

South-South
Dispatch 01

21st Century Socialism

The Experience of Latin America

Marta Harnecker



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Foreword

The geo-political situation today is rife with challenges and possibilities. While the triple crisis of finance, development and environment have discredited neo-liberalism; many countries of the South (including India and China) are unable to break free from the dominant economic model. In this context, the progressive experiments by governments in Latin America have provided a much-needed impetus to the global movement for alternatives.

Marta Harnecker has been both a participant and chronicler of these progressive movements in Latin America. At ActionAid we are privileged to launch our South-South Dispatch series with her thought-provoking piece on the new socialist trajectories in Latin America.

The South-South Dispatches are short briefing papers that provide analysis on regional and global developments from a South perspective. The South Solidarity Initiative, a knowledge-activist hub hosted by ActionAid India, publishes these dispatches, though the specific views expressed by the authors may not necessarily reflect those of our organization.

ActionAid recognizes that in today's context there is renewed interest in the idea of South-South cooperation and solidarity. While governments of the South are increasingly forging collaborative projects, it is equally important that social movements and civil society groups not only actively monitor and influence these processes, but also advance systemic alternatives that advance the cause of a new Internationalism of the South.

Through these dispatches we aim to contribute to such perspectives from activists and academics across the South.

We look forward to continued conversations around these themes.

Sandeep Chachra
Executive Director
ActionAid India

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Photo: © Benny Kuruvilla/ActionAid

Marta Harnecker is a Chilean sociologist, popular educator and author. She has written extensively on the Left in Latin America, resistance strategies to neo-liberalism and alternatives. She served as an advisor to President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela from 2003-2011.

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Section I

Socialism For The 21st Century

Socialism remains an important ideal, but the word has acquired certain negative connotations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was some confusion in socialist circles. Lack of democracy, dogmatism, totalitarianism, state capitalist bureaucratic methods, central planning, collectivism that did not respect differences, productivism that emphasized the expansion of productive forces without taking into consideration the need to preserve nature, intolerance towards legitimate opposition, attempts to impose atheism by persecuting believers, and the belief that a sole party was needed to lead the process of transition – these were all rejected by socialist forces.

But that was about what we do not want. What about what we do want?

The world's first experiment with a socialism that differed from the Soviet model began in Chile, with the triumph of President Salvador Allende and the leftist Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) coalition in 1970. The experience of Latin America is, in fact, the primary driver in the understanding of the kind of socialism we do want. This is largely due to, first, the practical experience of 'local governments of popular participation' – profoundly democratic governments that have opened up spaces for people's empowerment and, thanks to their transparency, contributed to the fight against corruption. Second, there has been a rediscovery of communitarian indigenous practices. Third, there are many lessons for socialism in the experience of those Latin American governments that have proposed moving towards an anti-capitalist society. These governments' efforts towards socialism were strengthened by the resounding failure of neoliberalism, increased resistance and struggle by social movements, and, more recently, by the global crisis of capitalism.

President Chávez of Venezuela was the first to have the courage to call this alternative society socialism, adding the qualifier '21st-century' to differentiate this new socialism from the errors and deviations of the socialist model that was implemented during the 20th century in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.

Three Transitions to Socialism

How do we transition from capitalism to socialism? History has shown that a long historical period is needed to make the transition from capitalism to a socialist society. Some talk in terms of decades, others of hundreds of years, and yet others think that while socialism is the goal we must pursue but that perhaps we shall never completely reach. This is not pessimistic – a utopian goal that is well-defined helps us chart our course and strengthens our resolve to struggle.

When talking of the transition to socialism, we need to distinguish between three kinds of transition to socialism: the transition in advanced countries, the transition in backward countries where state power has been conquered (as happened with the revolutions in the 20th Century in Russia, China and Cuba) and, finally, the transition in countries where only the government is in socialist hands.

