucus" that supports Bolsonaro today already had a place in government. Under Dilma Rousseff, they one of their leaders held a post in her cabinet (Katia Abreu). This example should be a warning sign to the left, since different conservative and ultraconservative politicians take advantage of progressivist governments to gain footholds in government. Progressivism opens doors for them with its discourse of plurality and governability and the need for stability and broad electoral support.

The defeat of progressivism also owes to its incapacity to promote a real agrarian reform or to transform the basis of agricultural development. Recall that the first Lula administration heavily promoted genetically modified soybeans, monocropping and the expansion of agroindustry for export, without protecting in the same way small and medium producers. Other progressivist administrations, especially in Argentina and Uruguay, promoted the same kind of agriculture.

In short, progressivism failed to explore alternatives for rural communities, insisting on the fallacy of supporting monocropping for export, sustaining the agribusiness sector and— if there was money left over— offering financial welfare programs to peasants. The left should propose a new vision of rural life, taking on not only land

ownership, but also land use, and recognizing the role of food providers first to the nation and then to the global market.

## 7. Radicalizing Democracy

The political debacle in Brazil reminds us of the crucial task of radicalizing democracy, one of the goals the left pushed for years ago and that progressivism abandoned. That included, for example, assuring effective citizen participation in politics and improving the institutions of parties.

The PT instead concentrated power in the federal government and fell into practices such as using bribes to legislators, as seen in the scandal of the “monthly bonuses” in the first administration. It maintained the vertical hierarchies of the party, for example, with Lula selecting his “successor”. Little by little, vigorous experiments like the participative budgets fell apart, and huge networks of corruption spread with public works. The boss culture in the party was replicated in other progressivist governments, such as Rafael Correa’s in Ecuador, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s in Argentina.

It’s clear that a renewal of the left must be based on a clear understanding of this dynamic. It must not give up on democratizing society and its own internal party structures and practices. If the left fails to democratize, it facilitates the rise of opportunists. The political structures of the left should, once and for all, be dignified representatives of the base and not mere trampolines from which individual figures rise to power.

In sum, the left should base its renewal on self-criticism, whatever it costs, to learn, unlearn, and relearn from recent experience. Familiar challenges remain, and there are new urgencies. The Latin American left should advance in building alternatives to development. It should be environmentalist by searching for a harmonic relationship with nature, and feminist in confronting patriarchy. It must maintain the socialist commitment to overcome social inequity and it must decolonialize to overcome racism, exclusion and marginalization. And above all, it should be an anticapitalist and antisystemic left. All this demands more, never less, democracy.

## Notes

1. About the distinction between left and progressivism see *La identidad del progresismo, su agotamiento y los relanzamientos de las izquierdas*, E. Gudynas, ALAI, 7 octubre 2015, <https://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/172855>

2. See as example the detailed analysis by Brazilian economist Lena Lavinas, such as *The takeover of social policy by financialization. The Brazilian Paradox*, Palgrave McMillan, 2017.

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<https://www.americas.org/the-extreme-right-in-brazil-and-lessons-for-renewing-the-left-in-latin-american/>