

Exploraciones/Explorations

Seven Theses on Latin American Social Movements and Political Change: A Tribute to André Gunder Frank (1929-2005)

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The perceived failure of revolutionary and reformist left wing parties and regimes in all parts of the world to adequately express people's protest and to offer viable and satisfying alternatives has been responsible for much of the popular movement toward social movements (Fuentes and Frank 1989, 186).

The resurgence of social movements is a phenomenon that rarely takes place in isolation. Increased social mobilisation often occurs consecutively in several countries and with the involvement of diverse movements. But the sudden increase of social movement activity is often followed by an evenly sudden downfall. André Gunder Frank pointed at this cyclical character of social movements in an article that he wrote with his wife Marta Fuentes in the late 1980s. Their *Ten theses on social movements* (published in *World Development* in 1989) was in fact a homage to the 'new' social movements of the late Cold War years, though still highly topical. As a student of Frank in that period, I appreciated his particular interest in the cyclical dynamics of social movements (Frank 1992). This focus was part of a broader research looking at the existence of long cycles in the world system. Social movements and other actors responded in Frank's view both to internal and external circumstances that determined their life cycles. These external circumstances, in turn, also were cyclical, and altogether they determined in some way particular phases of crisis and recovery in the world system, one of the core themes of Frank's academic work.

Along the lines of Kondratieff's long economic cycle, Frank assumed these 'long cycles' in social history had to be examined in all of their aspects in order to get a better understanding of the 'pulse' of the world system. By looking at cycles of ideological hegemony, politics and war, or economic and technological change, certain patterns could become apparent. One of these patterns seems to be that social movements become more offensive and socially responsible in periods of economic downturn, when people's livelihood and identity is negatively affected. Another pattern analysed by Frank and Fuentes is the cyclical character of their action: 'As movements mobilize people rather than institutionalizing action, even when they are unsuccessful or still relevant to existing circumstances, social movements tend to lose their force as their capacity to mobilize wanes' (Fuentes and Frank 1989, 183). This 'susceptibility to aging and death' is often seen with movements that rely on charismatic leaders to mobilize their members, which was the case with many (Southern) revolutionary movements in the past.

Over fifteen years later, Latin American social movements again seem to flourish in a period of economic downturn, which apparently coincides with a phase described above by Fuentes and Frank. The big difference is that new 'progressive' regimes have gained state power in many Latin American countries. This triggers several questions about the current position of social movements in the region: Why did social movements gain so much influence over the past decade in Latin America? Is this political influence not undermining their autonomy? And if for that reason their cyclical downfall might become inevitable, how are they dealing with the ambiguity of influencing the state and simultaneously maintaining their autonomy? The ideas below were originally drafted for a seminar at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Shortly before the seminar in late April 2005 we received the sad news of Andre Gunder Frank's passing away. As a small tribute to a key development theorist (and above all a critical and inspiring thinker) I reorganised this essay by developing the following seven theses on current Latin American social movements and political change.

1. The resurgence of social movements is spectacular and wide-spread, though not at all surprising

Throughout Latin America we are currently witnessing a growing strength and proliferation of social movements. From the early 1990s onwards, social movements of very different backgrounds have been at the forefront of social protest, at the local as well as at the national and supranational level. Whether the themes are free-trade agreements, privatisation of public services or corrupt politicians, there have been impressive mobilisations and campaigns that cannot be considered as isolated activities. The diversity of movements includes those from urban and rural areas, 'traditional' trade unions as well as 'modern' indigenous movements, and therefore old as well as new social movements. This growing strength and diversity is visible throughout Latin America, from North to South: from the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico and the Maya movements in Guatemala, to the indigenous and peasant movements in the Andean countries Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, the landless movement in Brazil and the numerous movements against free trade agreements and neo-liberalism in general in Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and practically everywhere else in the region.

Part of this movement can be traced back to New Year's day of 1994 when the Zapatista liberation army EZLN initiated their rebellion against the Mexican authorities, and in particular against the launch of the North American free trade agreement (NAFTA) negotiated by the government of president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. To the surprise of many, the Zapatista rebellion managed to maintain and expand itself for over a decade, not least due to its broad-based support from Mexican civil society and the innovative leadership role played by *subcomandante* Marcos. Much of the success of the Zapatista rebellion was due to a remarkable sense of self-criticism – little seen before in many of the preceding liberation movements of the continent – combined with the creative use of the (electronic) media and other non-violent methods. The Zapatista uprising was in turn preceded by a general re-awakening process of indigenous movements that had started in the early 1990s throughout Latin America. This process experienced its first highlight with the counter-celebration of the fifth centennial in 1992 and the international

recognition of the (Guatemalan) *indigena* movement with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchú.