Every society has its own unique characteristics that differentiate it from other countries and, therefore although there may be a shared goal, the measures that are taken in the transition process must be adapted to the specific conditions of each country. The following factors need to be considered:

- The country's history and cultural traditions.
- The country's starting point: the specificities of the inherited economic structure, the level of development of the forces of production, the way in which daily life expresses itself, the population's educational level, etc.
- Differing correlation of forces at the domestic and international level.
- Different historical actors: working class parties, other kind of political organizations, indigenous and peasant movements, military, charismatic leaders, etc.

Implicit in all this is the idea that there cannot be a general theory of transition; rather, each country must design its own particular strategy for the transition. This will depend, among other things, not only on the economic character of that country but also on the way the class struggle is waged there.

This process of transformation, of advancing towards the new society is not only a long process but also a process full of challenges and difficulties. There is always the possibility of retreats and failures.

Comparisons of Russia and Latin America

The most common interpretation of Marxism up until the Russian revolution maintained that socialism would start with the more advanced countries, where capitalism itself had created the material and cultural conditions for it. A high level of development of productive forces was also considered to be an indispensable condition. But this was not a rigid formulation. Marx himself foresaw that “the revolution was going to begin in the East.” With the political situation in Russia at the time, it appeared that a war would break out between Russia and Turkey, and that the Russian government would be defeated, with grave economic and political consequences flowing out of this defeat.

Marx not only foresaw the possibility of political revolution in a backward country; he also saw the possibilities arising out of the tradition of collective property in the countryside, which could provide the basis for a transition from the commune to socialism that bypassed a period of capitalist agriculture. A revolution was possible in Russia because political conditions outstripped economic conditions that did not favour revolution. The horrors of the imperialist war produced the proletarian insurrection that allowed workers to take power. Thus, the proletarian revolution was victorious when the objective premises for socialism did not yet exist in Russia, when the development of the productive forces had not yet reached the level of development that makes socialism possible.

The situation in Latin America the 1980s and 1990s was in some way comparable to the situation of the pre-revolutionary Russia in the beginning of the 20th century: the situation was ripe for a political revolution, through productive forces had not developed sufficiently. What the imperialist war and its horrors were for Russia, neoliberalism and its horrors were for Latin America: hunger and misery, increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, destruction of nature, and increasing loss of sovereignty. In these circumstances, the peoples of Latin America first resisted and then went on the offensive, making possible the victory of left-wing presidential candidates with anti-neoliberal programmes.

Faced with the evident failure of neoliberalism as it has been applied in Latin America, there were two choices. Either the neoliberal capitalist model needed to be rebuilt, with changes such as a greater focus on social issues, but still motivated by the same capitalist logic; or advances had to be made in constructing an alternative project

that makes the people the main builders of the new society. Some governments decided to embark on a truly alternative path – a path towards socialism – knowing that the objective economic conditions in which they find themselves obliges them to co-exist with capitalist forms of production for a while to come. They confront the challenge of moving toward socialism when only governmental power has been won. They not only have to confront backward economic conditions but also the fact that they still do not have complete state power. Nevertheless, practice has demonstrated that, contrary to the theoretical dogmatism of some sectors of the radical Left, you can use this inherited state and transform it into an instrument that collaborates with building the new society.

Chile and After

In the early 1970s, in Chile, Allende proposed a peaceful transition, an institutional road, but could not achieve his goal, as you all know he was defeated by a military coup three years later.

If anything was learned from this defeat, it was that to travel peacefully towards the goal required rethinking the socialist project that had been implemented until then in the world, and that, therefore, it was necessary to develop a new project more suitable to the Chilean reality and to a peaceful way to build it. That is what Allende seemed to sense when he coined his folkloric metaphor of “socialism with red wine and empanadas [a typical Chilean food], alluding to the idea of building a democratic socialist society rooted in popular national traditions.

