

## Returning to the Past to Rethink Socio-Political Antagonisms: Mapping Today's Situation in Regards to Popular Insurrections

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Special Issue: **Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, The Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture.**

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to elaborate a map or cartogram based on a number of protests and social mobilizations that took place in different parts of the world -mainly in Latin America, but also in Europe and Asia. Beyond the data and figures available from various sources, which never speak for themselves, an interpretation is proposed here to reveal the meaning of these events. In other words, by displaying a map of these social movements, the authors propose not only the visualization of a collection of data, but also an illumination of these events in the light of history. From there, the authors offer hypothetical predictions. These predictions allow the authors to consider the lessons that, sometimes, seem to be forgotten or are not learned yet.

**Nicol A. BARRIA-ASENJO, Slavoj ŽIŽEK, Hernán SCHOLTEN, David PAVÓN-CUELLAR, Gonzalo SALAS, Oscar Ariel CABEZAS, Jesús William HUANCA AROHUANCA, and Sergio J. Aguilar ALCALÁ**

**Returning to the Past to Rethink Socio-Political Antagonisms: Mapping Today's Situation in Regards to Popular Insurrections**

**Introduction**

The creation of the first *mappa mundi*, which showed the territories known or imagined by the ancient Greeks around the 4th century BC, is often attributed to Anaximander. Sometime later came the maps by Ptolemy in *Geographia*, which had a strong impact on the development of later cartography and the production of maps, until modernity offered new models.

Today, there are several models employed to distribute and classify the global landscape, as well as many conventions for representing them graphically in maps. Three cases are relevant here: the first is the so-called *south-up map orientation*, which inverts the traditional orientation and places Europe and North America in the lower part of the map, and the rest of the world (Africa, Australia and the greater part of the American continent) in the upper part. Secondly, there is the *Pacific-centered map*, which is frequently used in China and Japan. For the Western gaze, it has the particularity of positioning Eastern Asia in a more prominent place, pushing Europe to the edge. This highlights the extent which the cardinal orientations (north, south, east, and west) in the global map, and even expressions such as "Middle East" and "Far East," assume a center or axis (Greenwich, for that matter). The third model is that based on cartograms, thematic maps where the geographical size of the elements (countries, states) depicted is proportional to the size of some other variable: population, average income, average age, etc.

What kind of map or cartogram would we get if we took into account the social protests and mobilizations that have recently rocked the world? The *Global Tracker Project*, installed on the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace website, could be useful here. According to its data, as of September 2021, it has compiled over three hundred entries from over a hundred countries, since January 2017. Even though its information is thin in some aspects (it only includes anti-government protests), and while the project is aware of its own limitations, it provides some resources that make possible a *topology of mobilizations*.

Around the world there are cases worth noticing, but, as will be seen ahead, a quantitative criterion obfuscates notable differences in regards to their intensity, beyond the forms and causes of the protests. So, in order to develop an analysis, it is necessary to go beyond mere data and statistics, which cannot speak for themselves, and instead offer an interpretation.

To do this, a number of protests and mobilizations are considered here, most of them quite recent, from Latin America to Europe and Asia. This geographical plurality provides a useful vantage point, allowing for a diversity of situations and particular contexts, and permitting us to identify topics which occur frequently in these massive claims and collective complaints.

After brief summaries of these multiple events, we can create a map of topics raised and modalities of protests, which seem to spread and connect many parts of the world, and which will be the pretext to offer an historically informed glimpse into the future.

**Political Twists in South America (2016-19)**

The most echoed social mobilizations that took place in South America at the beginning of this decade can be categorized under two general themes. On one hand, they can be understood as massive protests that were the result of extreme polarization after the electoral results for presidents. On the other hand, these were insurrections that, due to an apparently insignificant event, developed without a particular center or limits (that is, without a clear leadership or a clear party line).

During the past decade, Brazil and Argentina, the biggest economies in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR),<sup>1</sup> entered a cycle of protests, at times highly violent. In Argentina, after the arrival of Mauricio Macri as President in 2015, a legal initiative was proposed to cancel all debt with the holdouts that Kirchner refused to pay (López et. al.). The Argentine peso devaluated up to 50% against the USD, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed a severe austerity plan.

<sup>1</sup> All organizations names are provided first in full English translation, then using the common acronym.

In regard to Brazil, it all started after the ejection (for some, a "soft *coup*") of President Dilma Rousseff from the Worker's Party, in 2016, and the arrival of Michel Temer to the Presidency, with a clear neoliberal plan for the South American BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) partner, boosted by Jair Bolsonaro's government. As Roberto Véras de Oliveira pointed, the efforts by Temer were oriented towards weakening the state presence in Petrobás and the reserve in Cuenca del Presal, as well as towards the flexibilization of work and cutting public expending.<sup>2</sup> It was a tense government from the beginning, due to the mobilizations in favor of President Rousseff and former President Luiz Inácio Lula Da Silva.