Looking more closely at the various movements, the origin of the current resurgence of social movements also goes back to the late 1980s, when most military regimes had been replaced by democratically elected ones in South America, and civil wars in Central America had entered the phase of initial peace negotiations. The overarching new concern of those that had suffered from political repression was shifting towards the need for socio-economic survival. This soon turned into resistance against social exclusion due to the impact of austerity measures following the implementation of structural adjustment programmes. The first radical and organised act of resistance to impoverishment and exclusion was registered in Venezuela in 1989, when popular sectors violently took the streets and looted shops on a scale never seen before in the region. This *caracazo* generated the social basis of the army colonel and future president Chavez, and inspired social movements elsewhere in the region to actively resist neo-liberal adjustment measures.

2. Social movement growth was triggered by social and political exclusion

Two decades of neo-liberal adjustment and restructuring have generated widespread disillusion with market-led development strategies. The drastic processes of privatisation, the gradual breakdown of institutions, and the regressive distribution of economic growth and public services had created a time bomb that only needed a spark to go off. The water privatisation in Cochabamba (Bolivia, 2000), the peso crisis in Argentina (2001/2002), and the Arequipa uprising against the privatisation policies of electricity companies by the Toledo administration (Peru, 2002) all are examples where massive social mobilisation was the ultimate response to neo-liberal reform measures. At least successful in the short term, these protests were fuelled by the conviction that economic growth and increased prosperity had not been beneficial to the poorer layers of society. To the contrary, as was observed by many authors, during the 1990s the inequality within Latin American societies had increased to levels that were more alarming than in any other region of the world.

In addition to rising inequality, another development has spurred unrest, discontent and protest of citizens, which in turn triggered and stimulated organised responses and the growth of a new generation of social movements: disillusion with the new post-authoritarian democratic regimes. Two decades of so-called 're-democratization' throughout Latin America has generated a widespread disappointment about the performance of many (elitist) political leaders that were supposed to act differently from their authoritarian predecessors. Elected on a platform promising alternative policies to market-oriented reform, these leaders (whether in Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Ecuador or Bolivia), once in office did the opposite and acted solely in accordance with the requirements of the Washington Consensus. In Peru, President Toledo managed to lose all his popular support within six months by doing exactly the opposite of what he had promised during his election campaign. By privatising public services in the Southern region of Arequipa against the will of a majority he simply continued Fujimori's socio-economic policies, though without having a clear vision how to deal with the impoverished sectors of society (Toche 2003).

These two processes mutually reinforced each other: the first being the devastating effect of neo-liberal adjustment on poverty and inequality levels; the second

being that the Latin American political leaders of the last decade implemented the ‘Washington agenda’ without taking into account that those who elected them had suffered most from its consequences. This in turn has reconfirmed the simmering sense of distrust of the poor and marginalised in the virtues of a profoundly elitist political system. These socio-economic and political exclusion processes merged into a powerful blend that multiplied support for the range of social movements that eventually proved capable of toppling regimes as a result of mass mobilisations.

3. The magnitude of national social mobilisations would have been unthinkable without the growth of supranational relationships between movements

Networking and cooperation between the social movements of Latin America is nothing new, as it has always existed. But it is the intensity of mutual contacts and the development of joint campaigns that have steadily increased from the early 1990s onwards. Initially, these supranational exchanges were mostly convened amongst like-minded sectors, such as peasant unions, indigenous movements, women’s organizations, human rights groups or non-governmental organizations. Gradually, multi-sectoral networks emerged around specific themes such as foreign debt, regional integration, free trade (against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas – FTAA) and the role of multinational corporations in relation to privatization policies.

