CESRAN Papers
No: 03 | April 2011

Whither Neoliberalism?

Latin American Politics in the Twenty-first Century

By Jewellord (Jojo) Nem Singh

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Whither Neoliberalism?

Latin American Politics in the Twenty-first Century

Jewellord (Jojo) Nem Singh*

> "When we speak of equality we do so in the awareness that we must grow to equalize and equalize to grow… Equality, economic growth and sustainable development must go hand in hand."
>
> *Alicia Bárcena, CEPAL Executive Secretary, 2010*

In the most recent attempt of Latin America's primary intellectual hub to respond to the world-wide financial crisis, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) argued for the need to tackle 'growth with equity' as an organising principle of development strategies in the Americas. Crucially, this opens up two main discussions. Firstly, neoliberal economics, though a complex political project aimed at controlling inflation, curbing state inefficiency and addressing debt management via fiscal discipline, has failed to deliver its promise of economic development through unfettered market opening. After twenty years of reforms, uneven patterns of economic growth, sustained inequality, and environmental exploitation have been its key consequences for Latin American countries (CEPAL 2010: 17, 20, 53). Having said this, macroeconomic stabilisation policy has been widely adopted since the debt crisis, which successfully addressed fiscal disequilibria and is now considered a pillar of sound policymaking in the region and elsewhere. But as neoliberal reforms induced the eclipse of state activism, social inequality remains unaddressed, even in cases where sustained economic growth was occurring, specifically Chile whose growth hardly came together with social equality despite the rhetoric of its left-centre La Concertación governments. Equality, whether in terms of access to the market or to decision-making, does not come naturally with economic growth.

Secondly, it re-focuses our attention to social equality as a core principle of economic development, which is a historical claim that is yet to be addressed after sustained failures of state-building projects in Latin America. Political exclusions and social inequality are historically entrenched problems that are by-products of political elites' refusal to accommodate the masses in the state-led development model. Labour unions challenged the populist-elite democracy of the 1930s and 1960s, which meant that they were targets of demobilisation by military regimes in 1970s. However, although neoliberalism has deepened inequality, it is by no means its cause. But what we market liberalisation produced was the entrenchment of 'accumulation by dispossession' wherein the benefits of liberalisation have been distributed unevenly between the already rich and the poor, at the expense of the latter. In Latin America's search for a new alternative development paradigm that goes beyond the Washington Consensus, the challenge is if it is even possible to maintain a critical balance between growth-enhancing open markets and inclusive social development.

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In this context, I explore three major trends that have been affecting policy choices of governing elites in Latin America. First, the commodity price boom at the turn of the millennium offers new opportunities for socially inclusive development while the challenges of sustainability both in economic and environmental terms imminently puts pressures for policymakers. With a region that is historically dependent for its raw materials as exports in the international economy, managing resource rents to avoid the 'resource curse' effect, distribute social goods, and democratise decision-making are all pressing issues for the governments in power. Second, beyond questions of economic dynamism, Latin American governments are now experimenting with reforms of political institutions that move beyond elite-centred, representative democracies. Although discourses of 'good governance' are really just about recasting the role of the state to enhance the functioning of markets – slim the state, enhance transparency and accountability, and outsource service delivery to professional NGOs due to cuts in social spending – democracy remains to be the best hope for more inclusive politics. Its ideological appeal lies on the numerous possibilities for civic engagement and participation of the poor and unorganised in a political system that was quintessentially elitist. Contrary to the claims against the possible marriage between democracy and development (Leftwich 2002), development, broadly conceived as empowerment of the poor, is compatible with democratic experiments (Grugel 2002). Finally, alternative pathways of development are now being forged across the region to find new ways of making development work for the poor. In particular, the strength of Brazil as a diplomatic and economic power as well as experiments of new regionalisms offer governing elites with more contextual, pro-poor strategies of engagement with globalisation. Whilst these endeavours are far from challenging the capitalist world order in the same way that the movement of New International Economic Order (NIEO) did, they are opening policy options to adjust to the globalised economy apart from the neoliberal-inspired Washington Consensus. All throughout this piece, I argue that these trends are shaping the prospects and challenges of what scholars now call the "post-neoliberal" phase of Latin America (Grugel & Riggirozzi 2009; Leiva 2009; MacDonald & Ruckert 2009).

mineral and oil exports have been the main contributors of revenues, hence, the pouring of massive amounts of incomes into state treasuries in the Americas.