Ecuador in 2019 also faced agitated times and protests, against the general context of neoliberal reforms that the IMF urged President Lenin Moreno to implement; at the beginning of his term in office, Moreno took a radical turn against the distributive policies that characterized the "Citizen Revolution." The inflection point, at the time, was the elimination of a fuel subsidy, to which the union of carriers reacted first, followed by a general mobilization led by the Ecuador's Indigenous Nations Confederation (CONAIE). The government had to change its headquarters to Guayaquil, as Quito was besieged by the indigenous uprising and protests, which resulted in eleven deaths and thousands of injured. Eventually, the fuel subsidy was reinstated.

### **Left on Trial: Contrasting the Cases of Nicaragua and Mexico (2018-20)**

During April 2018, following the recommendations by the IMF, the Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega imposed a reform on social security that forced greater contributions from business owners and workers, and a tax retention of 5% on retirement pensions. This reform provoked protests that were heavily repressed by the police and paramilitary groups related to the government. Although Ortega rescinded the reform after three days of declaring it, mobilizations and confrontations lasted for four months, with almost 400 deaths, a thousand people in custody and between 1200 and 3000 injured.

The social-security reform was the catalyst for the social uprising, but a deeper unrest was already boiling over; demands for the resignation of Ortega date back to 2007. The President was accused, before and after the protests, of bad management, waste of money coming from Venezuela, authoritarianism, censorship of media, repressive actions against the opposition, nepotism, political clientelism, influence peddling, corruption, electoral fraud, unconstitutional actions so he can be reelected as President, and being a traitor to the spirit of Sandinismo, a very important movement for the Left in Latin America and the world between the 1960s and 1980s.

We should remember that Ortega was one of the most emblematic leaders and militants of the Sandinist Front of National Liberation (FSLN), which he joined in 1963 to fight the dictatorship of the Somoza family. When the last dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was overthrown by the Sandinist Revolution in 1979, Ortega became part of the Government Council for National Reconstruction, and later was sworn in as President of Nicaragua between 1985 and 1990, with an ambitious socialist plan to expropriate big properties, redistribute wealth, fight poverty, and promote health and education. However, his government was overthrown due to the brutal counterrevolution financed by the United States and its strategy of terror, which involved killing civilians, destroying infrastructure, and bringing about the collapse of the economy. The moral and economic exhaustion of Nicaraguan society ensured the triumph of the anti-Sandinist governments.

With the 2006 elections, Ortega became President of Nicaragua again, a position he retained even after the 2018 protests. However, unlike the term from 1985 to 1990, Ortega ruled Nicaragua from 2007 to 2018 not as a socialist anti-imperialist as before, but as a populist leader who was forced into many compromises, contradictions, and simulations to keep power and to satisfy the two big antagonists: Sandinists and Somocists, socialism and neoliberalism, left and right, popular sectors and economic elites (Duterme "El populismo" and "On ne perdra plus"). On the one hand, to retain the sympathy of the Sandinists, Ortega's government designed a National Plan for Human Development, with ambitious new measures to fight poverty, free health and education, microcredits for housing with low interests, and various types of support to small and medium producers and women-led cooperatives. On the other hand, to gain the favor of businesses, capital, and the empire, the same government heeded the rules imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, ratified a free trade agreement with the US, collaborated with the US government to fight narcotics and migration, reduced taxes to foreign investments, given important concessions for mining and touristic projects to big Asian capitals, and implemented agreements with the right politicians and business owners. In addition to this, we should

<sup>2</sup> See the interview by Mariano Schuster in 2017.

also note the Christian and moralistic rhetoric, the banning of abortion, disagreements with feminists (Oettler) and the *de facto* privatization of the police, the justice departments and a huge piece of the national budget (Rocha Gómez).

These two fronts in Ortega's strategy try to leave everyone satisfied, but have actually created a greater discontent. The main figures of Sandinismo, both intellectual and political, have left the project, which they qualify as more "Orteguist" than Sandinist, accusing Ortega of appropriating, betraying, and instrumentalizing Sandinismo (Cruz Feliciano and Chaguaceda; Meza). The growing dissatisfaction with Ortega's contradictions finally erupted during the 2018 protests, in which we could see both antagonists who Ortega tried to keep satisfied, the oligarchic and the popular, who had been rivals and enemies in the modern history of Nicaragua. While Ortega tried to unite them into his project, they have united against him, against an Orteguismo that can only satisfy itself, and neither Sandinism nor Somocism.