Hugo Chavez of Venezuela was the person who coined the term 21st Century Socialism. However, this was not a matter of copying foreign models or exporting our own, it is necessary to build a model of socialism tailored to each country. Of course, all those models will share some common features that give them a socialist character.

Chávez believed that 21st Century Socialism could not be a carbon copy of other models; it had to be a “heroic creation”. That is why he talked of a “Bolivarian, Christian, Robinsonian, Indoamerican socialism [...] a new collective existence, equality, liberty and real, complete democracy.” Other leaders refer to communitarian socialism, a society based on the logic of good life (*buen vivir*), a society of complete life (*vida en plenitude*). But the name is not what matters; what matters is the content.

Recovering Marx's Vision

Socialism of the 21st century has recovered Marx and Engels' most original ideas.

The future society will facilitate the integral development of all the potentialities of human beings, something that can only be achieved in a 'cooperative society'. Another of Marx's often-ignored ideas has to do with the social character of human nature. When Marx put forward the proposition that human beings were social beings, he was not proposing the negation of the individual; he was saying that individual human nature is eminently social. There is a complementary, dialectical relationship between the individual being and the social being that makes it impossible to establish a separation between the individual character and social surroundings of a human being. This implies the rejection of any 'collectivism', which suppresses differences between each member of society in the name of a group.

Collectivism is a flagrant distortion of Marxism. Marx considered that any truly fair distribution had to take into account people's differentiated needs. Hence his maxim: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Section II

Features of 21st Century Socialism

We have mentioned briefly what are Marx and Engels's more relevant ideas. Obviously today we are confronted with new questions that require new answers. We need to enrich these ideas of Marx and Engels with new reflections and proposals. Below we discuss some key characteristics of 21st century socialism.

An Essentially Democratic Socialism

This is essentially a democracy that allows people's protagonism. Alfredo Maneiro, a Venezuelan intellectual and political leader, opined that it was not the same if a community managed to get a pedestrian bridge it had organized and fought for, and if it

was given the bridge by the state as a gift. In fact, state paternalism is incompatible with popular protagonism. State paternalism tends to turn people into beggars.

There is a need to move from a culture where citizens beg the state to solve their problems to a culture where citizens make decisions, and through struggle get results. People implement, control and manage things themselves: they govern themselves.

According to President Chavez of Venezuela, “Without the participation of local forces, without an organization from below of the peasants and workers themselves, it is impossible to build a new life.”

Decentralization and Popular Protagonism

Participation at the local level – popular protagonism – is central to socialism. But promoting participation can become little more than sloganeering if one does not create the spaces where people have the opportunity to offer their opinions and make decisions in the areas where they spend most of their time (communities, workplaces, educational institutions, interest groups, etc). If the central state decides everything, there is no room for local initiatives and the state becomes an obstacle; or, as Marx said, ends up hindering the “free movement” of society.

István Mészáros believes the Soviet state’s excessive centralization led to “both the Soviets and the factory councils [being] deprived of all effective power.” Historical experience shows us that decentralization is the best weapon for combating bureaucracy, as it brings government closer to the people and allows them to exercise social control over the state apparatus. It is necessary to decentralize all that can be decentralized, keeping as functions of the central state only those tasks that cannot be carried out at the local level.

Of course, this does not mean an anarchic decentralization. There must be a national strategic plan that coordinates local plans. This kind of decentralization must be imbued with a spirit of solidarity. One of the most important roles the central state can play is just that: implementing a process of redistributing national resources to protect the weak and help them develop.

Given the importance of popular protagonism in the socialist project, there are some additional questions related to this issue that governments need to consider.

The answers to these questions will help us to assess whether governments are making progress towards socialism or not.

- Do the governments mobilize workers and the people in general to carry out certain measures and are they contributing to an increase in their abilities and power?
- Do they understand the need for an organized, politicized people, one able to exercise the necessary pressure that can weaken the state apparatus and power they inherited and thus drive forward the proposed transformation process?
- Do they understand that our people must be protagonists and not supporting actors?
- Do they listen to the people and let them speak?
- Do they understand that they can rely on the people to fight the errors and deviations that come up along the way?
- Do they give them resources and call on them to exercise social control over the process?

