Westward look, the land is bright

Race and politics in the Andes

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Richard Gott *discusses the emergence of important new political players in Latin America, often based on new alliances between the armed forces and indigenous movements.*

Something new and interesting, and profoundly original, has been taking place in Latin America in the early years of this century, deserving close attention from all those left depressed or made cynical by global developments in the years since 1989. Seismic political upheavals have occurred in countries that once seemed permanently lulled to sleep by the siren voices of neo-liberalism, encapsulated within the so-called Washington Consensus'.

This US-inspired project, first codified in 1989, sought to reform the economic programmes of Latin American governments through a radical reduction in public spending, the privatisation of state enterprises, the encouragement of foreign investment, and the liberalisation of trade and finance. Part of the neo-liberal counter-revolution, and overseen by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, it promised huge improvements in economic performance, and was widely welcomed as though there were no alternative.

Yet in practice its imposition led to vastly increased unemployment

and to the further impoverishment of huge swathes of the population. The eventual rebellions against these programmes have seen the emergence of important new political players, some drawn from the armed forces, others from Latin America's indigenous movements. An entirely fresh and radical spirit is abroad, bringing the question of race and ethnic difference to the surface, not as a simple petition for indigenous 'rights' but as a demand for a restructuring of the old colonial, white settler state. This has the flavour of a genuine revolution.

In the countries of the Andes in particular - Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador - the rebellious movements created by the indigenous peoples, the majority of the population, have begun for the first time to make a major impact, introducing a new and transforming element into the politics of the region. Indeed the cultural resurgence of groups reclaiming their indigenous identity can be detected throughout the continent - from Argentina to Venezuela, from Chile to Brazil, from Colombia to Mexico. The ruling elite in countries like Chile and Argentina, traditionally imagining their country to be as white as Australia, have been shocked to find themselves sharing their territorial space with people who claim an aboriginal background.

The appearance of these indigenous movements has appeared in the foreign media with little explanation or analysis. Yet they represent a sea-change in the politics of Latin America. The indigenous peoples, heirs to the age-old civilisations of the continent, have been stirring themselves politically for the first time since the eighteenth century. Now highly politicised, they have grown strong enough to overthrow governments.

The continuing displacement of native peoples from the countryside, accelerated during the neo-liberal years, has produced immense new indigenous cities, often invisible to the white middle class. These rural refugees have been driven from their homes by the collapse of the tin mines, by oil prospectors, by logging companies, and by coca eradication programmes. Lima in the coastal plain of Peru has become a Quechua city, peopled by the inhabitants of the high plateau; the Chilean capital, Santiago, is now surrounded by shanty towns of Mapuches, the indigenous peoples driven out of their forest reservations in the south; the Ecuadorean capital of Quito has doubled in size in recent years; while El Alto, the new Aymara city on the high Bolivian plateau, often threatens to overwhelm La Paz, the capital in the valley below.

The population of these new urban conglomerations, thanks to modern methods of communication, often retain their rural culture and remain in constant touch with their rural roots. They also make fresh connections with their ethnic counterparts in the countries next door. Their cities have become a political tinder-box, inexorably changing the balance of power throughout the Andes.

The new movements of indigenous peoples have been causing considerable alarm within the local conservative (and racist) political establishments, as well as in the United States. A recent headline in a Miami newspaper read: 'War on Terror has Latin America's Indigenous People in its Sights'. Some academics argue that the growth of the indigenous movements is merely an extension of the democratic practice developed in the continent since the defeat of the dictatorships. Latin America once extended the franchise to the working class, so why should it not now incorporate the indigenous peoples? In theory that sounds plausible, yet Latin America's ruling elite has been notably reluctant to embrace this new democracy. The reason lies in its racist fear, deeply etched over the centuries, of the gigantic underclass with which it shares the continent.