Re-stating the Paradox of the Plenty

In her seminal work, Terry Lynn Karl (1997) posed the question to development specialists, policy makers, and academics: are resources God's gift or are they the 'devil's excrement'? She claims that what explains Venezuela's crisis ridden democracy is the presence, more aptly, the use and misuse of oil resources for economic development. Her thesis resonates at the heart of the debate on whether governing elites should rely on their natural resource wealth as the industrialising strategy, or should they leave extractive resources on the ground and find alternative ways of developing comparative advantages. This becomes more contentious as prices of primary commodities, especially metal minerals and petroleum, are at an all-time high due to the commodity price boom beginning in 2000. As Table 1 shows mineral and oil exports have been the main contributors of revenues, hence, the pouring of massive amounts of incomes into state treasuries in the Americas. The question is whether extractive resources translate into concrete benefits for workers, affected mining communities, and society in general. Two strands of research emerge out of this problematique. On the one hand, there exists ample literature asking whether the resource curse is happening in these extractive-intensive economies, and if so, what this would mean for reforming state and institutional capacity, averting rent-seeking practices, and using revenues for social goals (Dijohn 2009; Karl 1999, 1997; Sinnott et. al. 2010). On the other hand, there are studies that bring in the structure, contingency, and politics of (neoliberal) resource governance, and these works exami-

Table 1

Selected Latin American Economies with High Dependency on Exports of Minerals Percentage of total exports, 5-year average (2000-2004)

Country	Percentage	Product Description
Bolivia	19.1	Zinc, gold
Chile	45.0	Copper
Cuba	33.2	Nickel
Peru	32.9	Gold, copper, zinc
Venezuela	83.4	Oil

Source: UNCTAD 2007: 87

ne how far states can really move forward from neoliberal strategies of extraction, that is, whether a politics of continuity with change is a more realistic way of gradually moving away from the Washington Consensus (Humphreys-Bebbington & Bebbington 2010; Kaup 2010; Nem Singh 2010). Of course, both research agendas are complementary as they pose different ways of asking the same question: have we reached the point of no return, are we seeing the end of ideological politics and the beginning of what I call 'pragmatic politics' that accepts market fundamentalism as a necessary evil for development, albeit with adjustments? This big question requires an inter-disciplinary approach and grounded empirical work to accumulate credible answers.

Let us examine the empirical work currently being done in European academic circles. Due to the recent moves towards the nationalisation of natural resources in the Andean region, research has focused on the form, content and implications of nationalising extractive economies. At least to my knowledge, there are three big projects working on this: one led by Anthony Bebbington [1] on the relationship between resource extraction and changing geographies of civil society mobilisation at the local and national scales; another project by Barbara Hogenboom [2] examines the extent the politics of extraction in the Americas is being altered by new left-wing governments in power, if spaces for popular participation exist at formal structures of decision-making, and whether we are witnessing the re-politicisation of extraction in light of claims for greater social equity and inclusiveness in policymaking; and finally, a new project by Lorenzo Pellegrini and Murat Arsel [3] is about to start on evaluating how the credentials of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian states in its attempt to strike a balance between capital accumulation and social/political equality through their natural resources. All these projects, notwithstanding their focus on the Andean political geography, problematise mining-based development yet refuse to say something about institutional change and international political economy. This critique holds water if the argument is that post-neoliberalism does not offer any qualitatively different form of capital accumulation, and consequently the broader state-society relations, because states are 'locked in' neoliberal forms of governance and marketised social relations within a globally integrated economy that posits competitiveness and productivism as the overarching logic of extraction. As Philip Cerny (2010, 1997) claims, the 'Competition State' is embedding state strategies of development into deregulated relationships between the state, market, and organised labour. Although his argument makes a hasty generalisation and uncritically applied in the developing world, the point we draw on this is the multiple ways neoliberalism has been designed, implemented, and embraced by governing elites in Latin America. Though differing in degrees, neoliberalism has produced resource sectors today wherein property rights for (foreign) private capital are legitimated, subcontracting of labour and services is pervasive, and regulatory functions such as monitoring and punishing exploitative firms have diminished as the *logic of necessitarianism* becomes the rallying point for policy reforms towards competition. Even in the case of Brazil, where