To sum up, are socialist-led governments contributing to the creation of a popular subject that is increasingly the protagonist, assuming governance responsibilities?

These issues can be summed up in the words of Alvaro García Linera, the Bolivian vice-president:

“To govern by obeying is to affirm every day that the sovereign is not the state, that the sovereign is the people who do not express themselves only every five years through the vote, but rather they express themselves, they speak, they put forward each day their needs, expectations and collective requirements. What is required of the leader is to synthesize and to unite, because the voices of the people can be discordant. The people are not something homogeneous. No sir! There are social classes, there are identities, there are regions. The people are very diverse. The role of those in government is not to substitute for the people but to harmonize the voices of the people, only to synthesize in a sense their concerns. But that does not mean that they are substitutes for the people. To govern by obeying is

that: the sovereign is the people and the leader is simply a unifier of ideas, someone who articulates their needs, and nothing else.”

Economics That Satisfy Human Needs

Twenty-first century socialism proposes to replace the neoliberal capitalist model with a new socialist model. The first characteristic of this model is human development as its centre and focus. Socialism is to be governed by the logic of humanism and solidarity, and have as its aim the satisfaction of human needs, not profits. Second, socialism respects nature, and opposes consumerism. The goal should not be to live ‘better’ but to live ‘well’. Third, socialism requires a new dialectic of production / distribution / consumption, based on: (a) social ownership of the means of production, (b) social production organized by workers, in order to (c) satisfy communal needs. Fourth, socialism is guided by a new concept of efficiency that both respects nature and seeks human development. Fifth, the rational use of available natural and human resources through a decentralized participatory planning process that has nothing to do with the hyper-centralized bureaucratic planning of the erstwhile Soviet state.

The Centrality of Participatory Planning

Finally, without participatory planning there can be no socialism. The emphasis on this point is not only because there is a need to end the capitalist anarchy of production, but also because it is only through such a process that society can truly appropriate the fruits of its labour.

This section deals with some of the initiatives that governments in Latin America can put into practice, which would permit advances towards the construction of the new society. We also mention some initiatives on these points which have already been undertaken.

Section III

Initiatives Towards Socialism

New Constitutions and Regional Integration

It is important to change the rules of the institutional game by means of a constituent process that allows governments to develop new constitutions oriented around the welfare of the people. This process needs to be participatory down to the local level. Also, people need to be consulted on issues of regional integration. Lack of regional integration has been an obstacle in the path of socialism in Latin America, and this needs to be developed on a new, democratic basis.

New State Institutions and Transforming Government

New state institutions that have been created include the following:

- bringing the government closer to the people as the so-called gabinetes itinerantes (mobile cabinets) in Ecuador or the ‘government in the street’ in Venezuela;
- creating spaces where officials can be held to account, as in as Ecuador President Correa’s weekly radio-television programme, broadcast every Saturday in Ecuador called ‘Enlace Semanal’ wherein he provides information about his management;
- carrying out pedagogical initiatives, utilizing the media outlets at their disposal to educate the people and raise their consciousness – as in Hugo Chávez’s Sunday radio programme ‘Aló Presidente’ as a means for direct communication with the people; and,
- changing course when the people demand it, as in the case of President Evo Morales who backtracked on his government’s decision to remove subsidies on gas.

There is also need to transform parliament and to create forums for national debate.

From the vantage point of the government, socialists are not only capable of creating new institutions more suited to the new tasks; they are also capable, up to a point, of transforming parts of the inherited state apparatus (e.g, Parliament). In Venezuela, they have experimented with a new concept of participation with regards to drafting laws. They call this initiative ‘Social parliamentarianism of the streets’.