Debates within the continent's once powerful leftist movements have also been affected by the indigenous upsurge. Gender issues and liberation theology were taken on board in the last decades of the twentieth century, but many on the left have been unprepared to deal with questions associated with culture, race, and popular religion. For in parallel with the growth of indigenous politics has come an explosion of evangelical chapels, threatening the ancient monopoly of the Catholic Church. These developments have been greeted with confusion or rejection by the left. Little guidance on all this can be found in the classical texts.

Some of the indigenous peoples of the Andes have been making unprecedented and utopian demands. Bolivian radicals have been calling for the revival of the Aymara nation in the Altiplano that preceded the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Peruvians have talked about the return of Tahuantinsuyo - the 'four states' of the old Inca empire of 500 years ago that stretched from Pasto in Colombia to the River Maule in Chile, and over the Andes to Tucumán in Argentina.

Such developments are not peculiar to Latin America. They have elements in common with comparable phenomena in other parts of the world. The

revival of local and indigenous cultures across borders, and the desire to redraw the artificial frontiers established in colonial times, is a familiar theme in contemporary Africa. The United States itself has seen a significant revival of indigenous activity - with the revived memory of old battles and the reclaiming of ancient land rights. Yet the experience of Latin America, different though in some ways similar to what has been happening elsewhere, has rarely been bracketed together in a common analysis.

In their early years, in the 1990s, the new indigenous movements received a certain amount of assistance from outside - chiefly through example. The upsurge of indigenous activism in the United States preceded that in Latin America, and US activists were already making visits to the southern continent in the 1980s. The movements in Latin American took off seriously after 1992, when official festivities were held to record the 500th anniversary of the Columbus landings. These became a celebration of the continuing survival of the indigenous nations rather than of the achievements of the white settler societies. A UN declaration describing the 1990s as 'the decade of indigenous peoples' also gave a focus to the new movements.

An antiquarian strand, sometimes called *indigenismo*, has long permeated Latin American thinking about the pre-Colombian peoples. Whites in Cuba in the nineteenth century wrote novels about the island's heroic indigenous past, the phenomenon known as *siboneyismo*. In Peru in the 1920s Juan Carlos Mariátegui, an early Marxist, invoked the country's Inca heritage and called for the Andean peoples to be integrated into the nation. But the developments of the 1990s are new and different in that demands are being made by the indigenous people themselves - through increasingly vocal and well-organised political organisations.

The indigenous movements are not alone. Other forces are at work in the current upsurge in radical protest. In the southern cone countries of Argentina and Uruguay, a revival of the progressive tempo of the early 1970s has begun to surface, an apparent generational throwback to earlier experiments cut short by the military interventions of that sinister decade. The heirs of the radical Young Peronists (in Argentina) and the Tupamaros guerrillas (in Uruguay) are now in power through popular election. Social movements that had mobilised around the concept of 'civil society', abandoning the prospect of securing political power at the centre, suddenly found that this unexpected possibility had become a

reality. Not least among the intriguing developments of the new millennium has been the surprising capacity of popular movements to use the ballot box as a source of unity rather than division, producing election results often undetected by opinion polls.

One remarkable phenomenon has been the comeback of Cuba and its formidable leader Fidel Castro, now in his eightieth year and enjoying a position of respect throughout the continent. Banished from inter-American councils since 1961 by US diktat, and suffering from nearly half a century of economic sanctions unilaterally imposed by the United States, Cuba has re-established diplomatic and business links with most of the continent, bringing increased trade and finance as well as fresh and much-needed intellectual contacts to this too long isolated island.

Castro himself, largely ignored or derided in Europe as an authoritarian dictator, is now perceived throughout Latin America as a wise and benign elder statesman, one of the great figures of the twentieth century, in the pantheon with Nelson Mandela. Sought after by students and journalists wherever he goes, he is also waylaid by Presidents anxious for a photo-opportunity or simply for a word of approval. Cuba's success in resisting US pressure over such a long period is displayed as a badge of honour, recognised as such in the current climate of overt anti-imperialism - itself the result of the foreign policy of the US administration of George W Bush, unpopular throughout the continent among all groups.

