

Beyond Colonialism: Race and Ethnicity in the Mobilization of Indigenous People

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My essay has the title “Beyond Colonialism” in order to highlight the very important tension in the history of Latin American politics between the notion that the Marxist left could carry out the kind of political change that would empower everyone who was oppressed in the existing societies, and the reality that empowering oppressed peoples could not solely be done from above by a leftist leadership with its own idea of what was the best route to liberation.

This notion, in my opinion, is at the heart of the debates over guerrilla struggles in Latin America, and most especially in the context of the Cuban Revolution and the subsequent failures of other guerrilla *focos* to carry out successful revolutions in other parts of the region. The first critical consideration of the problem of guerrilla *foco* came from Régis Debray in his famous work *Revolution in the Revolution?* In this work, Debray was interested in considering critically the lessons that had been taken from the victory of the Cuban Revolution. In the introduction to his book, Debray wrote that the notion that the Cuban Revolution could not be repeated in Latin America had become a dangerous cliché. Ultimately, the danger lay, according to Debray, in the idea that the impossibility of repetition “reduce[d] Cuba to a golden legend, that of twelve men who disembark and whose numbers multiply in the twinkling of an eye, no one knows quite how.”¹ He continued: “Thus we cannot but deplore the continuing lack of a detailed history of the Cuban insurrectional process, a history which can come to us only from those who organized and participated in it. This lack constrains us to reduce our references to allusions, whereas what is really needed is a systematic investigation.”²

These questions came back into the forefront in Latin American politics with

the crisis of socialism that occurred with the decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. This coincided with a series of events in Latin American countries that also called into question the viability of socialist projects based on class struggle—including the 1973 military coup in Chile, the horrors of the Shining Path insurgency in Peru between 1980 and 1992, and the ongoing genocide of Maya peoples in Guatemala from the 1960s through the 1990s. As a result, indigenous, feminist, and human rights movements came back into the picture.

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the tense relationship between leftist projects for revolutionary transformation and indigenous movements. In addition to the critical and important reflections by Debray, we now know, thanks to the work of Julia Sweig, that Ernesto Che Guevara’s interpretation of what brought about the Cuban revolutionary victory was not entirely correct. Given his limited perspective on Cuban politics—which did not include an understanding of the political role of the urban underground, and of the leftist women who managed to gather funding support from Cuban exiles—his notion of the centrality of the guerrilla *foco* was at best a partial explanation.³ Still, the powerful image of the self-sacrificing guerrilla, and how such a figure could bring about the liberation of oppressed peoples, reverberated dramatically through Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

To the notion of guerrilla self-sacrifice, it is important to add the deep emotional satisfaction of revolutionary victory. As Daniel Wilkinson observed in his book *Silence on the Mountain*, a reflection about and observation of the Guatemalan Revolution, there were guerrilla fighters in Guatemala—he focuses specifically on

“Silverio”—who were trying to repeat the joyous victory and satisfaction they had experienced in Nicaragua. Quoting from the work of Irish poet Seamus Heaney, Wilkinson suggests that the moment of victory, especially as remembered in Nicaragua by “Silverio,” was the moment when “hope and history rhyme.”⁴ Wilkinson’s final reflection on “Silverio” is especially poignant when he writes: “He returned to Guatemala and spent the next decade killing people and seeing his friends be killed, always with the hope that he would hear the rhyme again.”⁵

This, then, would be guerrilla self-sacrifice, an effort to connect with peasants in order to bring down oppressive governments. When it was successful, it led to what Seamus Heaney called “when hope and history rhyme.” In this sense, there is a powerful emotional dimension to the vision of victory Wilkinson describes in *Silence on the Mountain*. Here I will compare the cases of the Guatemalan Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo (EGP) and the Chilean Movimiento Campesino Revolucionario (MCR), the mass organization of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR). While only the EGP was an actual guerrilla organization, both saw the path to revolutionary change as necessarily an armed path, and highlighted an alliance with indigenous peoples.