Perhaps the dissatisfaction from both left and right with Ortega in Nicaragua might remind us of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. Like Ortega, López Obrador provokes a great discontent from left and right sectors. The Mexican President, just like the Nicaraguan one, is a populist leader with leftist origins, with a history of tireless fights who lost the presidential elections many times before winning. The triumph of López Obrador in 2018, just like Ortega's in 2007 and the consecutive elections, is due to perseverance, important popular support and the discrediting of previous neoliberal governments. It is also due to a strategic and pragmatic plan; during the campaign and the period in government, this plan led him to a more moderate stance. He entered agreements with previous enemies and adopted a more conciliatory approach, with many compromises, contradictions and simulations to satisfy both the popular sectors and economic elites (Román Morales; Centeno). And just like the Nicaraguan president, the Mexican one also has a Christian and moralistic rhetoric and disagreements with feminists (Beer).

Feminists were precisely those who organized, during 2019 and 2020, the most important protests during López Obrador's term. In August 2019, following the news of three sexual abuses committed by policemen of Mexico City, tens of thousands of women took to the streets of the capital and of other cities, to paint over the walls and scream at the police "Rapists!," "Justice!," "They don't protect, they rape!" The next year, right before a world strike from women in March 2020, a massive protest took over Mexico City's streets again, with clashes between protestors and female police corps, in which 62 policewomen and 19 protestors were injured.

During these protests in Mexico, as well as those in 2018 against Ortega, the difference between the left and right side of the spectrum was blurred, as if this distinction were no longer relevant, or insufficient as a means to describe society's political antagonism. The fundamental antagonism in the 2019-20 Mexico protest was expressed, on the one hand, by those who protested against patriarchy and violence against women, and on the other hand, by those who took such protest as an anti-government protest (like the case in Nicaragua). In the contexts of Mexico and Nicaragua, many considered that the fundamental political antagonism was between those who supported and those who rejected López Obrador. Those who rejected his leadership included left feminists, Zapatistas, and anarchist groups, as well as members of the right and ultra-right wing National Action Party (PAN) and Anti-AMLO National Front (FRENA).

Beyond apparent similarities, we should also discern important differences between the Mexican and Nicaraguan cases. First, the Mexican feminist protests were not as clearly anti-government as in Nicaragua: although some took them as such, they were directed against violence against women, and against some specific police actions, and only partially against López Obrador's misunderstanding. Another difference is that the Nicaraguan protests were much more intense than those in Mexico, both in their duration and in the universality of their claims, as well as in the number of participants (even considering, in relative terms, the population of both countries).

In addition, while the protests in Nicaragua were brutally repressed by the police and paramilitary groups, with a death toll of hundreds, in Mexico there were just tens of women injured, most of them from the police corp. López Obrador's government did not appear, to the international community, as despotic, authoritarian, and repressive as Ortega's, nor we can affirm that the protests in Mexico are, as they are in Nicaragua, the sign of a general discontent towards the President. Even though López Obrador has lost the favor of many of his voters, the discontent is not general, and most of the left electorate in Mexico is still identified with the figure of the President, who has retained during the second half of his term a very high approval rate (Zizzis). There are no accusations against López Obrador as serious as those against Ortega, and it is not generally perceived that the Mexican President had proceeded, as the Nicaraguan one had, to instrumentalize, fool, and betray the left. The leftist sectors



who have not supported López Obrador in his government have never been in support of him and never expected much from his administration. Since the beginning, López Obrador's cause, although very important in the recent history of Mexico, has never been very radical, nor has it had the historical and symbolic reach that the Sandinismo had for the international left.

### **Democracy, Polarization, and Violence: Bolivia (2019) and Peru (2021)**

On October 20, 2019, general elections were celebrated in the Plurinational State of Bolivia. A first poll seemed to declare Evo Morales, candidate of MAS (Movement towards Socialism) and President since 2006, as the winner. Later, when over half of the votes were counted, the results indicated that a second round of elections would be necessary. After a long delay of almost 24 hours, when no update was presented, the counting finally gave the definitive victory to Evo Morales, with 10.57% over the next candidate.

Once the results were announced, strongly polarized views gave rise to protests. The complaints from university sectors and opposite political groups were relatively clear. They were not only demanding an impartial review of the results, the resignation of the authorities of the Electoral Council, and a second round against Carlos Mesa (the opposing candidate from CC, Citizen Community); moreover, they were demanding the imposition of the results of the referendum that took place in February 2016, where over half the voters rejected the possibility of a new reelection of the President. The firsts massive protests quickly overtook many cities, in the space of twenty-one days, during which strikes were declared and protestors from the officialism and the opposition clashed with security forces. On 8 November, a police riot took place in Cochabamba, and it extended to almost every region of the country.