Regional ‘jamborees’ of activists from a wide variety of social movements started to appear throughout the continent. Important events included the regional meeting of *indigena* movements in Guatemala (1992) and the international Encounter against Neo-liberalism (‘and in favour of Humanity’) convened by the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Mexico, 1996) followed by a second one in Belem (Brazil, 1999), which eventually provided a basis for organising the first World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre (Brazil, 2001). Although predominantly run and coordinated by South American NGOs, the annual meetings of the WSF in later years also attracted activists from social movements from all corners of the continent and became a key reference point for the struggle against corporate-led globalization.

The irony is of course that increased mobility and improved information and communication technology, both products of corporate-led globalization, were key factors in facilitating these regional and continental encounters of social movement activists. Equally important is that these meetings served as sources of inspiration and points of coordination for local campaigns. A good example of this development is the campaign against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), which has become an overarching regional coalition of popular protest against exploitation of local resources, environmental degradation, and in favour of autonomy for indigenous people. Its origins go back to the anti-NAFTA movement and the later campaign against the World Trade Organisation, but really gained momentum after the Cancún summit in September 2003 ended in a victory for anti-free trade advocates.

Since that moment, the so-called *Hemispheric Social Alliance* under the banner ‘Yes to Life, no to FTAA: Another America is Possible’ has transformed into one of the broadest coalitions of social movements ever established in the region. The alliance has stimulated the formation of local campaigns and encounters of groups

from all over Latin America, reaching out to the grassroots. Internet communication has increasingly performed a central role in this networking process.

4. Social movements have been crucial in the rise (and fall) of progressive governments throughout Latin America in recent years

The wave of victories by centre-left candidates in presidential elections throughout the region since 2001 is in itself a spectacular development that very few observers would have predicted five years ago. However, a closer examination of the constituencies giving rise to the new 'progressive' governments indicates that more than a decade of social mobilisation against neo-liberal restructuring is bearing fruit (Rodríguez et al. 2005). The earlier street protests in Carácas against the neo-liberal austerity measures formed the basis for the Bolivarian movement of Hugo Chávez and his Fifth Republic. Thanks to mass mobilisations Chávez in 2001 managed to counter efforts by the opposition to bring him down. Since then, the Bolivarian movement, rather than a social movement, has been a key instrument of the Chávez administration to rally electoral support for its efforts to stay in power.

The case of Brazil is somewhat different. A range of local election victories by candidates of the Workers' Party (PT) in key Brazilian municipalities and states over the past decade eventually paved the way for the long awaited presidential victory of Lula da Silva in November 2002. The basis of this victory was formed by prolonged social struggle and decades of mobilisation and community organizing at the local level. Next to the powerful trade unions and Christian base communities, the PT owes much of its success to the landless movement MST. It played a key role in mobilising the electorate for a historical victory of the PT, although soon turning into an oppositional role to continue its demands for a structural agrarian reform. Particularly over the past two years the MST has been rather critical of Lula's socio-economic policies and of the PT, which is seriously troubled by corruption scandals. For these and other reasons some observers are therefore more sceptical about the 'progressive' nature of these centre-left regimes.

But it cannot be denied that conservative candidates at least have been *less* successful in recent elections. In several other South American countries a new generation of progressive presidents came peacefully to power, notably Kirchner in Argentina (after the deep crisis of 2001) and Tabaré Vazquez as leader of the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay. Some would add Ricardo Lagos (Chile) to this list, as he has been an icon of the opposition against Pinochet. Others would point at promising future prospects for progressive candidates in Colombia and El Salvador. Two exceptional cases are Ecuador and Bolivia. In both countries progressive presidents came to power after mass mobilisations that forced the previous presidents to resign and to flee the country. However, events would soon repeat themselves for the newly installed Ecuadorian President Lucio Gutiérrez and Bolivian interim-president Carlos Mesa. First came Gutiérrez' resignation (April 2005), followed by Mesa (June 2005), who resigned to prevent further bloodshed after heavy protests by a broad coalition of social movements. Mesa had only been in power since October 2003 after he replaced President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada who was toppled by similar social protests against the exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies.

President Toledo of Peru has so far managed to prevent the embarrassment of a

public removal via social mobilisations. Four years ago he would probably have been placed in the same list of 'progressive presidents', after he managed to prevent a new term for Fujimori and his mafia team led by Montesinos. The Peruvian situation suggests that popular mobilisation is not equally strong in each Latin American country and underlines the effective disempowerment of Peruvian society that occurred during the authoritarian period under Fujimori. Moreover, the situation of Peru also shows the fundamental impact of a dirty war in a country in which the left historically has had a dominant position. This brings me to the final three theses.

