Latin American socialism: key points of difference from northern socialism
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Latin American socialism shares some elements with that of the ‘northern’ cultures, but also makes some significant departures. Both have rather diverse views of ‘socialism’, argue various emphases in approach, share a revised Marxist perspective which sees private capital at the root of power, oppression and social exclusion, the state mostly captured by capital, and a class struggle of some sort required for emancipation.

However there are significant differences, and these form the focus of this paper. As with many left debates, the differences have more to do with resistance than power. Most importantly, the Latin left and the left in imperial cultures have been shaped by their own distinct histories. Where the former has drawn on patriotic independence struggles to create post-colonial states, the latter has confronted well-established states backed by powerful oligarchies. Where the Latin experience includes revolution and counter-revolution, the northern left has not managed to wrest control of any of the powerful ‘core’ capitalist-states, and so its struggles have remained welfarist, syndicalist, social, ecological and civil.

While different cultures can always learn things from each other, the way in which this occurs is crucial. It seems useful to consider the implications of distinct world views, forged in distinct histories, especially as these may help international understandings and cooperation. This paper therefore sets out to broadly characterise the distinct left histories, to recognise how these histories have been differently conceptualised, and to consider some practical, contemporary implications.

1. Distinct Emancipatory Histories
The distinct histories of emancipation struggles in Latin America and in the northern countries have been conceptualised differently. We can see this from very early days. Prior to their industrial and capitalist development, Britain, France and Spain were long-established, powerful states with imperial armies and colonial possessions. They had racial ideologies which reconciled the various charters of citizens’ rights with large scale slave-labour regimes. Eric Williams (1944) noted the contribution of trans-Atlantic slavery to the development of British capitalism. Others (Bukharin 1917; Dutt 1902; Rodney 1972) have noted the contributions of the vast colonies to ‘metropolitan’, capitalist development.

The Latin American colonies, by contrast, had no self-governing bodies let alone centuries-old state institutions or international surplus-producing operations. Their domestic elites, to the extent that they were separate from the colonial elite, were not wealthy by commerce or industry but mostly through large landholdings. In this context the chief goal of the early liberators, after prevailing in military struggles against the colonial power, was precisely to establish a domestic body politic, protect it, consolidate key public institutions and engage in some form of land redistribution.

The most celebrated of Latin American liberators, Simón Bolívar, told a colleague in 1816, ‘Let us form a homeland [patria] at any cost, and everything else will be tolerable’ (Bolívar
1816: 188). Bolívar’s idea of a homeland was continental and republican, including citizens of all races, whose rights would be respected without discrimination (Bolívar 1819; see also Collier 1983: 42-43). Yet this broad homeland would have to combine diverse forms of government, so as to build a union that could stand up to the Spanish empire: ‘the power necessary to oppose the European colossus can only be attained by our own colossal union as Meridional America’ (Bolívar in Fernández Retamar 1986: 8). The new Latin American states would then need ‘the care of paternal governments to heal the wounds of despotism and war’ (Bolívar 1815). The act of forming newly independent states helped build social conscience and a progressive national identity, providing potential support for political movements in favour of the disenfranchised classes. Of course, all this had to confront domestic elites, ready to fill the vacuum left by the departing colonists.

Despite the failure of his unification project, Bolívar’s vision and his actions in driving the Spanish from large parts of the continent, left an indelible mark on Latin American thought. There is not a Latin American culture which does not venerate his image as a freedom fighter and creator of the dream of a united Latin America (e.g. Saint Upery 2008). Yet Bolívar is remembered quite differently in the imperial cultures. At the time, Bolívar’s image in the British periodicals was that of a ‘valiant military leader’, at least in the early part of his campaigns (Jones 1984: 384). The great man was, after all, fighting Spain, Britain’s traditional imperial competitor. Yet internal fighting from 1822 onwards led to caricatures of Bolívar as just another military strong man, a caudillo, a dictator pursuing his own vain ambitions. His image ‘gradually became more and more tarnished’ in Britain (Jones 1984: 394, 397).