A mood of expectant optimism now prevails in much of Latin America, a welcome change after three decades of political inertia. For years the adherents to the Washington Consensus were able to rule with barely a squawk of protest from within the political system (though with considerable popular upheaval taking place outside). The astonishing victory of Evo Morales, a radical indigenous leader, in the presidential elections in Bolivia of December 2006, has served to focus attention on a widely touted 'move to the left' that has characterised the early years of the new millennium. Foreign journalists and television crews have been trying to catch up after years of ignorance and neglect.

The language of Evo Morales, never less than direct, gives the flavour of the new era. 'This is a confrontation between rich and poor', he told an interviewer in his office in the Congress building in March 2005, 'but it's also a racial conflict'.

'Look at them', he said, pointing to photographs of former congressmen over the past hundred years. 'Almost all those people are white. They hate the fact that I'm an Indian. They hate that we're here.'

He was speaking under a poster of his smiling face with the legend: 'While the poor have no bread, the rich will have no peace.' Fighting talk. 'They have humiliated and looted for hundreds of years', Morales told the journalist. 'We are trying to put a stop to that now.'

This is the uncompromising voice of Latin America's indigenous peoples now making itself heard. Morales is the latest example of the radical mood in the continent, but the new political era began some years ago with the election of Hugo Chávez as President in Venezuela in December 1998. A charismatic former army officer with an overtly revolutionary programme (which included an entire chapter of a new constitution devoted to indigenous peoples), Chávez has begun talking recently about the need to formulate a 'socialism for the twenty-first century'. His victory was followed by that of Lula de Silva in Brazil in 2002, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003, Tabaré Vásquez in Uruguay in 2005, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Michelle Bachelet in Chile in 2006.

Following down the pipeline this year has come Ollanta Humala in Peru, a left-wing former officer who, though he did not in the end win, drew on massive indigenous support in the presidential elections in June. In Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obregón, a former radical mayor of Mexico City, is a strong presidential candidate; in September there are good prospects for the elections in Ecuador (where a possible candidate is Rafael Correa, a radical economist); and Daniel Ortega, the former Sandinista leader, will probably win the elections in Nicaragua in November. All come from ideological strands in the Latin American spectrum that are recognisably to the left.

Clearly this is not a homogenous left; their programmes and political processes are specific to each country. Some have an outspoken rhetoric hostile to neo-liberalism, others are happy with the way things are. Yet they do have several things in common. All share a strong sense of nationalism, the revival of a historic Latin American characteristic that has been strikingly dormant in the neo-liberal years. All are critical of the excessive US cultural influence in the continent, as well as its more familiar political presence; and all (with the exception of Chile) have indicated their hostility to the US project of creating a Latin American Free Trade Area, and share a vision of an integrated Latin America free from its

northern overlord.

These are small acorns, yet the outlines of a common agenda can be mistily discerned. While the word 'socialism' is used sparingly, many of these new leftist governments are also beginning to foresee a new role for the state. There is no intention to return to the large-scale nationalisations that characterised, say, the Chilean government of Salvador Allende in the 1970s. Yet many now see the need for the state to control, or more closely to oversee, their countries' extractive industries. The recovery of governmental control over the nationalised oil industry of Venezuela by Hugo Chávez, securing increased revenues from royalties and taxes, is widely seen as a model. What has worked in Venezuela is being copied in Bolivia, and Evo Morales announced on May Day 2006 that foreign companies would have six months to renegotiate their contracts. They would be expected to cede to the state their existing ownership rights to energy resources, and to pay higher royalties and taxes. The companies have made appropriate noises of discomfort, yet with the continuing high price of oil they will have little cause for complaint. If radical governments emerge in Peru and Ecuador, the same recipe will be tried.

