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Gerardo Muñoz

The Democratic Horizon of Emancipation: Interview with Maristella Svampa on the Crisis of the Progressive Cycle in Latin America

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GERARDO MUÑOZ¹

The Democratic Horizon of Emancipation: Interview with Maristella Svampa on the Crisis of the Progressive Cycle in Latin America²

*Maristella Svampa is a sociologist and researcher at CONICET (National Technical and Scientific Research Council) at the University of La Plata. She is the author of a dozen books that have had a significant impact on the academic and public discussion of regional politics, social movements, and the function of the state in Latin America. Among her most recent books are *Fifteen Myths and Realities of Transnational Mining in Argentina* (Colectivo Ediciones Herramientas, 2011), *Maldevelopment: Extractivism and Plunder in Argentina* (co-written with Enrique Viale, Katz, 2014), and *Latin American Debates: Indianism, Development, Dependency, and Populism* (Edhasa, 2016). Over the course of the decade, Svampa's critical work has constituted a sustained effort to understand the progressive actors of the region, as well as an inquiry into the geopolitical configuration at the intersection of state form and transnational capital. Her well-known thesis of the "commodities consensus" has had a broad influence across Latin Americanist thought of this decade, expanding the analytical frameworks through which we understand the so-called Latin American Pink Tide, that is, the series of progressive governments that came*

¹ GERARDO MUÑOZ is a fourth year PhD student in Latin American literature at Princeton University. His dissertation "Fissures of the State: crisis of sovereignty and principles Latin American twentieth century" explores cases of fractured hegemony and political principles. He is a member of the Infrapolitical Deconstruction academic collective (www.infrapolitica.wordpress.com).

² This interview was originally published in Spanish on the digital magazine Fronterad and can be found in <http://www.fronterad.com/?q=maristella-svampa-y-crisis-ciclo-progresista-en-latinoamerica>. It has been translated by Anne Freeland and was published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/6/21/the-democratic-horizon-of-emancipation-interview-with-maristella-svampa-on-the-crisis-of-the-progressive-cycle-in-latin-america> on June 21st, 2016.

to power following the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999. Her analysis of the new forms of extractivism (mega-mining, fracking, and deforestation, among others) constitutive of the current processes of accumulation has shed light on the internal workings of the redistributive policies of these states and their development models. In this interview, Svampa takes up some of the questions that have been central to her work in light of the so-called “exhaustion of the progressive cycle,” a moment in which we seem to be witnessing the decline of the progressive governments with the electoral defeat of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, the succession of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and Evo Morales’s defeat in Bolivia, where a referendum to amend the constitution and allow Morales to run for a fourth term was rejected. Within this conjuncture, Svampa’s political reflection is oriented toward a horizon of radical democracy—against all identitarianisms—grounded in a shared experience that she calls “a common good of humanity” and the possibility of thinking politics otherwise.

GM: How do you see the exhaustion of the cycle of progressive governments in light of the resounding electoral victory of Mauricio Macri in the recent election in Argentina? Can we in fact speak of the “end of an era” in the region, and the rise of a new regional right, considering what’s happening at the same time in Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela?

MS: Let’s start with the first part of your question. For some time I’ve been speaking of the end of an era in the region, which doesn’t just include Argentina. Between 2000 and 2015, a lot has happened in Latin America. Over the course of these fifteen years, the different progressive governments went from being considered a new Latin American left, arousing keen expectations of political change, to being understood in terms of a twenty-first century populism. In the passage from one conceptualization to the other, something important was lost, there was a sense of abandonment, the loss of an emancipatory dimension of politics and the evolution towards traditional forms of domination, based on personality cults and the identification of the leader with the state.

As for the rise of the right. I’d like to distance myself from conspiracy theories, and not because I don’t think that the right has done anything to erode the legitimacy of the progressive governments. We know they have. But I think the possibility of the

rise of a new right is due largely to the mistakes and excesses of the progressive governments, which have been emphasizing their least pluralistic, most populist dimension, evident in the concentration of power in the executive and in their clear intolerance of dissent.