This image was picked up and magnified by 19th Century Europe’s greatest emancipation writer, Karl Marx. His view of Bolívar is an early indication of the gulf between Latin and northern emancipation visions. In a biography written for an encyclopaedia, Marx bitterly denounced Latin America’s greatest hero as a dictator and would-be emperor. Marx acknowledged that Bolívar’s Congress of Panama had the objective of establishing ‘a new democratic, international code’, but claimed that Bolívar was really a ‘bonapartist dictator’, acting contrary to the interests of the anti-colonial revolution. Bolívar’s personal character was attacked and his role in liberation of the black slaves went unrecognised (Marx 1858).

Due to the article’s many factual errors and that it went quite against the grain of progressive opinion in Latin America, many followers of Marx would later claim that the European radical was only acting on the limited information he had at the time (see Draper 1968: 300). However Marx’s caricature was consistent with, if harsher than, prevailing views in Europe. Furthermore, this Latin American mode of ‘emancipation’ was a long way from the class struggle envisioned by Marx and his colleagues in newly industrial Europe. Nevertheless, the deep historical differences between imperial restoration in France and anti-imperial rupture in the Spanish colonies should have warned against simply labelling Bolívar a ‘bonapartist’. It seems that Marx’s views of Bolívar were largely a product of his Euro-centricism. Subsequent northern tracts on Bolívar tend to focus on themes of race and authoritarianism (e.g. Draper 1968; Helg 2003), rather than on the key legacies of anti-imperialism, universal citizenship and continental unification. The northern prejudices against the great man have been passed on in the form of caricatures of his contemporary successors (e.g. Corrales and Penfold 2010).

In his own brilliant studies of European capitalism, Marx began as a historical materialist, tracing the shifts in European class power. His later works (Marx 1859; Marx 1867) mixed this historicism with more economic themes: attempts to refute early political-economic theories and to identify the ‘laws’ behind centralising power and class relations. Marx did not theorise socialism in any detail; indeed he maintained his historical view that particular contradictions
would shape the emerging form of emancipatory movements (Marx and Engels 1846). However his strong focus on Europe’s rising industrial proletariat as the key revolutionary protagonists set the tone for the international movements he helped create.

Marx was rapidly followed by a group of reactionary neoclassical economists (Jevons 1871, Menger 1971, Walras 1874) who deepened European economic thinking. They developed mathematised models of economic relations, in an attempt to escape the worrying focus of Marx and Ricardo on questions of value, class and distribution. This modelling attempted to eliminate questions of cultural or historical difference, along with domination and social justice, in favour of more mathematical considerations of ‘purely’ economic matters (e.g. Marshall 1920). These ideas deflected criticism and recriminations over the role of the rising joint stock corporations.

Economism was and is a modernist European project, in that it seeks to eliminate historical difference, presenting human society as on an essentially convergent path, with cultural distinctions simple detail along the way. Northern economism was revised and entrenched in the mid twentieth century by the liberal macroeconomic ideas of English economist John Maynard Keynes (1936). Using neoclassical language, Keynes drew attention to capitalist stagnation and presented some new ideas on national economies and public finance. A subsequent ‘neoclassical synthesis’ (Samuelson 1947) adopted elements of Keynes’ ideas, linking up ‘market economics’ with new concepts such as gross domestic product (GDP). The national project envisioned by Keynes was one of sustainable liberal capitalism, to which all other claims could be linked. The more progressive elements of Keynes’ ideas (to do with distributional equity and public planning) continue to appeal to the northern left; yet this same economism also constrains the northern transformative imagination.