5. Progressive governments are seldom beneficial for social movements

Social movements managing to mobilise large numbers of people in order to forge political change are often faced with a substantial backlash after these changes have been implemented. Examples include the Chilean slum dwellers' movement that ousted Pinochet soon after his 1988 plebiscite, but who suffered from state-induced demobilisation after the installation of the new democratic government (Pearce 1996). Another example is the Guatemalan coalition of Maya organisations that played a key role in the implementation of the 1996 Peace Accords, but who became deeply divided and disempowered afterwards (Bastos and Camus 2003). In both cases development NGOs also played a problematic role, but that point has been developed elsewhere (Biekart 1999).

The social movements that recently gave rise to the new progressive governments in Latin America are running the risk of suffering a similar backlash as these new governments will try to co-opt the leaders of these movements and to neutralise their autonomous social power. After all, strong social movements will likely undermine the manoeuvring space of the new governments if they continue to mobilise their constituency. Argentina is an example where the government managed to convince key sectors of the *piquetero* movement to work closely together with the new Kirchner administration, in return for power and resources. Similar moves were made by the Ecuadorian government, concerned as it was about the substantial mobilising potential of CONAIE, one of the strongest indigenous social movements in Latin America. CONAIE had contributed to the downfall of the two previous presidents (Bucarám in 1997 and Mahuad in 2000), but decided to take part in the Gutiérrez government that it helped to bring to power (Zibechi 2005).

This decision by the leaders of the movements to actively assume responsibility to govern soon worked against them. The lower ranks of CONAIE rebelled against this decision and perceived that CONAIE was used by the new president to weaken their movement. Although the flirt with the government only lasted about six months, part of the leadership of CONAIE lost the confidence of its mass-based constituency, generating fierce internal discussions and reducing its social power. Similar internal divisions occurred within the *piquetero* movement in Argentina and in the coalition of social movements that toppled President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia.

The Brazilian landless movement MST has shown that co-option by progressive movements can be prevented, although in Brazil the trade union federations assembled in the CUT already performed a close position to the government which gave sufficient room for the MST to go for a more oppositional role. Without denying Frank's assumptions about inevitable life cycles of social movements, it also

seems to be a matter of long-term experience, strategic vision, and an intelligent use of political spaces by these movements. Rather than preparing for its downfall, the MST has demonstrated the capacity to critically follow Lula's policies and push for changes without toppling his government. The CONAIE also seems to have recovered from its short-lived flirt with the holders of power, basically due to reinforcing grassroots participation in its internal decision-making process.

6. The new generation of social movements is not aiming to take over state power

There has been a rich Latin American debate about the 'new social movements' and their relationships with the state (Slater 1985). If one lesson has been learned from the experiences of these 'new' social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, it is probably that the 'newest' generation of Latin American social movements (emerging after the Zapatista revolt) is not really interested in conquering the state. This is in a way surprising, as the current movements have shown more talent and dedication for social mobilisation and toppling presidents (largely with non-violent means) and thus have been closer to actually occupying the national palaces than any of their predecessors. In 2000 the masses stormed the executive offices in Ecuador to oust President Jamil Mahuad, but then passed the *batuta* on to an army colonel (Lucio Gutiérrez) who subsequently was removed four years later by the same masses.

Much of the discourse on non-violent means and avoiding the trenches of state power has been influenced by the Mexican Zapatistas, who were keen not to fall into the same trap that hindered the armed revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout the continent, these movements had generally lost their mass-based support after becoming part of local or national government coalitions. They had been unable to perform the vanguard role for the impoverished, generally without displaying a proper dose of self-criticism. The dramatic downfall of the Sandinista revolutionaries in Nicaragua (before and after the elections) and their desperate attempts to make a pact with their most fanatic opponents had been a clear warning (Biekart 2001). It is therefore interesting to monitor the implications of the latest declaration of the Zapatistas about their new political campaign towards the upcoming Mexican elections (EZLN 2005). Even if the announced consultation among their followers would lead to a decision to become an electoral platform, it is obvious that the Zapatistas want to protect their achieved autonomy at all cost.