On the other hand, the extractivist model has shown its limitations in the context of a sharp decline in international commodity prices (some have called it the end of the commodity supercycle). This seems not only to have limited the “comparative advantages” that fueled economic growth over almost a decade (2003–2013), but also to have thrown these countries into an ever-deepening economic crisis, demonstrating the inability of these governments to transform the productive models, their dependency upon and consolidation of a primary product export model. It has also shown the volatility of the success of this model, with rising poverty and the disaffection of the middle classes.

If we look at the Argentine case, there was no indisputable triumph of the right. Macri won by a small margin, and he was as surprised as anyone at the results of the first round, which led to the *ballotage* (the second electoral round). In fact, Kirchnerism was the architect of its own defeat. We must keep in mind that Kirchnerism had long ceased to be a center-left phenomenon, even if it enjoyed a quasi-monopoly of that space over the past decade, and this surely explains part of the exhaustion of a society in the face of the dramatization and polarization of politics that Kirchnerism exacerbated. Its support for the candidacy of the many-faced Aníbal Fernández (accused of having ties to drug trafficking), dismissing the claims of his complicity with the police and the region’s drug trade as if this were just part of the opposition’s “narrative,” was one of the signs of the moribund state of Peronist progressivism.³ So there were many factors: corruption and enrichment of the governing class, including the presidential family and the vice president, crony

³ On the allegations of Aníbal Fernández’s connection to the drug trade, see *Jorge Lanata presentó un informe que vincula a Aníbal Fernández con el narcotráfico*.

capitalism (known as *capitalism among friends*), sustained inflation since 2007, and a significant deterioration of the economy.⁴

GM: How do you see the emergence of Cambiemos-PRO and Macri on the Argentine political scene? Are we witnessing a rearrangement of certain economic policies of Kirchnerism, or is it simply a neoconservative restoration? Or maybe a combination of the two?

MS: The new Macri government represents a break, but also some continuities with the previous government. I will discuss only some of them. To begin with, we have the ideological break: as of December 10th of 2015, Argentina ceased to be governed by a regime identified with an intense populism, based on the concentration of power, intolerance of dissent, and Cristina's hyper-leadership; the new regime is one of right-wing liberalism, based explicitly on a "business-community" model, that is, pro-business, but one that is prepared to work to build its political base, and understands politics in terms of management and marketing.⁵

But I don't think this ideological break means a simple return to the neoliberalism of the nineties. I have no doubt that this will lead to greater social inequality, but this also depends on the limits that Argentine society imposes on the new government. Public sector layoffs, spiraling inflation both pre- and post-devaluation, pro-business measures, the exorbitant increase in utility prices, and a weak social agenda, testify to a government that tends to focus on a single sphere, and not that of the majority.

On the other hand, we must not forget that we live in a different society than we did two decades ago, and this is clear in the capacity for social protest and the expanded language of rights. All this suggests that there should be little room for such a regression. It's no accident that Macri seems to want to establish himself in a space of variable parameters, oscillating between, on the one hand, a less state-centered developmentalism and a recognition of the importance of the social, and, on the other

⁴ Svampa develops the ideas of the "new contractor nation" and "capitalism among friends" in *Maldevelopment*.

⁵ The ideologist of "political marketing" in Mauricio Macri's campaign, Jaime Durán Barba, discusses this in his *El arte de ganar: Cómo usar el ataque en campañas electorales exitosas* (Debate, 2011).

hand, a post-nineties neoliberalism, in the style of the former Chilean president Sebastián Piñera. It's still too early to say how this balance or tension between the one and the other will play out, which of the two tendencies will prevail, but the first two months of Macri's government have demonstrated a tendency toward business-centered developmentalist neoliberalism.

