History and Perspectives of the Left

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The formal title of this three day public conference at the University of São Paulo, August 13–15, 2003, was "History and Perspectives of the Left," but the infratext for this gathering of scholars, analysts and activists from four continents—Europe, Africa, North and South America—was what are the lessons from the experience of the Left in government elsewhere that the new leftist government in Brazil and its leading party—the Workers Party (PT)—should keep in mind? This was underscored in the formal introductions and welcomes of the sponsors: the PT's Fundação Perseo Abramo, the French Socialist party's Fundacion Jean Juares, the University of São Paulo and the office of the PT mayor of São Paulo, Marta Suplicy. As her secretary for international relations, Keld Jakobsen, stressed: this is the first time that the Brazilian left has the opportunity to govern their country and it is important that they do it well. For that reason, it is also important that they learn from other experiences of the left in government.

In a passionate opening keynote address, the Socialist mayor of Lyon, Gérard Colomb, analyzed the experience of government of the French Socialist Party over the past two decades. He stressed the initial successes of the Mitterand government of the 1980s in the area of social reforms such as the reduction in the work week, but also its ultimate failure as a result of a cyclic economic downturn, a xenophobic French reaction to immigration and the transformation of a left with a mission into a party of government.

Colomb ended, however, with a diagnosis of neoliberalism as a system in crisis, and with an appeal to the Left to organize itself internationally in an age of globalization of capital to create new regulatory institutions and alternatives to neoliberalism.

Marcel van der Linden, of the Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) then analyzed "the metamorphoses of social democracy" in Europe since the 1880s, the first being a shift in goals from abolishing capitalism to state intervention in a capitalist economy to create a welfare state with an egalitarian outlook. This social Keynesianism, he argued, entered into crisis in postwar Europe with the decline of economic growth (and a redistributable surplus), economic globalization (with its constraints on the ability of national governments to control their economies), the decline of the industrial working class and major cultural shifts, ranging from the rise of consumerism to the emergence of an autonomous youth culture. The result, van der Linden concluded, has been a crisis of social democracy that is waiting for its next metamorphosis to transcend.

Leon Fink (University of Illinois, Chicago) then interpreted the history of labor in the United States between "the World's two gilded ages" of unregulat-

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ed capitalism competition, one in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the other today. Extracting contemporary optimism out of a pessimistic historical narrative, Fink noted that it took the US labor movement decades to adjust, but that it eventually did organize effectively beginning in the 1930s and played a major role in the New Deal. He pointed to the new leadership of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) as a sign that US labor was beginning to adjust to the new gilded age. What is different about the current gilded age, Fink argued, was its global character, with the implication that labor needed an international organization to deal with it.

In his closing commentary, Marco Aurelio Garcia, a historian at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) in Brazil, but currently President Luíz Inácio Lula da Silva's chief foreign policy adviser, underscored the importance of the social democratic experience in Europe for Brazil, but stressed as well the differences, in particular the consolidation of a working class in Brazil in recent decades, the marginality of the lower classes and the heterogeneity of the social bloc in Brazil. In addition, Garcia argued that the PT needed to design a socialist project for Brazil that reflects the changes in global capitalism and the emergence of social movements that challenge the place of the working class as the central subject of the Left. But, he also wondered whether a leftist government on the periphery of the capitalist world was viable, particularly because like other leftist governments, the PT came to power in an economic crisis which has constrained its strategy and policies.

The second session of the conference focused on experiences in other Latin American countries. The Panamanian analyst, Nils Castro, opened with an overview of leftist ideas in the region, putting forth the view that these can be divided into those directed at solving "the national question" and those aimed at "the social question." The problem, he stressed, was that Latin American leftists have always imported foreign ideas and focused on the question of what method to use to implement them, rather than on the content of what they want to do as a Latin American Left. Now that there were no longer powerful leftist "internationals" to impose foreign ideas, Castro argued, it was time for Latin Americans to ask *what* they wanted to do and *for whom*.