In Ecuador and Bolivia social movements engaged in serious attempts to establish political parties in order to extend their struggles towards the political arena. Various Ecuadorian indigenous movements established *Pachakutik* in 1996 as an electoral platform to rally for a plurinational state. But rather than a political party, *Pachakutik* has more or less served as a political movement that aims to guarantee indigenous rights. Despite the participation of CONAIE leader Antonio Vargas as a minister of Welfare in the Gutiérrez government, the indigenous movement itself prefers to stay autonomous from state power.

In Bolivia the leaders of the Aymara indigenous movement (such as Felipe Quispe, a central figure in the recent uprisings) are also rallying for autonomy, possibly with a mandate for self-government. The coca growers association led by

Evo Morales has chosen a more traditional path by establishing the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), which temporarily supported President Carlos Mesa after the 2003 insurrection. After winning considerable support in the 2004 municipal elections and by playing a key role in the downfall of Mesa in June 2005, the MAS and Morales are currently well placed to achieve an important victory in the next Bolivian elections. But if this peaceful take-over of state power by a social movement is to happen, it will likely represent the exception to the rule that social movements are staying away from assuming government responsibility. After all, maintaining their autonomy from the state seems to be a solid guarantee for these movements to prevent co-option and their subsequent (cyclical) downfall.

7. The current strength of social movements also reflects the general weakness of political parties in Latin America

The massive social mobilisations in the region of the past five years have shown an astonishing potential for political change. Coalitions of social movements either managed to remove presidents (in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia) and (or) to give rise to newly elected presidents (in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay) that are expected to listen better to the demands of the marginalized and the excluded. But there are many reasons to temper the euphoria: the problems faced by the newly elected governments are immense and their space to develop alternative policies to the Washington agenda is extremely limited. The danger of disillusion and demobilisation is almost inevitable, as can be witnessed already in the case of the Workers' Party and the problems faced by the Lula government in Brazil (Arruda 2005).

A major concern for the coming years is the way in which the demands of the excluded will be translated into policy changes. This articulation of social demands is hampered by the profound weakness of Latin America's political parties that have been undermined by a combination of past and present authoritarianism, populism, corruption, clientelism and, generally, a lack of responsiveness to the constituencies that they claim to represent. Latin American countries, according to Transparency International, occupy the top ranks of the most corrupt nations in the world. As a consequence, the electorate has extremely little confidence in politicians, parties and in the political system in general, which is visible in a low voter turnout, a high turnover of presidents, and alarming crime rates. The recent corrupt practices within the leading ranks of the Brazilian PT illustrate how difficult it is to change this pattern.

The breakdown of state institutions over the past decades was paralleled by a structural weakening of civil society, which possibly gives more prominence to the current wave of massive social mobilisations than the movements themselves can handle. It will therefore be a major challenge for the social movements in the region to maintain their autonomy from the current weak and exclusive political systems, while simultaneously pushing for a new political practice that breaks with the vicious circle described above. The Brazilian landless movement and the Mexican Zapatistas illustrate that careful strategizing, whilst maintaining a broad-based mandate from their followers and a certain amount of self-criticism about past errors can be a first step towards preventing their downfall. But that is not enough: pressure from their constituencies is strong to push for political change and to engage with state power, despite all the risks involved. It is precisely this complex

dilemma that poses the main challenge for the current generation of social movement leaders in Latin America.

Conclusion

By trying to find a balance between maintaining social autonomy and accepting political responsibility, social movements are inevitably vulnerable to cyclical dynamics, even though these are often complex. Moreover, the emergence and the (eventual) downfall of these movements can be attributed to many, often contradictory, developments and are therefore very hard to predict. So far, many historical patterns of social movement cycles have been identified, but these are diverse and do not seem to be driven by universal external circumstances. Eventually, André Gunder Frank also admitted that the cycles of social protest were probably not synchronic with underlying 'long' Kondratieff cycles (Frank 1992). Perhaps it is precisely this unpredictable character of social protest cycles that adds to the current influence of social movements in the region. Fuentes and Frank (1988, 184) pointed to the fact that 'history has long term cumulative trends as well as cycles' and 'some major social movements may have contributed to these trends'. Therefore, rather than speculating about the downfall of Latin America's social movements at a certain stage, it would seem more relevant to critically monitor their influence on these longer term historical trends.

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