

# Latin America Goes Left

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Under the long shadow of George Bush's right-wing reign in the United States, the countries in its Latin American "backyard" have moved almost unanimously to the left. But that left is itself not unanimous, but divided between national populists like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and fiscally responsible open traders like Brazil's Lula.

A Nobel economist, two of Latin America's leading intellectuals and former presidents from Argentina and Brazil examine where the continent is headed.



## Latin America's New Left

**CARLOS FUENTES** is one of Latin America's most celebrated novelists and essayists. His latest book is *THIS I BELIEVE: AN A TO Z OF A LIFE*.

MEXICO CITY—The panorama of the present-day left in Latin America has recently been—and will continue to be—the object of passionate interpretations, each time touching on (a) the novelty of its return after long militaristic winters and democratic springs that never reached the broad popular base of the pyramid, and (b) a veritable smorgasbord or tossed salad of trends. Here is the way I see it.

Fidel Castro remains the dean of the Latin American left. He has been in power for almost a half-century thanks to several factors. First, United States aggression. Accustomed to dominating the island ever since the era of the Platt Amendment, the US encountered “the perfect fit”—the Castro Revolution, which it couldn't control.

An incredible game of errors: the hostility of 10 US administrations has only affirmed Castro's power. A famous cartoon depicts each American president since Eisenhower chanting the same mantra, “Fidel Castro is on the point of being overthrown.” Carter's and Clinton's attempts at normalizing relations with Cuba failed; they weren't favored by Castro, who—second factor—has built up an authoritarian apparatus that rests on the base of defending against Yankee imperialism. This makes any opponent *ipso facto* into a potential traitor. This totalitarian mechanism is oiled by the enemy and lubricates itself.

What doesn't work for Castro is the economy. Attempts at diversification have failed. Cuba has returned to a mono-crop agriculture and to tourist exploitation. A gigolo economy long supported by the now extinct USSR, artificially abandoned at the end of the Cold War and rescued again by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's petroleum munificence. Cuba's merits—education and health—will survive the regime. And Chávez's aid is as fleeting as the person himself.

As head of state of the world's fifth-largest exporter of oil, Hugo Chávez struts around like a leftist leader. In reality, he is a tropical Mussolini, always ready to benevolently lavish his oil riches, while sacrificing the sources of production and of employment at home. He attacks the US on commercial matters like a free-trade zone but doesn't dare touch the oil relations so dear to the Caracas government finances. Like Juan Perón, he combines a populist discourse with huge doses of social philanthropy. Unlike Perón, he is not constructing a local diversified industry. Chávez and his mirages will fade away. A disenchanted populace will seek new roads without having learned too much. The Venezuelan left should already be considering its post-Chávez project.

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At the other extreme of America lie the southern leftists. Hesitantly, Néstor Kirchner's regime in Argentina wavers between an intolerant and a soft neo-Peronism. Surprisingly, Tabaré Vázquez's government in Uruguay is agile in its defense of national interests under both the leftist as well as the rightist rubric. Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has achieved enormous economic and commercial success, but betrayed his popular electoral base. He sullies himself with scandals of corruption as melodramatic as the multiple faces of the ex-éminence gris of the regime who was his top aide, José Dirceu. Excluding the Lon Chaney of Brazilian politics, it is hoped that Lula's government, certain to be defeated in the coming elections, will leave the field as clear as possible to his successors.

The other face of the left in Latin America is represented, of course, by Ricardo Lagos of Chile. Under his mandate, Pinochetism was buried by the judicial authorities (revealing that the atrocious tyrant was also a sinister thief, the head of a Mafioso family of cynical crooks), and the president has dedicated himself not to condemning the past, but instead to constructing the future.

Market and state: The balance between both factors has assured the swift (and incomplete) development of Chile under socialism. The poverty level has gone from 40 percent to 18 percent. That is still a large percentage of poverty: Michelle Bachelet, who succeeded Lagos in March, has her task set out before her. But Lagos leaves behind a model that transcends the "Washington consensus," which did not cultivate either a high level of investment with sustained growth or greater growth with greater equity. He leaves Bachelet a model under construction that promises to preserve a macroeconomic stability that will enable her to urgently attend to the micro-economic underdevelopment with programs for employment, infrastructure, education, redistribution and economic opportunities.

This is the project that in broad terms would fit the renewed Mexican left, which 2006 presidential candidate Andres López Obrador currently represents. Demonized as a populist Herod and as a demagogue, López Obrador has just given a positive sign in the opening address of his campaign, delivered in Metlatonoc, Guerrero. "Let it be heard clearly and let it be heard far away: There will be a market economy, but the state will promote social development in order to fight inequality." And he added: "There will be macroeconomic stability and discipline in dealing with inflation and the public deficit."

Above all, López Obrador has declared that micro- as well as macroeconomics should combat the poverty that, as we all know, has been Mexico's most painful and permanent wound ever since Humboldt defined us at the beginning of the 19th century as the country of inequality, a poverty that has been our worst weakness, as

Ignacio Solares expressed in his excellent novel on the Mexican-American War of 1848, *The Invasion*.

My hope is that the route of Lopez Obrador in Mexico will be similar to Lagos and not that of Chávez, though, to be sure, neither the Lagos nor the Chávez programs can in any way be replicated in a country that shares a 3,000-kilometer border with the world's greatest power.

A situation that doesn't worry me is the latest leftist to gain power in Latin America, Evo Morales of Bolivia. Elected by a clear majority, Morales confirms a positive turn in Latin American politics: The left can gain power by electoral means. Not so long ago, this was inconceivable. The left's only recourse was through armed insurrection. Without a doubt, Evo Morales is conscious of the fact that his election commits not only him, but the ill-treated Bolivian people, to maintain clearly and intelligently the same free political process that led them to power in the first place. That is a step forward for Latin America that should not be underestimated. Democracy has finally reached the base of the pyramid.



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