Also significant in many of countries with left-leaning governments is the presence of mobilised social movements operating in the background. These have been working for the most part as independent actors, yet they have proved capable of dramatic political intervention, and include the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil (the Movement of Landless Workers), and the *piqueteros*, or 'strikers', in Argentina. This movement developed from the actions of unemployed workers in northern Argentina, thrown out of work by the privatisations of the 1980s and 1990s. Spreading widely throughout the country, the *piqueteros* brought Buenos Aires to a standstill in December 2001, provoking a prolonged political crisis of which Nestor Kirchner was the eventual beneficiary. Together with the indigenous movements in Bolivia and CONAIE in Ecuador (the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas*), these have all become permanent features of the political scene, unimaginable in the years of military dictatorship.

The revolt against the Washington consensus

The move to the left is largely the outcome of the economic and political failure of the Washington Consensus. This formidable, counter-revolutionary neo-liberal project, first imposed in Chile in the mid-1970s, spread throughout

the continent in the two subsequent decades. The Chilean programmes were originally elaborated by General Pinochet's 'Chicago Boys', eager monetarists schooled at the University of Chicago, who began their work in 1975. The privatisation of state industries took off after 1978, and the Chilean model was finally established in the 1980s, combining free markets with a repressive political system. It was much admired by the new conservative governments of Eastern Europe (and China) after 1989.

Bolivia was next in line to imbibe the neo-liberal medicine. In 1986 it fell into the hands of Jeffrey Sachs, a then youthful Harvard economic guru who went on later to help dismantle the statist economies of Eastern Europe. (He subsequently repented somewhat to become the director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.) One result of Sachs's recommendations to the Bolivian government was an end to the scourge of hyper-inflation that had affected the economy in the 1980s. Less welcome was the advice to halt the government subsidy to the country's historic tin mines, a decision that led inevitably to their economic collapse and closure, throwing thousands of miners out of work.

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After Bolivia came Venezuela, where an arrogant attempt in 1989 to drive through an emergency neo-liberal programme (put forward, as in Bolivia and Chile, by clever young US-educated economists) was greeted with street protests in Caracas on an unprecedented scale. The so-called *Caracazo* of February 1989 marked the start of the fight-back in Latin America against the neo-liberal order. The protests were perceived as regime-threatening, the army was called in to crush them, and more than a thousand people were killed. A further decade of economic and political deterioration (involving two attempted military coups, the successful impeachment of the President, and the collapse of the country's principal bank) led to the implosion of the corrupt old political system and the eventual emergence at the end of the 1990s of Colonel Chávez.

After Venezuela came Ecuador, where a political explosion in 1990 marked the formal start of the new politics in the Andes: the emergence of indigenous movements demanding their political rights. That year a hundred indigenous activists occupied the cathedral in Quito, to demand action from the government

to resolve a land dispute in the Sierra. Later in 1990 the unrest spread to Bolivia where indigenous groups from the lowlands of the Beni began a long protest march to La Paz, their anger provoked by another neo-liberal phenomenon: the arrival of foreign logging companies moving onto their land.

The demonstration in Quito sparked an insurrection throughout the highlands, and the government was obliged to recognise CONAIE as the legitimate voice of the Indian majority. CONAIE had been established a few years earlier, in 1986, by Ecuador's 11 principal indigenous nations.

Land conflicts and the increasing politicisation of the indigenous movements led to the creation of Ecuador's first indigenous political party in 1995. Pachakutik, or the Movement of Pluri-national Unity, developed a radical rhetoric that went far beyond a demand for the recognition of land rights. The initial three slogans of the movement were 'no corruption, no lies, no idleness' ['*ama sua, ama llulla, ama kjella*'], but eventually it came out with more specific complaints against the Quito government's neo-liberal programme, moving into top gear when the government, with IMF advice, adopted the US dollar as the national currency.