Peter Winn (Tufts University) then analyzed the first of three case studies—the experience of the Left in government during the Salvador Allende era (1970–73) and its democratic road to a democratic socialism. He interpreted it as shaped by the interactions between a sophisticated, complex, legalistic and phased revolution from above orchestrated by the Allende government and its Popular Unity coalition and a deepening and accelerating revolution from below protagonized by workers, peasants and shantytown dwellers, which was aided by political forces but enjoyed a substantial relative autonomy. The result was at first a dramatic revolutionary advance, but then economic dislocations, social tensions and a political polarization that contributed to the eventual failure of the Chilean road to socialism. Winn concluded that it was important for a Leftist government to be aware of the objective constraints on its project and to not

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raise expectations that it could not fulfill without sacrificing or distorting that project, while retaining a dialogue with social movements that incorporated their expectations and demands into the government strategy. He advised Lula to steer a course between that of Allende and the current Socialist president, Ricardo Lagos—the former representing the danger of attempting to do more than objective conditions permit, the latter an example of the risk of settling for less than is possible, disillusioning your social base and ending by merely administrating with a greater social sensibility the neoliberal system inherited from past non-leftist governments—neoliberalism with a human face.

Jeffrey Gould (University of Indiana) offered next an analysis of the experience of the Left in Nicaragua and El Salvador, focusing in particular on its failure to address the issue of indigenous culture and identity. As a result, when indigenous interests coincided with those of Leftist revolutionaries, as in 1932 in El Salvador and 1979 in Nicaragua, indigenous activists supported the Left, but that the Left's insensitivity to indigenous concerns and Leninist suspicion of social movements eventually led to a loss of support in both countries. Gould pointed to "the myth of racial mixing" in Central America, which he identified with a racist Liberalism that argued that Indians were disappearing with Hispanic "civilization" and that the resulting Mestizo nations did not need special Indian policies. The Left was the unwitting heir to this racist conception of the nation, which it failed to transcend. This failure, he argued, was crucial to the ultimate failure of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) in Nicaragua and the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) in El Salvador.

Lastly, historian Mario Rappaport (University of Buenos Aires) analyzed the failure of the Left in Argentina and the origins of the current deep crisis in that country, Brazil's Mercosur partner. The former he identified with the failure of Argentina's Communist Party to understand Perón and Peronism, which it characterized as "fascism," and its consequent loss of support within the overwhelmingly Peronist working class. The crisis, Rappaport argued, was the result of thirty years of neoliberalism, which began under the military dictatorship of 1976–1983, but continued with the restoration of democracy and reached its apex in the 1990s, during which the foreign debt tripled and $120 billion in Argentine savings left the country as capital flight. The result was the worst economic crisis in Argentine history, leading to the social explosion of 2001–2002 and the repudiation of neoliberalism.

Rappaport's critique of the Argentine Communist party linked the morning with the afternoon session on the trajectory of the Brazilian Left. The tone was set by former Communist leader Jacob Gorender, who described the Stalinization of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and its attacks on President Getulio Vargas as a "fascist," which contributed to his 1954 suicide and the failure of his national populist project. Gorender's critique was extended further by historian Fernando Teixeira da Silva, whose presentation on the 1955–1964 period characterized the PCB as a Staliinist, topdown, and ideologically rigid vanguard party which viewed labor unions as instruments, but one with a strong

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working-class base and class subculture. The result was a party that was "for" not "of" the working class, but with a working class social base that protagonized strikes and created new forms of socialibility.

Historian Daniel Aarão Reis Filho, on the other hand, stressed the need to talk about many lefts in the history of Brazil—social-democratic, anarchist, and Catholic—and not just about the Communist party. Looking at the 1960s, he analyzed the emergence of a "revolutionary" populism under Leonel Brizola, whose failure led to the antipopulist stance of the Left after the 1964 military coup that put an end to those illusions. What united the diverse postwar decades, he argued, was a nationalist and statist project that began with Vargas and ended with the founding of the Workers Party (PT) twenty-five years ago.