On the other hand, there is a continuity with Kirchnerism with respect to extractivism—mega-mining (the government has already announced the elimination of mining taxes), fracking, land-grabbing, and agribusiness. It's true that the appointment of CEOs to various ministries has caused considerable alarm, and especially among communities affected by extractivism, which doesn't mean that these communities have forgotten the recent past. After all, Miguel Galuccio, the CEO of YPF, came from a major multinational company almost on the scale of Shell and the Kirchnerist minister of mining, Jorge Mayoral, is associated with firms that supplied Barrick Gold. Kirchnerism was particularly effective in consolidating a powerful business community, although it availed itself of a language of political mediations and a narrative of heroic progressivism, and could count on the complicit silence of so many intellectuals. In this vein, Macri's program represents a social shift and further extractivism, so we will very likely see new situations of repression and disregard for democracy.⁶

GM: Two recent books—**Verónica Gago's** *Neoliberal Reason: Baroque Economies and Popular Pragmatics* (Tinta Limón, 2015) and your *Maldevelopment: Extractivism and Plunder in Argentina* (Katz, 2014) (with Enrique Viale), expose the limits of the economic model of redistributive policies coupled with the perpetuation of a flexible model of accumulation and development. I'm also thinking here of Gareth Williams' groundbreaking work, *The Other Side of the Popular: Neoliberalism and Subalternity in Latin America* (Duke University Press, 2002). This economic model seems to consist of complex registers that function simultaneously at the macro and micro levels, that negotiate inclusion in the sphere of consumption and more global models of extractivism. How

⁶ Maristella Svampa. Estruendos en la mina. *Revista Ñ*, February 22, 2016.

should we understand the heterogeneous composition of the region's economy at the moment? How do you understand the relationship between consumption and accumulation in the popular processes in the region in the past years of progressivism?

MS: The kind of production that goes hand in hand with today's dominant model of commodification of nature and of social life is associated with certain social paradigms and imaginaries of consumption. That is, they contribute to the consolidation of a way of life, that which is currently hegemonic, grounded in certain ideas of progress that permeate our language, our practices, our everyday life; how we conceive of quality of life, the good life, and social development. Ulrich Brand speaks of an "imperial way of life," referring to the universalization "of a mode of life that is imperial toward nature and in its social relations and that is in no way democratic, in that it does not question any form of domination. The imperial way of life does not simply refer to a lifestyle practiced in different social milieus, but to imperial models of production, distribution, and consumption, cultural imaginaries and subjectivities strongly rooted in the everyday practices of the majority in the north, but also, increasingly, of the emerging upper and middle classes of the south."

In this sense, the progressive regimes have not been very innovative with respect to the models of consumption, because they have stimulated the model of the consumer-citizen or of inclusion through consumption, rather than a model of citizenship based on rights. This is not what happened in the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, when part of the Latin American left, despite being rather indifferent to environmental issues, thought in terms of "basic needs" and questioned the universalization of the model of consumption of the societies of the north, which, in its expansion toward the richest sectors of the societies of the south, not only implied increased concentration of privilege and wealth, but also constituted an unsustainable development model. I want to underscore this because today the progressive governments are far from questioning consumption; they glorify it. I remember in 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner boasted that the Argentines were

the world's top consumers of soft drinks.⁷ We are moving away from the association of Coca-Cola with the United States, a country in which there is a campaign against the consumption of soft drinks as a cause of obesity. Latin America is an emerging market for a lot of products, which become aspirational symbols, something that the various governments encourage while simultaneously availing themselves of an antisystemic rhetoric.

Much of the prominence of the notion of development is due to the fact that the models of consumption associated with the hegemonic model permeate the entire population. That is, today, what is considered to be a “better life” is associated with a demand for the “democratization” of consumption, rather than the necessity of bringing about cultural change with respect to consumption and the environment, based on a different theory of social needs and the relationship with nature. The correspondence between the models of production and consumption, the generalization in the countries of the north, but also of the south, of a “hegemonic way of life,” makes the social and geopolitical connection or articulation between the different struggles (social and environmental, urban and rural, for example), and their respective emancipatory languages, notoriously more difficult.