In January 2000 a rebellion was ignited by Pachakutik supporters, backed by young army officers. They seized the Congress building in Quito and brought down the government. Colonel Luis Gutiérrez, one of the young officers, was elected President three years later with the support of Pachakutik. This first experiment in the Andes of an alliance between the military and the indigenous movements lasted for less than a year, for Colonel Gutiérrez refused to abandon the neo-liberal policies of his predecessors. He retained the US dollar, and Pachakutik withdrew its support. A further rebellion in 2005 led to his overthrow and replacement by an interim President, Alfredo Palacios.

Meanwhile something similar was taking place in Bolivia, where the indigenous movements had also organised a Pachakutik movement in the 1990s, with the same three demands as the movement in Ecuador - no corruption, no lies, no idleness. Felipe Quispe, their leader among the Aymara, talked of the communal Eden that had existed before the Spanish conquest, and, like the indigenous leaders in Ecuador, he often used the anti-capitalist language of the anti-globalisation movements. He called for capitalism to be replaced by an economic system based on the three ancient pillars of pre-Colombian society, and for the country's artificial borders to be redrawn. Quispe was soon overtaken in political realism and in popularity by Evo Morales, another Aymara leader, who

allied himself to politicians outside the indigenous movement, notably Alvaro García Linera (who would become his Vice-President). Their political group, the Movement to Socialism, secured support beyond the indigenous population in the *mestizo* middle class and in the relics of the old trade union movement.

As a result of the drastic closure of the tin mines in the 1980s, the class-conscious and highly unionised mining workforce, now without work, had been translated from the cold plateau of the Altiplano to the semi-tropical coca fields of the Chapare. There these former miners cultivated coca, the most profitable work available. Their unscheduled move had an unexpected impact on the country's politics, for their old union activism, deployed in this fresh setting, was soon to join with that of the emerging indigenous movements to create a successful electoral tide.

At presidential elections in June 2002, Morales came a close second to Sánchez de Losada, a right-wing millionaire with close links to the American embassy. A year later, in October 2003, La Paz was given over to demonstrators protesting against his privatisation programme. The indigenous population streamed down from the hills to attack US fast-food outlets and supermarkets, and Sánchez de Losada fled into exile in the United States, to be replaced by his deputy, Carlos Mesa.

The popular protest bubbling away in the Andes had a particular focus on the various neo-liberal attempts to privatise the municipal water supply, a project that proved particularly offensive to indigenous opinion. Demonstrations in Cochabamba in April 2000 led to the cancellation of a water contract with the US firm Bechtel, and similar protests in El Alto in January 2005 led to the withdrawal of a French water firm, Lyonnaise des Eaux, which had been operating there since 1997.

Protests in Bolivia against water privatisation were soon extended to the government's apparent 'give away' of the country's oil and natural gas reserves, and these led in June 2005 to the resignation of President Mesa and to the eventual electoral victory of Evo Morales in December.

A similar story has been unfolding in Peru, hitherto less exposed to indigenous politics than the other Andean countries. The terrible cost of the repression of *Sendero Luminoso*, the Maoist guerrilla movement of the 1980s, which led to more than 70,000 deaths, left people with little appetite for politics. Yet in the year 2000 a coalition similar to that in Ecuador, of military officers and indigenous

organisations, supported a rebellion by two young officers, Ollanta and Antauro Humala. Their rebellion accelerated the downfall of the neo-liberal government of Alberto Fujimori, and in subsequent years, the Humala brothers created a countrywide organisation with an indigenous and nationalist agenda that sought to resurrect the government and geographical space of the Inca empire.

Their movement's magazine, *Ollanta*, selling more than 60,000 copies each fortnight, campaigned against privatisation, globalisation and the free-market system adopted by successive Peruvian governments. *Ollanta*'s message went down well in a country where more than half the population is Quechua or Aymara. Peruvian social movements were closely watching events in Bolivia and demonstrations in Arequipa in 2002 halted the sale of local water companies to a Belgian firm.