Meanwhile, the Latin American left had advanced the principle that transformation of their own cultures had to draw from their particular historical circumstances. The idea of copying European models, or being subsumed into a North American project, was consistently rejected. Cuba’s national hero, José Martí, combined liberal concepts of justice and civil freedoms with universal access to education and culture; because ‘to be cultured is the only way to be free’. Foreseeing the need for a ‘second independence’ in a neo-colonial era (Martí, 2009: 89-93) he called for ‘revolutionary unity’ (Martí, 2009: 174). Problems should be ‘subject to debate, not submitted to a pre-determined economic school’ (Martí, 1975: 334-335). Cuba’s early Marxists incorporated many of Marti’s ideas. Carlos Balán drew on Marti’s humanism and ideas of a broad anti-imperialist alliance (Balán 1976: 43, 205). Julio Antonio Mella adopted Marti’s internationalism, ideas of free thought, the project of Latin American unity and cultural development, affirming that ‘culture is the only emancipation, real and definitive’ (Mella 1975: 101; Cantón Navarro, 2008: 142-144).

Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, a contemporary of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, reinforced the idea of an independent Latin American road to socialism. Like Gramsci, Mariátegui challenged the prevailing Marxist dogmatism and elevated the role of culture (e.g. Fernández-Díaz, 1991). He maintained socialism was a process which varied in distinct contexts, and could incorporate elements of liberal reasoning. Latin America had distinct modes of production, social relations of production and distinct cultures (Santana Castillo, 2008: 143-151). ‘Models’ could thus not be copied from one social context to another (Mariátegui, 1928). In this way, the Peruvian thinker reinforced the ideas of Cuba’s national hero. The synthesis of Marti and Marx’s emancipatory ideas are most famously seen in the practice of Fidel Castro Ruz, leader of the Cuban Revolution. Fidel’s lieutenant, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, also spoke of the need to create ‘new men and women’, in building socialism. He
stressed the values of freedom, collectivism, sacrifice, a fuller sense of education and conscience building (Turner Martí, 2008: 20-27). Socialism had to accommodate the spirit of the new era, suppressing human exploitation and building on the concrete circumstances of each country (Guevara, 2007: 5).

Nevertheless, economistic modernism in Europe was helping shape left views, and the resilience of northern, capitalist states helped drive pessimistic views of the state. While Marx and Engels (1848: 35) had simply asserted that the state had become ‘a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’, European Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s began to entrench the logic of why this was so. Ralph Miliband (1969) wrote that the power of capital had overwhelmed a supposedly pluralist state; Nicos Poulantzas (1973) suggested that the state had become a near autonomous partner to capital; while Claus Offe (1972) held that the ‘capitalist state’ had developed new functions and contradictions. All maintained the modern state had been ‘captured’ by capital, and retained very limited ‘relative autonomy’.

At this very same time, the government of Salvador Allende had come to power in Chile. Socialists had penetrated the Chilean state and pursued radical yet constitutional measures in land reform, state takeovers of mining and finance and extended social programs (Feinberg 1972; Smirnov 1979). Although this reformist state was betrayed by its own military, in league with imperialism, Allende’s government was neither the first nor the last in Latin America to suggest that the state might still represent the excluded and working classes. The crushing of Allende’s attempt to transform the Chilean state was seen by European Trotskyists as a ‘reformist illusion’ whose chief sin was ‘avoiding revolution’ (Raptis 1974: 91); in Latin America the explanations were more diverse.

While the problems of transforming the ‘capitalist state’ in contemporary Latin America cannot be underestimated, the burden of ‘relative autonomy’ ideas have not fallen quite so heavily on the Latin imagination as they have on the European and North American. Indeed, the possibility that the state might still represent the popular classes remains linked to Latin American national identity. After all, to be Chilean, Venezuelan or Cuban does not mean the same thing as to be British, German or Spanish. The former identity links to anti-colonial struggles by broad groups of revolutionary protagonists, the latter to ancient but imperial traditions, with elite institutions. In the case of the United States of North America (as the Mexicans say), we see the unique hybrid of national identity linked to an anti-colonial struggle but also to an idea of ‘freedom’ in which slavery is deeply embedded (Waldstreicher 2009). North American culture (apologies to the Canadians!) habitually sees anti-imperialism as ‘anti-Americanism’; but this is precisely because North American patriotism has become imperial in character. To be a nationalist in the imperial cultures is more often to be a chauvinist, to revel in imperial victories and, at times, defeats. When the father of the English dictionary, Samuel Johnson, said in 1775 that ‘patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel’ (Boswell 1791) he meant British Empire patriotism. Yet to be patriotic in Latin America at the least allows identification with a historical, emancipatory struggle.