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natural resources were politically constructed as part of the national security doctrine due to its history of developmentalism, the role of foreign and domestic capital is undeniably strong especially in mining and petroleum sectors. This brings us to the conclusion that the politics of extractive resources is complex and contingent because it is an internationalising sector that is now subject to political conflicts as the world moves towards a resource scarce economy.

Social Inclusion and Citizenship Rights in Post-Neoliberal Latin America

Irrespective of one's definition of post-neoliberalism, the key element of the Washington Consensus is its use of consent and coercive force to depoliticise economic management. Latin American elites embraced neoliberalism with optimism in the 1980s yet its support precipitously waned as liberalisation brought in more poverty, inequality, and undemocratic practices for the sake of saving the neoliberal paradigm (Cook 2007; Grugel 2009; Teichman 2001). Ironically, states implementing the market reforms were formally democratic, where some of them gained electoral legitimacy through an anti-neoliberal platform, as in Carlos Memem of Argentina and Alberto Fujimori of Peru. In hindsight, three decades of neoliberal reforms have contributed to anti-democratic practices, particularly as centres of state decision-making – Ministry of Finance and Central Bank being the main organisations – are filled-in by experts with no democratic accountability and whose ideological commitment to the monetarist economics has brought in the depoliticisation of the economy (Silva 2009; Soederberg 2010; Teichman 2001). In the high time of neoliberalism in Latin America, there is no key difference between technocrats who are appointed in economic posts on the basis of their expertise and *technopols* who are political leaders at the apex of power defining rational policy on the basis of its political endurance (Domínguez 1997: 7).

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Logically, one way of redressing exclusionary politics is to open decision-making structures for consultation, absorbing social movements into government posts, and encouraging civil society formation. In one way or another, Latin American countries sought for inclusionary politics. However, the extent of peoples' participation has met its limits as neoliberalism, by its very logic of depoliticisation and technification, disallows the state to engage with the citizenry. Market reforms necessitated a strong state that would curb social and political resistance, whether through executive decrees, constitutional change, or in some cases such as strikes, direct use of coercive state power.

As a consequence, Latin American states are being challenged inside-out, that is, societal pressure from below and external imposition from above (i.e. the 'imperatives of the market') are forcing the state to reform itself to be more inclusionary and capable of delivering growth at the same time. The weight of the market over the state is now felt in economic policies, wherein the former tends to close consultative spaces for civil society and citizens, hence, rendering policy outcomes as illegitimate in the face of crises. As a remarkable case of societal rejection of neoliberal political economy, the 2001 collapse of the Argentine economy, deemed as a result of the failure of neoliberalism and the breakdown of social consensus around marketised social relations, brought in social protests not just of the unemployed (*Piquetero* movement) but also the lower middle and upper classes who experienced pauperisation, constituting the 'new poor' in Argentina (Grugel & Riggirozzi 2007). Elsewhere in the Southern Cone, indigenous groups mobilised themselves from the 1990s onwards as a way of claiming cultural rights as citizenship rights, that is, their position in society as members of the nation-state (Yashar 2005; Sawyer 2004). Of course, it has to be made clear that indigenous peoples have been historically marginalised groups in Latin America where the governing elites of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, to name a few, have resorted to discrimination if not outright violence to control peasant uprisings.