In the case of the Guatemalan EGP, in his memoir *Days of the Jungle* guerrilla leader Mario Payeras likened the guerrilla struggle to attempting to cross a dangerous and slippery bridge, an immensely long and slender tree trunk laid across a dizzying torrent. I quote from his memoir: “We had to cross over twice: to pick up supplies and bring them back—a hundred pounds on our backs. Half-way across, advancing slowly, trying to keep a foothold, the

ceaseless flow of the water would suddenly make us feel dizzy. Whoever hesitated at midpoint would become paralyzed, unable to go back or forward. The secret was to cross slowly but without hesitation.⁷⁶ This powerful image is a particularly dramatic example of the memory of heroic agency.

My second example comes from the Movimiento Campesino Revolucionario (MCR), an attempt by the Chilean Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) to connect the Left with indigenous peoples. Gustavo Marín, one of the leaders of the MCR in the Mapuche region of Cautín and who went by the name José Peralta, describes in the collective MCR memoir entitled *A desalamburar* how the MCR began to consider the strategy of *corridos de cerco*, or fence runnings. Beginning with his arrival in the Cautín region in 1969, he describes the conversations he had in Mapuche communities during which, in a process he terms “inductive,” Mapuche peasants would conclude that they needed to run the fence. “The elders of the communities,” he explains, “searched for the Títulos de Merced (original community land titles) at the Instituto Indígena (Indigenous Institute) in Temuco; they were given the titles and they returned also with the map, that was drawn on wax paper.” This, in Marín’s experience, was the beginning of an intergenerational dialogue in the communities, which also became, in a sense, an intercultural dialogue that involved the communities’ own views of the territory they held, as well as the views of their new non-Mapuche allies. According to Marín, “We would put the title map on another map that represented landed property and it was extremely clear where the old fence had been, you didn’t have to be a geographer to understand this. In addition the elders had a very clear vision of the fence, it had remained

engrained in their memories, they knew it went through this stream, by the side of that apple tree, in that particular valley. When someone has taken away your land and your house, the place where you were born and grew up, you never forget. The elders had the memory, but they did not speak of it; after our conversations between mate teas, we began rediscovering the history with them.”⁷⁷

During the Popular Unity government between 1970 and 1973, the MCR developed a land recuperation strategy in the south of the country they called *corridos de cerco*, or fence runnings. Beginning from where the MCR saw the consciousness of the Mapuche indigenous people, in the memory of usurpation of their original lands by invading landowners after the defeat of Mapuche resistance at the end of the nineteenth century, these fence runnings would, MCR activists reasoned, quickly make clear to the Mapuche the limitations of a land recuperation strategy as a long-term solution to the agrarian problem. In effect, then, the recuperation of Mapuche territory was seen by MCR activists as beginning a process of educating indigenous peasants in Marxism and class struggle.

Conclusions

Inspired by the heroic image of guerrilla sacrifice embodied by Che Guevara, both EGP and MCR activists saw their destiny as educating the indigenous people of their societies in the necessary Marxist truth of class exploitation, which would make clear that, for the purpose of political struggle, rural indigenous people needed to be seen as peasants. Given the failure of these movements to bring about lasting change, as well as the bountiful violence they endured, indigenous activists began,

as of the early 1980s, politically to rethink the place of indigenous peoples in Latin American politics. In so doing, they reformulated the idea of internal colonialism initially put forth by Mexican intellectuals and activists Pablo González Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen and gave it an entirely new meaning. Especially as envisioned by Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil in Guatemala and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in Bolivia, the notion of internal colonialism brought to the fore the enduring racism and colonialism still present in Latin American revolutionary thought.⁸

While Mario Payeras and others, badly impacted by the massive losses of life and brutal massacres endured by guerrillas and their indigenous supporters, could not engage fully in the personal reflection and self-criticism to consider the political possibility that indigenous peoples were not simply peasants, it turned out to be a different story in the Chilean case. Indeed, although the limitations of space prevent me from going fully into detail on this, surviving MCR activist Gustavo Marín, exiled to Europe, would ultimately suggest in his personal testimony that the error of the MIR and the MCR was in fact to see the Mapuche simply as peasants rather than as an indigenous people.⁹

As we have seen in the emerging pan-Maya and Mapuche indigenous movements in Guatemala and Chile over the past decades, they are very much taking us beyond colonialism. They are also challenging us to think through the difference between socialist revolution and national liberation, and to consider the possibility that these two struggles, even if connected and articulated, are not the same.