It is hardly possible to conclude this small historical reflection without recognising that, after the Russian Revolution, all the great social and socialist transformations of the twentieth century (the Chinese revolution, the Cuban Revolution, Vietnamese Liberation, the African independence movements, Pan-Arab Nationalism) came from the former colonies. They were patriotic struggles which drew on a wide range of revolutionary protagonists: peasants, workers, students, military rebels and the excluded classes. While the most powerful revolutions recast state institutions, rather than simply reforming them, the construction of a
strong patriotic identity, popular mobilisation and a state capable of resisting both domestic reaction and imperialism were all central features. Further, former colonies saw no need for a European-style industrial capitalism to develop their productive forces, before moving ahead with emancipatory projects. The European and other northern emancipatory movements have not had similar experience. Their struggles have often remained ‘economic’, trapped in weakening proletarian movements and fragmented in an array of social and ecological movements, claiming distributive justice, syndicalism and civil rights.

2. Thematic differences
At this stage I would like to present a provisional accounting of the key differences between the northern and Latin left, before moving on to some contemporary implications. Allowing for the diversity of views within each broad culture, and accepting that there are cross influences (e.g. the links between Gramsci and Mariategui) and some common themes (e.g. the resistance to monopoly capital and imperialism), it seems to me useful to identify distinct emancipatory themes. These can be seen in terms of the ‘point of departure’ of historical traditions, the general visions of emancipation, the different views of the chief revolutionary protagonists and some practical themes.

The Latin Left has as its ‘point of departure’ the anti-imperialism of the indigenous resistance, of Hatuey in Cuba and Túpac Katari in Bolivia; the early liberators, Bolivar, Martí, San Martin, O’Higgins and others; and the anti-imperial leaders of the neo-colonial era, such as Sandino, Fidel and Chavez. These are foundational influences. The Left in imperial cultures has far more a history of internal resistance, which draws on Marx and Lenin to focus on class struggle within formal economies. This has been supplemented and extended by distributional and eco-feminist concepts. Nevertheless, the vision of the northern left remains strongly economistic and modernist, maintaining ideas of social convergence and downplaying cultural and historical difference. The Latin left, on the other hand, while sharing a more hopeful view of emancipatory nationalism, draws on a long tradition (Rodríguez, Martí, Mariategui) of heterodoxy and originality in social transformation. Revolutionary protagonists, in the Latin paradigm, are broad and popular, while in the north (with larger formal economies but declining labour organisation) the idea persists of proletarian-led struggle.

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As discussed in the first section, the northern left has a modernist and generally pessimistic view of the state, often seeing it as definitively captured by capital and only able to support the popular will in some limited social, environmental and distributional causes. The idea of wrestling any northern state from the tight grip of the giant corporations and the imperial network of strong states is seen as fantasy. This sort of revolutionary defeatism (whether justified or not) has consequences. The state plays little part in left idealism, being largely seen as the enemy. By contrast, the Latin Left keeps alive the struggle for the state, having a substantial history of reference points: for example, the Cuban Revolution, Allende’s Chile, Sandinista Nicaragua and Bolivarian Venezuela.

Emerging themes in practice might then be seen as follows. For the Latin left, radical nationalism remains a progressive force (while nationalism is usually seen as reactionary and chauvinistic by the northern left). The false promise of populism (popular appeals with hidden agendas) remains alive in Latin America, but is confronted by some real breakthroughs in social democracy, for example in Venezuela (often misleadingly called ‘populist’ by the corporate media). Latin American history has demonstrated that a strong state (as in contemporary Cuba and Venezuela) is required to defend and extend popular participation; failing this, even modest initiatives can be crushed by imperialism (e.g. the Arbenz government in Guatemala). Continental integration (as with the ALBA, Unasur and CELAC) is an extension of this need for a unified, popular political will. The combination of a strong state and citizens’ participation is something poorly understood in the northern cultures, where a strong state is identified with imperialism and the crushing of dissent. Finally, the role of education, culture and conscience building, as stressed by the Cuban hero José Martí and his most outstanding successor, Fidel Castro, remain widespread and potent themes in popular mobilisation.