Antauro Humala organised a fresh rebellion in January 2005, seizing the Andean town of Andahuaylas with a group of 200 former soldiers. Their call for the resignation of President Alejandro Toledo secured the support of thousands of local people, who came out on the streets to express their solidarity. Government forces soon regained control of the town, but the explosive potential of the Andean highlands stood revealed.

Ollanta Humala became the frontrunner in this year's presidential campaign, distancing himself from his brother's version of what has become known as 'ethno-nationalism' on the grounds that it was too right-wing. Ollanta prefers the left-wing language of Hugo Chávez.

Latin America's white elite has been virulently hostile to the emergence of the indigenous movements in the Andes. In Peru, Mario Vargas Llosa, the novelist and former right-wing presidential candidate (now a Spanish citizen), is an outspoken critic, accusing them of generating 'political and social disorder'. Society faces a choice, he says, between civilisation and barbarism. This is the age-old cry of Latin America's white settlers, an indication of their unwillingness to come to terms with the indigenous peoples whose continent they have usurped.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by the opposition in Venezuela, where the pronounced hostility to Chávez from the old ruling elite comes more from race hatred than from class prejudice. Chávez has not hurt the rich in their pocket, only in their *amour propre*. By addressing the neglected question of the black and indigenous majority of the population, he has reminded the rich whites

of the real nature of the society in which they live.

The prevalence of the free market, once thought to presage 'the end of history', has certainly thrown up some intriguing new actors on the political stage, although maybe it is too early to map out their ultimate impact. The indigenous movements are by no means homogenous and have a disconcerting tendency to quarrel and divide. Each ethnic group has its own traditions and its own leader, and unites with others with difficulty.

Yet their presence at the political centre is now well-established. Their flamboyant eruption signposts the creation and growth of a cultural resistance to the globalising trends that have swept the world in the years since the collapse of communism. As well as bringing increased poverty to the already poor, the onslaught of economic neo-liberalism was also accompanied by a cultural invasion that has affected the development of individual countries in important ways: the import of American-style consumer habits has influenced what people grow and what they eat, where they shop and what they wear, and what they watch at the cinema and on television.

Globalisation had also brought a particular form of liberal democracy, often at odds with local tradition. Old political parties have been undermined and cast aside, while new forms of political campaigning have arrived as part of a package 'Made-in-the-USA'. Huge sums have been spent on election advertising, particularly on television, and on the commissioning of marketing and opinion polls. Freshly revived concepts have been encouraged, like 'civil society' and 'human rights', that have little echo in Latin America's traditional political vocabulary.

While the new cult of globalisation has been accepted by Latin America's dominant elites, their position is increasingly insecure. They remain delicately balanced above a seething mass of discontented humanity. The problem for the globalisers is that Latin America is composed of many countries with little cultural or social homogeneity. The white settler elites may welcome the culture and practice that comes from another settler society, but these are anathema to the indigenous inhabitants, at war with the settlers for five centuries.

In breaking away from the political parties of the white settlers, and in giving their support to their own emerging movements, the indigenous peoples are promoting and sustaining the growth of a new cultural nationalism that is beginning to erode the forces of globalisation.

Three countries so far have embraced the cause of cultural nationalism at the level of the state - Castro's Cuba, Chávez's Venezuela, and Morales's Bolivia. All have supported the struggle of the indigenous peoples, and all have emphasised their own history of liberation struggle going back over the centuries. All have sought to give value and respect to their traditional underclass, and to use their sense of history as a weapon to defeat the globalisers.

In doing so they have revived an argument in Latin America that goes back at least as far as Simón Bolívar and José Martí. 'Our history is different from that of the United States or Europe', they argue. 'Our culture is different, our politics are different, and so too is our economic system. And our countries have a right to define what our future will be, without being told what to do by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, or the World Trade Organisation.' Maybe such ideas may be seen eventually as a force for change, and not just in Latin America.