With internal tension building, international pressure came from the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union.<sup>3</sup> Although new elections were announced, this wasn't enough to stop the protests and mobilizations. Evo Morales resigned on 10 November while denouncing a *coup d'état*, and after a brief period in Mexico, he moved to Argentina as a refugee, alongside Vice President García Linera and other ministers who also resigned their positions. On 12 November, Jeanine Áñez, the second Vice President of the Senate, took charge as interim President. A series of mobilizations of Morales' sympathizers started in many cities, with a rally supported by "Los Ponchos Rojos" (The Red Hoods), a radical Aymara<sup>4</sup> organization, from El Alto to La Paz. The police declared themselves outnumbered and unable to contain the protests, and solicited the intervention of the army, causing some people to believe this was a "civil war."

The violence, which left many dead and hundreds injured, decreased by the end of November, when new elections were being organized and programmed for October 2020, in which Luis Arce, candidate from MAS, emerged as winner. On November 7, the new President took charge, and a few days later, almost a year after he left the country, Evo Morales returned to Bolivia. He was escorted by a caravan that stretched along 1000 kilometers from the border of Argentina.

As these events were shocking Latin America, Peru was about to enter its most complex political storm since its entering into democracy in 2001. Vice President Martín Vizcarra "gave a new dynamic of the conflict between the Presidency and the Congress, but now with a President that had a bigger support from the citizens on its anti-corruption agenda" (Dargent and Rousseau 379)<sup>5</sup>. The general crisis came to a climax in September 2019, when President Vizcarra dissolved the Congress, on grounds that were borderline unconstitutional. A year later, a similar political crisis between the President and the Congress would force Vizcarra to resign, coerced by the Congress that was elected for one year (Paredes and Encinas).

While Peru suffered greatly from the lethality of the Covid-19 pandemic, in the general context there were other agents, such as poverty and hatred toward indigenous people, that led to an unfortunate scenario in which political actors were fighting for state power while ignoring the tragedy of the people (Durand). The power was held by Manuel Merino, but due to questions regarding the process that elected him President, he was forced to resign six days later.

New elections were organized, and they took place on 6 April 2021. A second round was needed in this process, in which 18 candidates participated. This occurred on 6 June, between Pedro Castillo from Perú Libre (an elementary-school teacher) and Keiko Fujimori from Fuerza Popular (daughter of the

<sup>3</sup> See the reports published on 11 November and 4 December 2019 on police brutality and manipulation of electoral results.

<sup>4</sup> An ethnic group of Bolivian natives, sympathizers of President Morales.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations originally in Spanish are translated into English.

polemical former President Alberto Fujimori). Both antagonists displayed ideological and geographical polarization; the neoliberal element was mainly backed by the inhabitants of the capital, Lima, while the somewhat radical left came from the rest of the country and from popular sectors.

The results from this second round were published on Tuesday, 15 June 2021: Castillo (50.125%) triumphed over Fujimori (49.875%), in an almost insignificant percentage. However, as both parts asked for the nullity of several voting acts, neither of them could be declared as the winner yet. In this scenario, US newspapers presented grim predictions of what would happen if the "ultraleft" won. During the following month, both leaders called for mobilizations and protests, where police force was necessary to control the outbursts of violence. The National Electoral Board eventually confirmed Castillo's victory over Fujimori.

These protests in Bolivia and Peru, of considerable extension and intensity, have at their center the struggle for state power. In a way, they are an exacerbation of common scenarios in elections that are so close. Nonetheless, during the same period, some mobilizations displayed particular characteristics and relatively new structures.

### **"Social Outbreak" in Chile and Colombia**

On October 6, 2019, the Chilean government enacted an increase of 30 pesos (less than five cents of USD) on the subway fee. This event is usually considered as the beginning of the massive mobilizations and protests that took place soon afterwards. When the advisors became aware of the consequences of the fee increase in the capital Santiago, and tried to reverse it, it became clear that the protests were not just about the fee hike, but about roughly three decades of economic policy, "not 30 pesos, but 30 years" (to quote the slogan).