This new PT "cycle" in the history of the Brazilian Left was the subject of historian Alexandre Fortes, who stressed the key role of political culture in shaping the PT in a different mold. With its roots in the social movements and democratization campaign of the 1970s and 1980s, the PT had a more complex relationship with the CUT labor confederation than the PCB. As a fully legal party (vs. the semilegal PCB), moreover, the PT has had a different relationship as well with Brazil's political system, emerging as a mass (not vanguard) party that grew impressively in electoral support and local government victories during the past two decades, leading up to Lula's recent presidential victory that has created the first opportunity ever for the Left to govern Brazil. Fortes also observed, however, that the working class configuration that permitted the formation of a Workers Party in 1978—with its strong base among the metal and automobile workers of São Paulo—no longer exists today and that the PT has a more diverse constituency as a consequence, including both public sector workers and landless rural workers.

The theme of the Lula government and its complex relationships with both public sector workers and social movements was elaborated on during the final session of the conference by Raul Pont, a PT deputy and former mayor of Porto Alegre, who stressed the severe financial constraints under which the government has operated during its first seven months in office and the need for comprehension of these constraints by its supporters. Pont's major theme, however, was the importance of the PT's prior experience of local government, where it had pioneered innovative mechanisms of popular participation and a combination of direct and representative democracy. He argued that it was important for the national government to create comparable mechanisms, as well as a tax reform that would give local governments more resources to deal with the larger responsibilities they have as a result of a decentralization that the PT strongly supports.

The idea of local government serving as a laboratory for leftist innovation that prepares the Left to govern the nation was taken up as well by Ariel Bergamino, one of the closest political advisers to Tabaré Vázquez, the head of Uruguay's Frente Amplio and its likely presidential candidate in 2004—elections which the Left is currently favored to win. Bergamino described the long trajectory of the Frente Amplio over three decades, during which it survived a

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brutal military dictatorship and gradually built its support and governmental experience to emerge as a serious contender for national power. It had done this, he argued, by maintaining a realistic sense of what was possible, and a capacity to articulate what Uruguayan society felt, but informed by a "will to change" that was essential for a government of the Left.

Bergamino's account of the progress of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay contrasted with Antonio Araníbar's analysis of the failures of the Left in Bolivia, beginning with the Communists of the PIR (Partido de la Izquierda Revolucionaria) and Trotskyists of the POR (Partido Obrero Revolucionario), which he critiqued in terms similar to earlier analyses of the Argentine and Brazilian PCs. But Araníbar also reflected on his own experience in the postdictatorship MIR (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria) of the 1980s and MBL (Movimiento Boliviano de Liberación) of the 1990s, concluding that "the Left had to be audacious but precise" in its program and its policies.

In one of the most illuminating presentations of the conference, South African sociologist and labor activist Karl von Holdt presented a lucid account and analysis of the relationship between the Left and labor and what he characterized as the "triple transition" in South Africa over the past two decades. Like Brazil, South Africa has gone through a transition from authoritarian rule to democracy and from a closed to an open economy, but, in addition, South Africa has also had to cope with a "national" transition from colonialism to independence and from apartheid to racial equality. Von Holdt analyzed the tensions between these transitions and what he termed the "process of class formation of a new Black bourgeoisie," and focused on the unresolved problem of how to change the unequal "economic geography" of South Africa, which has grown worse during the years of ANC (African National Congress) rule, which have been characterized by neoliberal policies and a concern with preparing the economy for opening in a globalized world. Within this context, South Africa's labor movement has been a voice for social reform and equality, as has the Communist Party, but both have weakened in a "triple alliance" with the ANC that allows them to express dissent but not to openly oppose governmental policies. A recovery of the Left in South Africa, he concluded, might depend upon a new Left emerging from the unions, the CP and the left wing of the ANC, but this would be a difficult process because of the enormous legitimacy and popularity that the ANC still commands as the leader of the national transition from colonialism and apartheid to independence and racial equality.

South Africa differed from Brazil in its triple transition and in the diffferences between the ANC and the PT, but there were enough similarities between their situations as nations and governments of the Left-Center for them to learn from each other and collaborate on an international level.

Overall, the conference was a rich and varied account of the historical experience of the Left on four continents, some of which was relevant to the situation of Lula and the PT in Brazil, but all of which was interesting to historians of labor and the Left.

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