GM: Along with the crisis of the progressive cycle we see an explicit return of the politico-theological. In what way do you think Pope Francis affects the current Latin American map? There are some who think that there could be an alliance with a certain Franciscanism as a new contentious force in the international arena. This is the argument that Gianni Vattimo made at the Forum for Emancipation and Equality in Buenos Aires, where he predicted that the Vatican would become a Fourth Communist International.⁸ What do you think are the limits of such an alliance?

MS: I'm very skeptical about this. Certainly Francis (a Peronist pope) adds a new level of complexity to the current Latin American configuration, but I think the

⁷ Diego Valeriano. Consumamos, lo demás no importa nada.

⁸ Gianni Vattimo's talk at the *Forum for Emancipation and Equality*, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRBcrrmnDE>

importance of his role in Europe is exaggerated. And this exaggeration has less to do with the Latin American reality and much more to do with a certain ideological vacuum in Europe, beyond the promising leftist movements, like that which has emerged in Spain. In Latin America, despite the crisis of the progressive movements, there is no such vacuum, because there's another backdrop, made up of the social organizations and social movements, which have contributed and continue to contribute to the emergence of a new language of valorization (of the land, of nature) and a new political grammar.

On the other hand, Latin American societies are very religious, but Catholicism has lost ground to evangelical churches whose conservative and reactionary character is alarming, and which are beginning to occupy political positions (as a parliamentary bloc in Brazil, or a sector within the Movement Toward Socialism in Bolivia, or in the context of indigenous organizations aligned with the government, as in Ecuador). Francis is a relevant figure and his new encyclical, *Laudato Si*, is critical of the extractivism of the current governments, whether of the right or of the left, and is surely a source of support for social and environmental organizations. But his environmental preaching has found little resonance in the current governments.

GM: Bolivia seems to be one of the countries on the Latin American political map that has escaped the general exhaustion (notwithstanding Morales's defeat in the referendum to authorize another presidential term). But to what point is the hegemonic communitarian horizon—proclaimed by vice president Álvaro García Linera himself over the years in his public speeches, and published on the website of the Vice Presidency of the Plurinational State⁹—sustainable in the context of extractivism or internal domination within the logic of hegemony?

MS: There is no doubt that Morales's government represented a redistribution of social power in a country where the indigenous majority has historically been excluded and subjected to systemic racism. It's also true that the political task has not

⁹ See *Geopolítica de la amazonia* (2012) and *Socialismo comunitario: un horizonte de época* (2015). Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia.

been easy; in its early years it had to contend with regional oligarchies that threatened to secede. But this “catastrophic stalemate” ended toward 2009, the year in which the new constitution of the Plurinational State was approved, and thus a new stage began, with the growing hegemony of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) and the ever greater importance of Evo Morales’s leadership. The government was characterized by its redistributive programs, a new agrarian reform, economic growth and stability, and the strategic nationalization of certain companies, along with the escalation of natural gas extraction and agribusiness.

But conflicts like the one with the TIPNIS (Indigenous Territory of Isidoro Secure National Park) over the construction of a highway without due consultation with the indigenous populations reconfigured the political scene, unmasking the real politics of the government, beyond its eco-communitarian discourse in defense of Pachamama. The indigenist and most autonomist wing of the government thus succumbed to the more statist wing, increasingly oriented towards a traditionally populist form of domination. Vice president Álvaro García Linera—who during the TIPNIS conflict would accuse critics of “colonial environmentalism,” an anathema that conflated the leftist NGOs and dissenting indigenous groups with international organizations—headed the defense of the extractivist model. A “revelatory conjuncture,” as political scientist Luis Tapia (a former colleague of García Linera in the intellectual collective Grupo Comuna) would say, after TIPNIS, nothing was the same again in Bolivia.¹⁰ In the past few years the ruling party has increasingly displaced oppositional indigenous organizations (marginalizing dissenters and creating power structures recognized by the state), silenced critical journalists by cutting off public support, and generated a growing process of self-censorship in the non-official press; and finally, the threat to expel the critical and leftist NGOs, for which the government wrote a new law for disciplinary purposes.