Among these protests, one sector gained particular visibility: female students from middle and high school, women between 15 and 18 years old, who organized the first protests, refusing to pay for the subway fee. This action, organized via social media and instant-messaging apps around the slogan, "To refuse to pay, another way to fight," was not in itself a novelty. In 2011 and 2012, another student movement took place in Chile, known as "The Penguin Revolution," the most important mass movement since the *coup* of 1973, demanding high-quality, free, non-for-profit education for all. Since then, student protests included in their demands transgenerational issues concerning a censored history. Since 2011, the politicized masses have demanded a new Constitution, replacing the one that ruled over Chile since the 1980s, which was written during the civic and military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

In 2019, once the previously ignored demands were now in public view, gradually, what were once student protests were now extending to other sectors, and the slogans began to articulate the country's recent history, creating a juncture in the neoliberal ideological matrix. The actions were initially focalized in the capital, but became much more widespread on 18 October 2019, when it started to extend all over the country and forced President Sebastián Piñera to declare, a few days later, an "Emergency State" in almost every regional capital of the country. The number of injured and hospitalized during the protests are considered to be in the thousands, and even tens of thousands. Several international organizations (International Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) took note of the violations of human rights that occurred when state forces repressed the protests.

After an agreement signed by most political parties, a national referendum was held in October 2020, and a new Constitution would be proclaimed. The people commissioned for such a task conformed the Constitutional Convention, and its first session took place on 4 July 2021, under the presidency of Elisa Elcon, a Mapuche academic and activist for indigenous communities' rights.

Despite some differences, there are several points of overlap with the case of the "National Strike" in Colombia, in April 2021. The protests started with the announcement of a tax reform during Iván Duque's presidency, following the instructions of the IMF. These measures imposed new taxes on basic services, therefore affecting, mainly, the middle class. The National Strike Committee, a nonpartisan entity that is mostly composed of workers unions, is considered as the central nucleus. Nonetheless, among groups of local indigenous people, several other communities have declared themselves to be self-represented, with no political leaders.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Among the workers organizations are the Unitary Central of Workers (CUT), the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), and the Confederation of Workers of Colombia (CTC). One of the indigenous organizations was the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC).



As in Chile, although the tax reform was withdrawn, the crises and mobilizations continued (which showed that, here too, the nature of the protests went beyond the apparent causes). In the beginning of May, protests resulted in the toppling of public statues and caused riots in Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla, and many other cities, which extended for months. Criminal complaints were filed against several authorities at every level for crimes against human rights, including persons arbitrarily detained during the protests, many of whom disappeared or died, with thousands more injured.

### **"Social Outbreak" in Europe**

Although protests in Europe and other parts of the world, like those in Latin America, are characterized by local particularities, those same revolts are situated within a globalized space that seems to confirm Félix Guattari's hypothesis that we live in "Integrated World Capitalism" (Guattari and Rolnik). In other words, the historicity of the revolts and their anti-authoritarian or anti-government contents are inscribed within the global history of capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The protests are happening due to the advanced capacity that capitalism has to open frontiers and destroy community and identity niches. Social protests in European countries have not emulated milestones such as May 1968. They do not follow modern narratives such as socialism or communism, nor do they follow historical revolutionary events, such as the Paris Commune or the Soviet Revolution. Recent social protests under the neoliberal regime are the result of the general crisis of national capitalism and the welfare state.<sup>8</sup> Even though it is undeniable that most protests have an anti-authoritarian and anti-government motivation, the scenario of globalized economies commanded by a neoliberal hegemony suggest that those protests result in local, political destabilization as well as effects at the scale of financial capitalist global hegemony.

European protests, such as the Greek outbreak in 2008 and the paradigmatic eruption of the Movement of 15 May (15M) in 2011 in Spain, constitute upheavals against the austerity measures provoked by inexistent or weak welfare states. These upheavals do not aspire to control state power (see the analyses in Ancelovici, Dufour, and Nez), unlike the revolutionary movements in the 60s. One of the main aspects of the protests in the twenty-first century is the access and mobility that technologies and communication can offer via social media. The use of the internet and the speed of communication not only allows them greater global visibility, but also a new type of organization in which indignation occurs as discomfort and discontent with state institutions. This organization is based on a common sensibility that various authors have identified through the language of affects and the suspicion that state and party politics leads to failure, or to the conversion of the "weak" into agents of power (Fernández-Savater, *Habitar y gobernar*).

In the map of the *indignados* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this anti-authoritarian sensibility emerges with the intensification of financial capitalism or, as David Harvey has called it, flexible accumulation. The undermining of work and the lack of it for younger generations turn the upheavals into an anti-authoritarian position against the institutions that are supposed to look after the "common good" of its citizens (Dardot and Laval). In their immediacy, the upheavals are directed against the main actor in the maintaining of order: they defy the police system, in which is condensed the violence of financial capitalism and the defense of neoliberal policies. Free-market ideology is sustained through police democracies from which powerful oligarchies are benefitting. However, the social injustice system produced by the neoliberal state is resisted by the discontent of disenfranchised citizens. Attempts to dismantle the idea of "common good" within societies, and to neutralize the politics that emanate from the outbreaks prove sterile for neoliberal consensus (Brown). For example, the European revolts of the current century have this common denominator, i.e., they break out in the immediacy where the state monopoly of violence is concentrated and tend not to be recognized as political events.