The left in imperial cultures, for its part, faces strong states deeply integrated within an imperial network which aims to keep the ‘peripheral’ states weak and divided. Not only the structure of this system but also the ‘imperial voice’ of its dominant culture conditions social debate. The northern left is hardly immune from the interventionist impulse, the ‘natural’ process of speaking of what others ‘must’ do or be. With a weak history in popular victories, except in building some welfare and social policy gains, and in defending union rights, this northern left has had little political space and little encouragement by way of popular breakthroughs. Combine this with the northern left’s pessimistic view of the ‘captured’ state and we are left with rather fragmented movements, organising around welfare, syndicalist, social, feminist and ecological concerns. Modernism and economism also inflame idealist sectarianism, as small groups have often felt driven to assert an abstract ‘ideological correctness’ in face of their practical impotence.

3. Some contemporary implications
What are the contemporary implications of these differences? I would like to discuss this under themes that seem to arise from the previous discussion: first, on economism, contingent histories and social transformation; second concerning nationalism and the state; and finally some cultural contrasts between the imperial and the post-colonial ‘voice’.
3.1 Economism, contingent histories and social transformation

The transformatory inexperience of the northern left, along with the constraints of its material circumstances, have left it with some rather rigid views on social transformation. The process of left transformation known as ‘socialism’ is now more often spoken of as a goal; and that goal is often described as where ‘working people own and control the means of production and distribution’ (SPA 2012), or in the Bolshevik ‘New Economic Policy’ terms of control of the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy (see Nove 1995). Despite the narrowness, these goals retain substantial reason, given that private capital draws power from its domination of key sectors of the formal economy. The weak link seems to reside in the more traditional view (from Marx) of transformatory power through a proletarian-led, internal subversion of European-style industrial economies. Such views still dominate the northern left’s strategic thinking.

For those same reasons, much of the left in imperial cultures has had difficulty in understanding the Latin transformations, given that resistance and initiatives have typically not taken the form seen a century or more ago in Europe. The thinking goes along these lines: the Cuban Revolution was not based on a proletarian uprising (Binns and Gonzalez 1980; Sweig 2004); Bolivarian Venezuela grew from ‘populism’ and heroic individualism; the indigenous-influenced processes in Bolivia and Ecuador similarly do not fit any modernist or economistic view of socialist transformation. Therefore, these are not really ‘socialist’ projects. Perhaps trapped by its own economism, the northern left maintains a search for ‘economic alternatives’, looking at cooperativism (e.g. Curl 2009), nationalisations, the social use of privatised pension funds (e.g. Block 2011), and social democracy in some forms of social and economic citizenship (e.g. Kessler-Harris 2003). These all have their own logic, but fall short of transformatory processes.

The Latin left, for reasons discussed above, has had far less problems in accommodating heterodox and novel forms of social transformation. Nor is there a general expectation that transformation will closely follow, or ‘copy’, another Latin model. Indeed, the very idea of a Latin American model, in the productivist or economic sense, barely exists. This is not to say that ideas are not borrowed, but rather that principles, rather than models, seem to be foundational.

There was indeed an attempt in Venezuela to borrow the European idea of a ‘third way’, that is, to develop social policy while ‘civilising’, or avoiding the extremes of, contemporary capitalism: the extreme inequalities and social exclusion which drove poverty and deprivation, as well as ecological crises. However Hugo Chavez coined the phrase ‘Socialism of the Twenty-First Century’ in recognition of the failure of such ‘third ways’. After savage reactions to his own social democratic reforms, Chavez concluded that it was not possible ‘to solve the drama of poverty, of inequality’ within the framework of capitalism (Chavez 2005). In view of the apparent failure of the Soviet model and the intractability of contemporary capitalism, he called for a ‘rescue’ of the idea of socialism, suggesting three principles: economic transformation, participative and protagonistic democracy and socialist ethics (Harnecker 2010: 3). This broad approach has the advantage of being humanistic, flexible and easily understood.