Rather than discuss laws from a narrow corporatist vision by, for example, speaking to the private sector about economic laws, or discussing a housing law with experts in the field, attempts were made to create spaces where people could come together to discuss proposed laws and have their opinions and suggestions taken into consideration.

There is another interesting idea proposed by a Bolivian investigator Luis Tapia for deepening democracy at the local levels through “the creation of political spaces for direct participation, not only in regards to local and municipal issues, but also in national and plurinational issues.” Citizens located in places distant from the capital should not be limited to discussing local issues; they should also have the possibility to participate in discussions on national issues. “These ‘national democracy local assemblies,’ ” as Tapia calls them, “would be the space in which citizens could exercise, in a permanent manner, their right to participate in governing the country.” Popular, nation-wide consultations, as have already occurred in some Latin American countries, can also be undertaken.

Twenty-first-century socialism required the construction of a new state from below. The more advanced expression of this initiative are the Venezuelan communes. This refers to territories within which exist a number of communities that share common historical-cultural traditions, problems, aspirations and economic vocations, and use the same services; have the conditions to be self-sustaining and self-governing; and are willing to come together behind a common project that has been elaborated in a participatory manner and which is constantly being evaluated and adjusted to new circumstances as they emerge.

Each commune should strive to build up a communal system of production, distribution and consumption with the participation of its communities, via communitarian organizations, cooperatives, and social property companies with a socialist orientation. Within each commune, a communal parliament or communal legislative power should be created. The commune’s assembly of popular power will be the highest decision-making body within its territory.

In the future, the commune's assembly of popular power should become the communal government, creating for itself the necessary apparatuses and institutions that can allow it to take on the tasks that arise as a result of having greater responsibilities. The commune should have a communal planning council. At the start of each governing term this can facilitate a participatory planning process for the elaboration of the commune's multi-annual strategic development plan and its annual plans.

The commune should also have its own financial entity or communal bank to deposit all the funds it administers. The national state should establish a fund to help kick-start the creation of communes, based on the principle of equity and solidarity. Those communes with the most needs and historically least efficient social control should have different means and mechanisms available for citizens to speak out about the quality of services. They should also have the power to remove those functionaries whose performance has been questioned by a sufficient number of local residents.

This new state emerging from below and the old inherited state taken over by revolutionary cadres will coexist for a long time in the transition process. The uniqueness of this process is that the inherited state fosters the emergence of the state that will replace it, and, therefore, a complementary relationship should be developed rather than one where one of the states negates the other.

Transforming the Armed Forces

One of the most important tasks facing Latin American governments is that of transforming the military. This is no easy task given that in most of Latin America this institution has been a repressive institution at the service of the established order.

Today, however, an increasingly large number of left governments in Latin America have understood the importance of changing this order. New constitutions have installed a new way of organizing society to establish a social order that should serve the majority of the population and not the elites. The military, by defending this new order, will thus be defending the homeland and the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population, and not the interests of the elites.

There are some other ways of winning the military over to defend the new order that governments have been implementing.

- Give the military the responsibility for social projects to help the most destitute (Plan Bolívar 2000, Bonus Juancito Pinto).
- Provide educational schools and courses in accordance with the spirit of the constitution.
- Give the armed forces responsibility for big infrastructure projects that will strengthen national sovereignty.
- Democratize access to the top ranks and change selection criteria.
- A military doctrine which includes the people in national defence work.
- Recover patriotic symbols and traditions.
- Building territorial sovereignty of the state in regions that were previously neglected.

Changing the Relations of Production

This is a complex process that needs time. It will also additionally involve the start of a process of recovering spaces which are now in the hands of capitalism as a result of the privatizations during the neoliberal period. Some of the measures towards this goal are listed here:

- Companies need to move from formal ownership to real appropriation through:
 - Creating workers council that would allow workers to play a part in running the company.
 - Organizing production to satisfy communal needs.
 - Opening the books and ensuring complete transparency, thereby allowing workers to exercise a social accounting function and combat waste, corruption and bureaucratic interest.
 - Electing managers who share this vision and who have the trust of the workers, and
 - Applying a new type of efficiency in these companies such that, as productivity improves, it becomes possible for the workers to achieve more and more human development (e.g., intro-

ducing a work day which includes time for worker education so their involvement in management is truly effective and not merely formal), and also respects the environment.