In Greece, the revolt of 2008 started when the police shot at point blank and killed a 15-year-old student, Alexandros Grigoropoulos. The resulting insurrection, an immediate response to the abuse of police force, created one of the deepest crises in governability in the history of the country where democracy and politics were born. The revolt was motivated by the systemic corruption of institutions unable to resolve the problem of unemployment, and the general lack of hope for the future (Vergara). As a consequence of the politicization of the outraged society, social antagonisms led to the formation of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in 2009, and a triumph in the 2015 elections. However, the translation of these revolts into a political party did not overcome the crisis.

<sup>7</sup> We find this hypothesis also, in a different fashion to Guattari's, in Wallerstein.

<sup>8</sup> See the book by Bobbit who explains, in an ambitious way, how there was a cycle of national states as the last versions of *Welfare-State*; meanwhile now we have *Market-States*.

In a similar vein, in Spain, the 15M movement was famously translated into Podemos, a political party founded in 2014. Led by Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, in its most intensive moment, Podemos completely changed the Spanish political scenario, drawing from the hegemony theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Villacañas). Just like the Occupy Wall Street movement, the 15M rejected the capitalism that is still to be found in the imaginary of Spanish politics. There is no doubt that one of the most important effects of this social movement was the establishment of Podemos, which introduced a rupture into the bipartisan scenario of the Popular Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE). The party has suffered several fractures, and yet today some intellectuals of the anti-capitalist or anarchist left still believe the experience of 15M to be the paradigm of politics (Fernández-Savater). The revolts are strongly related to unemployment and the discontent produced by the direct or indirect control of the financial system, which favors and protects transnational oligarchies. These oligarchies make it difficult for popular uprisings to become political parties that can manage the fight against neoliberalism. This impasse occurs when outrage, a deep discontent that cannot be governed, finds no way to be channeled via the traditional leftist parties. In other words, the demand for dignity makes it difficult to translate the revolts into a political party of the traditional left when these parties are, or have been, part of the neoliberal consensus.

What clearly emerges from anger or in the name of outrage is not so much the cliché of "democratic participation," but the spirit of a general surfeit that demands an opening up of "the end of history" into an "awakening" (Badiou). The subject of this awakening is composed by a multiplicity of social actors: ecologists, feminists, those with diverse sexual identities, and, especially, young students, workers, and independent merchants who have little or nothing to lose.

### **Thirty Years After: The Return of Vanishing Mediators**

Thirty years after the fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, nationalist conservative populism is returning there with a vengeance: the recent turn of Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and some other post-socialist countries—we can call them a new axis of evil—in a conservative-illiberal direction worries us all. How could things have gone so wrong? Perhaps we are paying the price now for something that vanished from our view after socialism was replaced by capitalist democracy. What vanished was not socialism but things that mediated the passage from socialism to capitalist democracy.

"Vanishing mediator," a term introduced decades ago by Fredric Jameson, designates a specific feature in the process of a passage from the old order to a new order: when the old order is disintegrating, unexpected things happen, not just the horrors mentioned by Gramsci but also bright utopian projects and practices. Once the new order is established, a new narrative arises and, within this new ideological space, mediators disappear from view.

Following this pattern, the passage to capitalism in Eastern European socialist countries was also not a direct transition: between the socialist order and the new order, liberal-capitalist and/or nationalist-conservative, there were many vanishing mediators that the new power is trying to erase from memory. We witnessed this process when Yugoslavia fell apart. To avoid any misunderstanding, we are not trying to express a feeling of nostalgia for Yugoslavia: the war that ravaged it from 1991 to 1995 was its truth, the moment when all the antagonisms of the Yugoslav project exploded. Yugoslavia died in 1985 when Slobodan Milošević came to power in Serbia and broke the fragile balance that kept it working. In the final years of Yugoslavia, communists in power knew they had lost, so they desperately tried to find a way to survive the passage to democracy as a political force. Some did it by mobilizing nationalist passions, others tolerated and even supported new democratic processes. In Slovenia, communists in power showed understanding for punk music—including Laibach—and for the gay movement.

At a more general level, when people protested against the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, what the large majority had in mind was not capitalism. They wanted social security, solidarity, a rough kind of justice; they wanted the freedom to live their lives outside of state control, to come together and talk as they pleased; they wanted a life of simple honesty and sincerity, liberated from primitive ideological indoctrination and the prevailing cynical hypocrisy ... in short, the vague ideals that led the protesters were, to a large extent, taken from socialist ideology itself. And, as we learned from Sigmund Freud, what is repressed returns in a distorted form. In Europe, the socialism repressed in the dissident imaginary returned in the guise of right populism.