Nevertheless, parallel processes in Bolivia and Ecuador draw on their own indigenous roots for guidance and legitimacy. In Bolivia ‘living well’ (vivir bien) is presented as an indigenous ecological response to the environmental catastrophes of contemporary capitalism; but also as a counter to ideologies of growth and ‘development’, and as a vindication of communal values (MRE 2009: 130-198). In Ecuador, a similar Quechua expression sumak kawsay is guiding
debates in the ‘citizens’ revolution’ of that country over participation, resource development and political legitimacy (Dávalos 2008; Gudynas 2009).

3.2 Nationalism and the state

A stark difference remains in the way nationalism and the state are seen in transformation. A newly independent country like Timor Leste, for example, with strong bonds of social solidarity from the recent sacrifice of its independence struggle, is still able to mobilise patriotic sentiment and associated social conscience in support of the construction of shared institutions, like public health and education systems (see Anderson 2010). On the other hand in that small country’s larger neighbour, my own country Australia; and while some have tried to resurrect emancipatory currents (Tsokhas 2002), the main themes of Australian nationalism remain chauvinistic. It is associated most strongly with defence of the colonial project of dispossession against ongoing indigenous claims (see Moran 2002), and in defence of imperial collaboration, from British campaigns against the old Ottoman Empire to the US alliance in Vietnam to the current occupation of Afghanistan (e.g. Inglis 1987). The Timor Leste–Australia comparison, I suggest, indicates that there can be greater transformatory dynamic in the nationalism of post-colonial countries than in cultures deeply integrated with imperialism.

As to ‘state capture’ by capital, we can see some stark differences between the USA and Venezuela, in recent attempts to advance public health. Over the past two decades, two Washington administrations have failed in their attempts to guarantee universal health care cover to US citizens. The Chavez administration in Venezuela, on the other hand, has made substantial advances in this regard. In both cases there was substantial resistance from private interests engaged in the business of medicine. In Venezuela, President Chavez constructed a large primary health care ‘mission’ outside the health department, precisely to avoid obstruction from an elite which had helped embed vested interests in the business of medicine. Mission Barrio Adentro faced substantial opposition, including politically-organised position, but with political will the Chavez Administration pushed through the new programs and dramatically improved access to health services (see Alvarado et al 2008; Muntaner et al 2006). By contrast, neither the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s nor the Obama administration in 2010 managed to supplement the private insurance model with a ‘public option’ nor to eliminate the significant group (about 15%) without health cover. These failures in Washington are commonly seen as evidence of the strong grip health finance has on the Congress (Altman and Shactman 2011; Starr 2011). This comparison tends to suggest that, while powerful resistance comes from within the state to transformatory policy which affects privilege, the barriers seem more formidable in the imperial cultures despite, or perhaps because of, the ‘strength’ of the state.

3.3 Imperial and post-colonial voice

One final difference can be seen in the contrasting voices used at times to address critical issues. The ‘imperial voice’, developed in cultures accustomed to command and to assert privilege, including racial privilege, is at once universal and imperative. It recognises no real boundaries and has little problem in saying what others ‘must do’. The post-colonial voice, on the other hand, tends to be more self-referential, and more respectful of boundaries.

This can lead to divergent reactions to international events, such as the recent Syrian crisis. The ALBA group (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), for example, made a principled statement on that crisis:

‘[we reject] the systematic intervention and destabilization policy in the sister nation of the Arab Republic of Syria aimed at forcefully imposing a change of regime … [we] condemn the acts of armed violence that irregular groups supported by foreign powers have unleashed against the Syrian
people … [and we support] the reforms and national dialogue bolstered by President Bashar Al Assad, which are intended to find a peaceful solution to the current crisis, with respect for the Syrian peoples’ sovereignty and the territorial integrity.’ (ALBA-TCP 2012).