In this context, the post-liberal democratic era in Latin America implies a break, or at least attempts to do so, from the kind of politics forged within the neoliberal paradigm. As leftist coalitions of parties capture the state through elections and backed up by popular mobilisation, new terms of state-society engagements are in the making. The increasing disillusionment on neoliberalism is now repoliticising many segments of Latin American societies. In Argentina, the *Pequetero* movement revitalised trade union activism that was entangled before in the web of patronage and clientelism under populist neoliberal regimes (Grugel & Riggirozzi 2007). In Chile, the historically strong labour movement went on strike in 2006 after *Minera Escondida*, one of the largest mining investors in Chile, refused to negotiate with the unions on issues of subcontracting, higher wages, and better health and safety measures. Equally, transnational social protests have emerged at the turn of the millennium. A good example is the international treaty between Argentina and Chile to harmonise state policies to allow Canadian firm Barrick Gold to explore through open-pit mining the *Pascua Lama* territory in the Andean mountains. Environmental NGOs mobilised against the treaty, which led to the temporary halt of gold extraction. Of course, the human rights movement in the region has proactively pushed for justice claims of those aggrieved under the repressive military regimes in the 1970s and 1980s. Most importantly, the poor began organising themselves to claim citizenship where both authoritarian and democratic regimes have superficially recognised their political rights, such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil and Zapatistas in Mexico. Without exaggerating their organisational capacity and impact on struggles for land rights, they have indeed reshaped the politics of agrarian reform, challenged the concentration of economic power by traditional rural oligarchies, and grounded conceptions of autonomy and radical democracy by linking land to citizenship (Collier 2005; Stahler-Sholk 2010; Wolford 2010). Others brought back the examination of the 'Left' in the context of neoliberal globalisation and ask whether the radical democratic practices constitute a new left or a new politics of the old left (Barrett et. al.

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2008; Lievesley & Ludlum 2009). If indeed the transition towards a post-neoliberal political economy is on its way, then such movements critically problematise state-market relations and may well serve as counter-hegemonic forces to challenge the wisdom of marketised relationships in rural spaces and national political landscapes.

Challenging Neoliberalism in the International System

> ...some states in Latin America are emerging challengers of the neoliberal model, or at least discursively, their foreign policies point to such direction.

What is most obvious to the naked eyes is the fact that some states in Latin America are emerging challengers of the neoliberal model, or at least discursively, their foreign policies point to such direction. There are two major trends that substantiate such claims. Firstly, the undeniable importance of Brazil as a regional power and as a counter-balance to the United States (US) in Latin American inter-state politics have led some to conclude that we are now witnessing a multi-polar global order in which the unquestionable dominance of the US is waning and a new balance of power is emerging (de Almeida 2007; Hurrell 2010; Sotero 2010). Brazil's exceptionalism in Latin America comes from the historical construction of its position in the international system. Whilst all states in the Americas opted for republics after the colonial rule, Brazil kept its empire after independence and by 1930, the military revolution that put into power General Getulio Vargas enabled the centralisation of authority, weakening of regional landowners, and effective modernisation of the Brazilian state. Indeed, since the consolidation of *dirigisme*, or *desenvolvimentismo* (developmentalism), Brazil with its enormous, diversified natural resource base and sheer economic size allowed for its economic strategy to give itself a state identity unthinkable for other Latin American states. The narrative of Brazil as a sub-regional power in which its national political interests are tied to the success of import-led industrialisation necessarily implies it cannot be a natural ally of the US. In the post-Cold War context, Brazilian state elites regained their interest to re-orient their relationships with regional partners as part of the adjustment strategy towards globalisation and reclaiming the long-held belief of exceptionalism in regional affairs (Burges 2007; Grugel & Madeiros 1999). Brazil has engaged the world through its twin policy of pragmatism to access new and wider markets for its national economic interests and leftist rhetoric putting Brazil at the forefront of various political initiatives to pursue more autonomy for developing states. That being said, Brazil is playing a central role in reforming the global financial architecture in the aftermath of the worldwide crisis that hit industrialised states badly as well as in challenging the US to follow trade rules and reduce its subsidies especially in agricultural exports within international economic forums such as the WTO. Although tempting to say Brazil is re-shaping global politics (just as China and India), it is not to the same extent as the moves to alter the rules of the game *a la* 1970s. In so doing, Brazil may be giving developing states more policy options and a wider set of alliances than in the Cold War era. How far Brazil can do this, and whether in the future this is sustainable, is the new research area that academics and policymakers ought to focus on.