Although, as to their positive content, the communist regimes were a failure, they at the same time opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of the really existing socialism itself. When dissidents like Vaclav Havel denounced the existing communist regime on behalf of authentic human solidarity, they (unknowingly, for the most

part of it) spoke from the place opened up by communism itself—which is why they tend to be so disappointed when the "really existing capitalism" does not meet the high expectations of their anti-communist struggle.

Why mention these vanishing mediators today? In his interpretation of the fall of East European Communism, Jürgen Habermas proved to be the ultimate left Fukuyamist, silently accepting that the existing liberal-democratic order is the best one possible, and that, while we should strive to make it more just, we should not challenge its basic premises. This is why Habermas welcomed precisely what many leftists saw as the big deficiency of the anti-communist protests in Eastern Europe: the fact that these protests were not motivated by any new visions of the post-communist future. As he put it, the Central and Eastern European revolutions were just "rectifying" or "catch-up" (*nachholende*) revolutions, their aim being to enable those societies to gain what the Western Europeans already possessed; in other words, to return to Western European normality.

However, the *gilets jaunes* protests in France and other similar protests today are definitely not catch-up movements. They embody the weird reversal that characterizes today's global situation. However, what is new is that the populist right has proved to be much more adept in channeling these eruptions in its direction than the left. Today's populist right participates in a long tradition of popular protests that were predominantly leftist.

Here, then, is the paradox we have to confront: the populist disappointment at liberal democracy is proof that 1990 was not just a catch-up revolution, that it aimed at more than the liberal-capitalist normality. Freud spoke about *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the discontent or unease in culture; today, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ongoing new wave of protests bears witness to a kind of *Unbehagen* in liberal capitalism, and the key question is: who will articulate this discontent? Will it be left to nationalist populists to exploit it? Therein resides the big task of the left. This discontent is not something new. It was already addressed thirty years ago (Žižek), as the dark side of processes occurring in Eastern Europe (anti-semitism was emerging in East Germany, Hungary, and Romania, as well as a nationalist-populist faction in Poland).

This dark side is now re-emerging forcefully, and its effects are felt in the rightist rewriting of history: first the socialist aspect of the struggle against communism (remember that *Solidarność* was a workers trade union!) disappears, and then even the liberal aspect disappears, so that a new story emerges in which the only true opposition is the one between communist legacy and the Christian-national.

On 7 July 2021, Viktor Orbán bought a page in the Austrian daily *Die Presse* to publish his views on Europe. His main points were: Brussels' bureaucracy acts as a "superstate" which only protects its own ideological and institutional goal—nobody authorized Brussels to do it. We should renounce the goal of greater unity because the coming decade will bring new challenges and dangers, Europeans are to be protected from "massive migrations and pandemics" ... This couple is a false one: immigrants and pandemics didn't invade us from outside, but we are responsible for both of them. Without the US intervention in Iraq, there would have been much fewer immigrants; without global capitalism there would have been no pandemic; and it is precisely immigrant crises and pandemics which necessitate stronger European unity. The new rightist populism aims at destroying the European emancipatory legacy: its Europe is a Europe of nation-states bent on preserving their particular identity—when a couple of years ago Steve Bannon visited France, he finished a speech there with: "America first, vive la France!". *Vive la France, viva Italia*, long live Germany ... but not Europe.

Does this mean that we should put all our forces into resuscitating liberal democracy? No: in some sense Orbán is right; the rise of new populism is a symptom of what was wrong with liberal-democratic capitalism, which was praised by Francis Fukuyama as the end of history. In order to save what is worth saving in liberal democracy, we have to move to the left, to what Orbán and his companions perceive as "Communism."

Today in Europe, we are not dealing with three positions—populist right, liberal center, left—within the same universal political arch that reaches from the right to the left: each of the three positions implies its own vision of the universal political space. For a liberal, left and right are the two extremes that threaten our freedoms; if any of them predominates, authoritarianism wins—that's why European liberals see in what Orbán is now doing in Hungary (his fierce anti-communism) the continuation of the same methods as those of communists in power. For the left, rightist populism is, of course, worse than tolerant liberalism, but it perceives the rise of rightist populism as a symptom of what went wrong in liberalism, so if we want to get rid of rightist populism, we should radically change liberal capitalism itself, which is now morphing into neo-feudal corporate rule. The new populist right exploits the fully justified complaints of ordinary people against the reign of big corporations and banks, which cover up

their ruthless exploitation, domination, and new forms of control over our lives with fake politically correct justice.