The focus here was entirely on the threat of foreign intervention which, in many ways, effectively destroys the possibility of national self-determination.

This approach contrasts with that of several northern left groups, including some which support Venezuela and the ALBA, but which clearly have different ideas of what constitutes solidarity and self-determination. For example, the Australian Socialist Alliance group proclaimed, as a NATO-led war was threatening Syria:

‘[Our group] expresses its full solidarity with the Syrian people’s democratic uprising against the tyrant Bashar al-Assad. We also condemn the interference by Western imperialist powers and the threats of military intervention … We condemn the Syrian government’s military repression of protests and Assad’s refusal to yield to the wishes of the Syrian people to step down’ (Socialist Alliance 2012).

Their main theme here was condemnation of the Syrian government and a call for ‘regime change’; though without foreign intervention and with no alternative regime.

There are two big differences in approach here. First, the ALBA group’s priority is to unambiguously oppose foreign intervention and support domestic process. The Australian left group’s statement, on the other hand, seems to draw on its enthusiasm for a new but necessarily unknown revolt, then hedge this with a secondary message about opposing foreign intervention. The second difference is related, and is more than just ‘diplomatic language’. The ALBA statement of support for the Assad government is not a statement of approval of or agreement with that regime. It simply shows support and respect for a government presented by the nation and people of Syria. The ALBA group itself comprises a variety of regimes. The ‘northern left’, on the other hand, often likes to disqualify, or not defend, regimes which are ‘not socialist’; that is, regimes which do not match some modernist, idealised requirements.

It is highly likely that the ALBA leaders have their own particular views of, and reservations about, some of their non-aligned group ‘sister nations’. However they choose to not express these in a statement at a time of crisis, and when the imperial powers are involved. The Socialist Alliance group, on the other hand, collapses a vehement judgement on the Syrian regime (at a time of crisis and in the midst of a propaganda war) into its statement on the crisis. In practice, the statement provides moral support for the imperial ‘regime change’ agenda.

Yet the imperial powers are not concerned about caveats or tactical advice from small left groups; they just want backing for ‘regime change’. This difference in approach seems driven by a modernism which does not respect boundaries, and an interventionist imperial voice.

4. Some lessons

I am sure I will have offended some people with the various sweeping statements about ‘Latin’ and ‘northern’ views, based on very little in terms of representative evidence. Such evidence is difficult to mobilise, yet I believe the issues merit discussion. In any case, I look forward to having some of my erroneous conclusions corrected! This is a provisional paper.

Those of us in the northern or imperial cultures do not see social and socialist transformation in quite the same way as the left in Latin America. I have suggested that this has a lot to do with our different histories, cultures and circumstances, and the way in which our distinct traditions have conceptualised their respective experiences. I began with the principle that cultures can
always learn things from each other; however I think I have focussed more on the advantages in Latin America, and perhaps even romanticised them.

Nevertheless, for two centuries the Latin left has taken anti-imperialism as its ‘point of departure’, maintained a wide view of the revolutionary protagonists, valued originality in transformation and kept alive a role for a reformed state in that transformation. By contrast, the northern left, limited in its transformative imagination by a modernist economism, privileges the transformative role of an industrial proletariat and remains deeply pessimistic about the role of the state.

The left in imperial cultures has not yet been able to take advantage of the multiple contemporary crises and assert a major transformative initiative. We remain critical of experiments which do not measure up to our own idealised yet untested standards. Latin socialists, on the other hand, have used broad nationalism and the project of regional integration as a means of extending their horizons. It seems to me the Latin left has better conceptualised ‘possible socialism’ by reference to its own particular history, and that this has helped the recent breakthroughs in social democracy. Transformatory and socialist ideas seem to have best drawn from quite particular historical realities.

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