

The Politics of Dignity and the Politics of Poverty

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Nottingham

How far is Latin America from Nottingham? It depends on how you measure it. You can measure it in terms of a politics of poverty or you can measure it in terms of a politics of dignity.

If we speak of a Pink Tide in the area, we must remember that Pink is not a primary colour, that what seems to be pink is in fact a blend of colours that combine and conflict. There is a central issue that runs through so-called pink tide in Latin America and the way that we understand it. This is the contrast between a politics of poverty and a politics of dignity.

By a politics of poverty I mean a politics that starts from the poverty of the great mass of the population and the desire to eliminate it. This has a very real basis. There is enormous poverty in the region. This is one of the most striking things when you first go there: the number of people selling things at the traffic lights or begging in the streets, the shanty towns, the poverty in the countryside. A very big part of the population live in poverty or extreme poverty. And beside that, the big houses and the big cars, the obvious social disparities between rich and poor.

The immediate reaction when we see all that is to say that we must strive for the elimination of poverty and for an end to injustice. We need economic progress and we need a government that will introduce policies that benefit the poor and attack the structures of inequality, a government that will try to free itself from the neoliberalism that has caused so much misery in the region in the last thirty years or so, that will improve health and education. As we know, there are now a number of governments in the region that are firmly committed to making important changes in these directions, and that is most definitely to be welcomed.

But there is more to be said. Go back to the poor people we started with and talk to them, or rather listen to them. And as you listen to them, they open up in front of you, or rather your mind opens up, and you see them not as poor people to be pitied or cared for, but as people in struggle, in daily struggle for existence and very often in collective struggle for a better society. And as you listen, the third person dissolves, the third person relation that separates them from you: you realise that they and you are part of a we that are trapped in a world of injustice and trying to find a way out, part of a frustrated we that have the capacity to create a different world but cannot do it. Inside the poverty we discover dignity: the dignity of the poor and the dignity of ourselves. Inside the object an objectified subject struggling against her own objectification.

This changes everything, because it changes the way that we think about politics and the way we organise politically and the way we understand what is happening in Latin America and the world.

First of all, dignity breaks the state as a form of organisation. The concept of poverty leads to a state-oriented politics: the poor are a they – poor people – and the way to change things for them is by improving them on their behalf. The state is precisely that – a group of professionals that claim to do things on behalf of people, and this always involves imposing a view of what is for the benefit of people, treating people as objects. Dignity, on the other hand, says “No, thank you very much, don’t do anything on our behalf, we’ll do it ourselves. To think politics from the subject means thinking of different forms of organisation, forms that articulate the collective will of those involved – assemblies, councils, forms of organisation that aim at overcoming the separation of politics from everyday life. This is often referred to as a politics of autonomy, or of dialogue rather than monologue, of listening rather than talking, a politics of *mandar obedeciendo*, as the Zapatistas put it: a form of organisation that seeks the effective subordination of all decisions to the collective will of the community.

This means a critique of representative democracy. A representative is someone who claims to act on our behalf. The very act of representation is the creation of a public sphere separate from the private, an act of distancing politics from life, an exclusion. A concept of dignity pushes towards a different form of democracy, one that does not exclude.

Dignity dissolves the third person, the state, representative democracy, and it also dissolves progress. The concept of poverty is closely linked to that of progress. Progress is generally seen as the antidote to poverty, but it is a progress that is understood as having an autonomous, objective existence, something that we must try to attain. Dignity, on the other hand, is anti-progressive, not in the sense of not wanting to develop human capacities to create a better life, but in the sense of subordinating changes to collective consideration: if progress means making bigger and bigger cities, that is probably not what we want; if progress means covering the world in highways, that is probably not what we want; if progress means accelerating global warming, that is not what we want. But Progress, as an autonomous force outside our control, is simply the operation of the law of value, the rule of socially necessary labour time, of that empty faster-faster-faster that determines what is done and how it is done under capitalism. Dignity, then, is anti-capitalist in the profound sense of breaking capitalist time, in confronting the faster-faster-faster of capitalism with a “whoa, let’s slow down, lets discuss whether we really want a new highway, whether we want the mechanisation of agriculture, whether we really want to work under so much pressure.”

Dignity, in short, takes us into a whole different epistemological universe where everything is laid open: the meaning of knowledge, the meaning of research, the meaning of politics, the meaning of revolution, the meaning of class, the meaning of work, time, space, the meaning of left and right. The person we start off by classifying as poor turns around to us and says “I am not poor, I am in struggle, I have dignity” and with that she hurls all our categories back in our faces and forces us to rethink everything. It is this manifest bubbling of dignity that makes Latin America such an exciting place at the moment, such a challenge to us all.