Decline of U.S. Hegemony?

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Notes

¹ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 15.

² Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, 16.

³ Julia E. Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴ Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 342.

⁵ Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain*, 342.

⁶ Mario Payeras, *Days of the Jungle: The Testimony of a Guatemalan Guerrillero, 1972–1976*, introduction by George Black (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 94.

⁷ José Peralta, testimony in Rafael Railaf, Lucy Traipe, Félix Huentelaf, Víctor Molfinqueo, José Peralta, and Rudecindo Quinchavil, *A desalambarrar: Historias de Mapuches y Chilenos en la lucha por la tierra* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial AYUN, 2006), 68–88, direct quotation on pp. 74–75; my translation.

⁸ Demetrio Cujtí Cuxil, “The Politics of Maya Revindication,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward R. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 19–50; and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Oppressed but Not Defeated”: *Peasant Struggles among the Aymara and Qhechwa in Bolivia, 1900–1980* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1987).

⁹ Peralta, in *A desalambarrar*, 68–88. ■

U.S. president Donald Trump has pledged “to make America great again.” The premise of this exciting pledge is that U.S. power has been declining over some recent period. Applied to the trajectory of U.S.–Latin American relations, the hypothesis of decline raises three interesting questions:

1. Has the United States government suffered a decline in its ability to impose its own policy preferences by force or persuasion on the 32 independent governments in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past 50 years (since roughly the date of LASA’s creation in 1967)? That is, has the U.S. capacity to project power in the region actually declined? I think the answer to this question is no.
2. Have U.S. policy preferences evolved over the past 50 years such that governments in the region are more likely than in the past to find them attractive, or at least consistent with their own perceived national interests? I think the answer to this question is yes.
3. Hegemony is a wonderfully elastic concept. In its modern Gramscian articulation, it refers to the dynamic role of ideas and institutions in securing popular acquiescence or even support for objectively exploitative social arrangements. Translating this notion to the international arena, one might ask whether the ideas and institutions that support U.S. policy preferences in the region have become stronger or weaker over the past 50 years. I think the best answer I can give to this question is probably stronger.

On the first question, the impression that U.S. dominance has declined seems to be based on (at least) two kinds of evidence.

First, the U.S. share of trade and investment flows has declined over the past 50 years. U.S. leverage, the argument runs, must have diminished accordingly. However, trade and investment flows do not necessarily convey proportionate political influence. Most of the main trade and investment rivals of the United States in the region—Western Europe, Japan, and more recently, China—avoid openly confronting the United States. None has devoted much time and money to cultivating domestic interest groups within Latin America to serve as political allies. In any case, the United States will always be a more important economic partner to each of them than any Latin American partner or collection of partners.

The second kind of evidence cited for the decline hypothesis begins with the observation that the U.S. government has successfully intervened to overthrow a sitting government in the western hemisphere only three times in the 25 years since the collapse of the USSR, in contrast to the 22 overturned in the 29 years between 1961 and 1990. The U.S. failure to intervene, it is argued, has allowed governments hostile to U.S. interests to persist in power and made even friendly governments more difficult to bully or persuade. Ergo, U.S. hegemony has diminished.

I think this evidence actually argues against the decline hypothesis. The interventions of the Cold War era suggest a much shakier hegemony than the historiography suggests. A truly *successful* hegemon (like the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, for example) would not have felt compelled to intervene so often.

The Cold War strategy of the United States in Latin America was to seek reliably anti-Communist allies, mostly conservative and right-wing economic and political elites,