For the new populist right, multi-culturalism, #MeToo, LGBT+, etc., are just a continuation of communist totalitarianism, sometimes worse than communism itself—Brussels is the center of "Cultural Marxism." The alt-right obsession with Cultural Marxism signals its refusal to confront the fact that the phenomena they criticize as the effects of the Cultural Marxist plot (moral degradation, sexual promiscuity, consumerist hedonism, etc.) are the outcome of the immanent dynamic of late capitalism itself. In his new afterword for *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell revealed the crucial cultural fault lines we faced as the twenty-first century approached: the turn towards culture as a key component of capitalist reproduction, and, concomitant to it, the commodification of cultural life itself, enables capital's expanded reproduction. Just think about today's explosion of art biennales: although they usually present themselves as a form of resistance towards global capitalism and its commodification of everything, they are, in their mode of organization, the ultimate form of art as a moment of capitalist self-reproduction.

Now we see why we should remember vanishing mediators: today the global capitalist order is approaching a crisis again, and the vanished radical legacy will have to be resuscitated.

### Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we proposed that we would create a map featuring the social mobilizations and protests that are happening all around the globe. Now, we should remember that maps do not reproduce reality and that, in fact, that is not their purpose.

In any case, this does not prevent us from recognizing maps' utility: maps are not only guides, an index of the trip we have to take to get to a destiny; they can also be open to surprises, allowing us to appreciate the limits or highlight some aspects that go unnoticed in normal circumstances. In this sense, when we deploy a map of social movements, we not only propose the display of a collection of data, but also an illumination of such events in light of history, and from there, provide some hypothetical predictions.

In the case of Latin America, protests and mobilizations are strongly related to the presidential elections, and besides shedding light upon governments strongly settled in the executive branch, they expose the tensions and oscillations between different parts of the political spectrum (from the extreme right to the diverse leftist organizations). These tensions let us appreciate a series of alliances and affinities with the international scenario and its social dissidence. This collaboration is not only derivative of the constant efforts to build international agencies (such as MERCOSUR and UNASUR<sup>9</sup>, among others), whose strength has always depended on polarization and the scheme of mobile affinities of the recent history, but is also a remnant of darker times. During the 1970s and 80s, Operation Condor took place in the region, when the diverse Southern American terrorist governments (civic and military dictatorships) were privileged with aid from the US (Esparza, Huttenbach, Feierstein; Basualdo, Berghoff, and Bucheli).

On the other hand, in the case of the social outbreaks in Chile and Colombia, the State was interpellated as the guarantor of internal peace, and was strongly questioned in its capacity to negotiate. Indeed, as previously mentioned, it was not enough to undo the measures that the government itself had implemented and which were supposed to have triggered the protests; on the contrary, this further exacerbated the crisis. Moreover, the authorities also faced the challenge of a self-convened multitude without leaders or representative figures, which was outside the structure of political parties or trade unions. This made it impossible to apply some classic strategies of disarticulating protests, such as giving privileges to certain individuals or groups (for example, as De Gaulle did with the unions in the context of May 68)

It is also worth mentioning some limitations of our map. Within it we did not point to the gradual increase in popularity of Evangelists groups which, while not part of a specific political party, are deeply rooted in Brazil, and whose influence is expanding all over the region—with increasing tensions in the whole political spectrum.

We should also note the absence of Uruguay, a country usually referred to as "the Latin American Switzerland." This analogy, it should be clarified, points to a social, political, and economic stability

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<sup>9</sup> MERCOSUR, Spanish acronym of Southern Common Market. UNASUR, Spanish acronym of Union of South American Nations.



exceptional for the region, where news of significant mobilizations or protests are quite rare or totally inexistent in recent history.

However, we should not fall into the trap, many times sustained or even promoted by certain media and some experts, of assuming that these protests are a clear code to explain the characteristics of Latin America. This would imply an acceptance of and indulgence in a scenario that many "Latin American Studies" scholars sustain, of a region traversed by an (almost) irretrievable structural chaos.

Accordingly, social movements, or more precisely, protests and mobilizations, allow us to contemplate contemporary symptoms and to elaborate tentative hypotheses, but in themselves, they cannot offer us a precise diagnosis to imagine an adequate therapeutic response. In order to do that, we should look at and listen to the past, let history teach us. This will allow us to consider the lessons that, sometimes, seem to be forgotten or are not learned yet.

A critical consideration of these historical back-and-forth processes should lead to an interpretation that allows us to reveal their meaning. Is it possible, as Freud asked himself in the last pages of the aforementioned *Civilization and its Discontents*, to elaborate a kind of cultural psychoanalysis to decipher the apparent drive for collective repetition, that eternal return immanent to the region, and thus reveal its functionality and put it back on track? If the answer is "yes", then another Freudian question arises: who would take on this task?

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