But of course dignity simmers in all the world. And of course the politics of Latin America, or even the radical politics of Latin America, is not just a politics of dignity. Rather, it is an extremely complex and tense intertwining of the politics of poverty with the politics of dignity. At one extreme, perhaps, we have the Zapatistas who proclaim dignity as their central principle - and in this they are echoed by many of the movements of opposition - , and on the other side we have the governments of Bolivia and Venezuela, say, who, by their form of existence as states, act on behalf of the people, however open they may be to consulting them. But of course it is not so simple: there are certainly instances in which the Zapatistas or other groups reproduce authoritarian practices or in which Zapatista supporters say “we must help the poor *indígenas*”, and there are also genuine

attempts by the Venezuelan state (or part of the Venezuelan) state to break with the state as a form of social organisation and transform itself into what they call a Commune state, particularly through such measures as the promotion of the communal councils. With the distinction between a politics of dignity and a politics of poverty I do not want to say “these are the goodies and here are the baddies”, or “here is the answer”. Nevertheless I do find the distinction helpful in at least three ways.

Firstly I think it means that we (the two strands of anti-capitalist thought) should push together in the same direction as far as we possibly can. In that sense, I confess that I am one of the many adherents of the Otra Campaña in Mexico who did vote for López Obrador in the last election and certainly I think the governments of Chávez and Morales are preferable to their predecessors.

Secondly, however, I do not think we can simply add the two politics together, as was advocated by both John Foran and Mike Geddes yesterday, and is argued by the proponents of poder popular in Argentina and elsewhere, because there are really two different logics at work here, two different concepts of the world and politics, and of what is at issue in anti-capitalist social change. Put simply, it is the clash between the progressive and the anti-progressive left. Progressive governments are just that, progressive, with all that means in terms of slotting in to the faster-faster-faster of capitalist development and all the destruction that that involves, whereas many of the most important anti-capitalist struggles both in Latin America and the world are very explicitly opposed to the destruction that Progress entails, whether in the form of new metro lines, nuclear power stations or climate change. In that sense the Zapatistas are quite right to criticise the politics of López Obrador, and I have a great deal of sympathy for the many people involved in the important social movements in Bolivia from 2000 to 2005 who feel that the Morales government does not represent what they were fighting for. That is why, too, I do not feel very optimistic about the future of the more radical strands within the Bolivarian process in Venezuela.

Thirdly, I think the distinction is useful because it confronts us who work in the universities with what we are doing. If we think in terms of the politics of poverty, then we live in a world of pre-established categories in which we can define Latin America as our object of analysis, comfortably separated from us by the Atlantic Ocean. If however, our object of analysis turns into a subject who kills the third person and throws our categories back in our faces, then we find ourselves on very unstable ground in which we have to feel our way forward, experimenting and exploring, and always asking as we walk.

Measured in terms of a politics of poverty, Latin America is certainly over there, a million miles away from Nottingham. Measured in terms of a politics of dignity, Latin America is right on top of us, a raging challenge, an appalling terror, and a shining light of hope for the future.

Notes

Dignity is the push towards social self-determination against-and-beyond a world that is built on the negation of self-determination.

Poverty leads you to a politics on behalf of, dignity to a politics of No thank you, we'll do it ourselves, autonomy.

Dignity and we-ness. Dignity breaks the third person. Poverty reproduces it. In Latin America there are two voices raised: the voice of poverty and the cry of dignity. Closely intertwined but very important to distinguish. Lead in different directions politically, reminding us that pink is not a primary colour.

The distinction between dignity and poverty is not concerned just with how we understand Latin America: it slaps us in the face, it is about how we relate to the world and understand what is happening.

'Then that suffering that united us made us speak, and we recognised that in our words there was truth, we knew that not only pain and suffering lived in our tongue, we recognised that there is hope still in our hearts. We spoke with ourselves, we looked inside ourselves and we looked at our history: we saw our most ancient fathers suffering and struggling, we saw our grandfathers struggling, we saw our fathers with fury in their hands, we saw that not everything had been taken away from us, that we had the most valuable, that which made us live, that which made our step rise above plants and animals, that which made the stone be beneath our feet, and we saw, brothers, that all that we had was DIGNITY, and we saw that great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that DIGNITY was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle'.

- Marcos