- Cooperatives must be encouraged to overcome their narrow focus on the interests of the group that makes up the cooperative encouraging them. Steps that:
 - To forge links between cooperatives, so that they relate to each other in a cooperative style rather than a competitive one.
 - To forge relations between cooperatives and the communities. This is the best way to begin to move away from the private interests of each cooperative and focus on the interests and needs of people in general.
- To gradually transform capitalist companies by finding various ways to subordinate their economic activity to the interests of the national economic plan by:
 - Demanding transparency and open books so the communities and workers can inspect them.
 - Using a system of prices and taxes which obliges companies to transfer a portion of their surpluses to other sectors of the economy, thus making it possible to set up new companies or to improve social services for the population.
 - Using competition with state companies or subsidized cooperatives to oblige the capitalist companies to lower their prices and reduce their profits, and,
 - Using government regulations which require companies to transform the workday so that a given number of hours is set aside for educating workers, and requires them to implement specific ways for workers to participate in taking the decisions about how the company will be run.

Development that Respects Nature

Another important task governments face is implementing an economic development model that is not based on the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, but instead seeks to gradually re-establish the necessary harmonic metabolism between humans and nature.

This is a far-from-easy task. The big dilemma is how to raise the people out of poverty and attend to their basic needs, while respecting nature. To aim for some kind of ‘zero growth’, as some propose, to avoid the consumption of polluting energy and its degrading consequences for the environment, would mean enshrining existing inequalities between rich and poor countries – that is, between developed societies that have reached a high standard of living, and the majority of humanity that are a long way from reaching those conditions. It is much easier to ask others to stop growing if one’s own needs are already satisfied.

As President Correa says, the great challenge we face is to utilize “extractivism in order to overcome extractivism.” Our governments, therefore, need to take steps in the direction of ensuring the development of our countries depends less and less on extractivism. The dilemma is not between extracting and not extracting, but rather extracting at rates that maintain a healthy metabolism between humans and nature. This is difficult and cannot be achieved overnight.

So, it not about saying no to development, but instead of conceiving and making into reality genuinely human models of development, or what several authors call ‘sustainable development’ or ‘ecologically sustainable society’ – that is a society that satisfies in an equal way the necessities of their inhabitants without putting in danger the satisfaction of the necessities of the future generations, a society in which it is the people who decide what is produced and how it is produced.

Given that the challenge is huge and temptations abound, the role popular participation should play in the protection of the environment is fundamental. **END**

21st Century Socialism: The Experience of Latin America is a synthesis of lectures delivered by the Chilean author and activist Marta Harnecker during her visit to India in 2014. Harnecker was hosted by the South Solidarity Initiative (SSI). During her visit various organisations and institutions provided valuable contribution in organising seminars, lectures and workshops in Telangana, Kerala, West Bengal and Delhi.

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South Solidarity Initiative is a knowledge hub hosted by ActionAid India (AAI) with the remit to conduct research and analysis on issues related to south-south solidarity and cooperation. We focus on India's role and engagement in various international fora on issues such as trade, investment, agriculture, land, public services and development aid. The idea is to contribute to south-south solidarity by facilitating platforms (through collaborative research, workshops, conferences, people-to-people exchanges) for activists and researchers to engage in policy debates to push for economic policies and a new Internationalism of the South.

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ActionAid India is part of a global federation and is a full affiliate of ActionAid International that is present in over 40 countries worldwide. AAI works in 24 states and 1 union territory of India. AAI works to address the root causes of poverty in partnership with grassroots organisations, civil society groups and platforms.

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