Secondly, new regional initiatives have begun to gain grounds in order to change the terms of international trade, a re-orientation of foreign policies towards strengthening South-South relations so as to reduce the region's dependence towards the US. The first example is the enthusiasm of Brazil and Argentina to forge a state-to-state regional cooperation that would serve as stepping stone for more inclusive development. The Common Market of the South (Mercosur) came into being as a defensive response to the costs of neoliberal globalisation. For some, e.g. Brazil and Chile, this is an opportunity to maximise a single market with harmonised tariffs without necessarily closing other free trade arrangements with other states (Grugel 1999; Grugel & Medeiros 1999). Additionally, Mercosur poses itself as a model of new regionalism that is more inclusive than the US-led Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). Interestingly, networks of activists enthusiastically embraced Mercosur for its inclusion of citizenship rights in regional meetings, though its limits became quite visible as it failed to fully implement the regional democracy agenda (Grugel 2005). Equally, Mercosur is undeniably built upon the neoliberal model of the 1990s and its staunchest critics argue for its incapacity to ameliorate the social costs of marketisation. The second case, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) led by Venezuela is a state-led regional project that potentially responds to the problem that Mercosur met: the lack of civil society participation in making proposals on economic and social welfare issues at the regional level. A caution is in order here. The promise of social movement participation in state-constructed international arrangements generally fails primarily because democratic participation comes into direct conflict with the need for efficient decision-making, and of course, the politics of diplomacy is inherently exclusionary.

...the global context simultaneously constraints and opens new doorways for states to assert their policy choices.

What does new regionalism tell us about alternative pathways from neoliberalism? Grugel & Hout (1999: 11-13) neatly summarises the point: state strategies for regionalism can potentially help weak states adjust in globalisation in so far as it empowers the state to retrieve its independent policymaking capacity… but this is mediated by states' positions in the international system, state-society interactions (especially with organised pressure groups), and policies of other states/regions. Therefore, though regionalism offers possibilities for state autonomy, it does not mean it gives them the capacity to implement such initiatives. Ultimately, the global context simultaneously constraints and opens new doorways for states to assert their policy choices.

Concluding Remarks

This brings me to the initial point I made: growth with equity. In all the themes, equitable growth is central in reconstructing a new politics for Latin American societies. Whether resource-rich states like Bolivia and Ecuador, or the weaker states in Central America, the logic of social equality remains the most timely policy and ethical issue that governing elites and societies are faced with. Equality can be conceived in many ways: as a social justice claim to benefit from resource extraction, as a question of social citizenship and inclusion in politics, and as a way to redress the global structure of inequality that Latin America experienced for centuries. I do hope that this short piece has given justice to the complex phenomena that is occurring in Latin America and elsewhere. My aim is to raise questions than give answers; to problematise than to solve such historical issues. In the next issues to come, I will make sure we find short research notes that explores these themes and beyond.

Notes:

* **Jewellord (Jojo) Nem Singh** is a PhD student in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield, UK.

[1] Specifically, this is the ESRC project led by Tony Bebbington (RES-051-27-0191) at the School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester entitled "Conflicts over the countryside: civil society and the political ecology of rural development in the Andean region". Please see the following link for further details: http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/andes/.

[2] Recent publications include Hogenboom 2010, 2009. Additionally, she has worked on the role of China in the Latin American political economy, see Fernandez Jilberto & Hogenboom 2010.

[3] Their paper presentations at the Netherlands Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (NALACS) laid down the general overview of the proposed study, please see Arsel 2010, Pellegrini 2010 for references.

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