It is in the framework of this attempt to close off channels of expression that the

¹⁰ Luis Tapia. *El Leviatán criollo*. La Paz: Autodeterminación Ediciones, 2014.

government launched its proposal to renew the term of the presidential ticket, which has just been rejected in a referendum (with 51.56% against and 48.44% in favor), in a context in which the political opposition is weak and fragmented (despite controlling several departments and despite the regime's defeat in the referendum).¹¹ Moreover, the concentration of power forecloses the possibility of an emergence of a new political leadership from below. If the government had won the referendum, Evo Morales and García Linera would have been permitted to remain in power for twenty consecutive years. Only ten years ago, these same leaders would have vehemently opposed any other political figure or party that attempted to perpetuate its rule in this way, and yet today, they can unabashedly claim that only the renewal of their own mandate can guarantee the continuation of the process of change within the framework of a popular government and prevent the dreaded return of the right.

The topic of reelection is not a new one in the Latin American conjuncture and has been a source of social polarization. In 2013, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner flirted with the possibility but found that there was too much social opposition. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa also had to renounce the prospect of reelection after a year of conflict with both the right and the left in 2015. To my knowledge, the only ones who succeeded in authorizing indefinite reelection were Hugo Chávez, in 2009, in his second attempt, and the Sandinista Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, whose government is unequivocally authoritarian. These governments, despite their differences, represent a process of concentration of executive power in a hyper-presidential framework and ultimately represent a messianic historical narrative, because they believe that historical change is effected by a leader and not by a change in the correlation of social forces.¹²

In my opinion, we do no service to the Latin American left by leaving these problems to the political right. Neither the defense of freedoms nor the critique of the

¹¹ Official results here: <http://52.86.73.107:55>

¹² Maristella Svampa. *La sociedad excluyente: la Argentina bajo el signo del neoliberalismo*. Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2005.

concentration of power is the ideological property of the right. Moreover, in line with what Roberto Gargarella maintains, it's almost impossible to think that the expansion of popular participation and the concentration of power can go hand in hand.¹³ And reelection is clearly a move towards the concentration of power. Finally, it is precisely the most vulnerable sectors and those on the left who are the victims of the recurrent closures of political spaces and violations of human rights. In sum, returning to Bolivia, perhaps because it's the country that aroused the greatest political hope in the region, it is today an exemplary case that is putting the critical intelligence of the various Latin American lefts to the test.

GM: Critical Latin Americanist discourses (produced within and outside of Latin America) have upheld the notion of the “communitarian” or “the commons.” The “turn to the commons” seeks “direct” access to democracy, and positions itself at once against the institutional verticality of the state and against the charismatic process of populism. But the discourse of the common or the communal is also installed within the rhetoric of some of these states (such as the Venezuelan or the Bolivian).¹⁴ To what extent can the communitarian (identitarian) be a democratic horizon of emancipation?

MS: Concepts in the process of their construction tend to be disputed concepts. So there is a symbolic debate around the new horizon of concepts and a risk of their abuse; they can be twisted or emptied of their potentiality. It's the danger of the “perverse convergence,” as Evelina Dagnino warned in reference to concepts like that of “democratic participation” back in the nineties, with their appropriation by the World Bank and the neoliberal governments. This is occurring today not only with

¹³ Roberto Gargarella. *La sala de máquinas de la Constitución: dos siglos de constitucionalismo en América Latina (1810-2010)*. Buenos Aires: Katz, 2014.

¹⁴ Three major works on the so-called communitarian turn in Latin America: *Dispersar el poder: los movimientos sociales como poderes antiestatales* (Ediciones desde abajo, 2007) by Raúl Zibechi; *Los ritmos del Pachakuti: movilización y levantamiento popular-indígena en Bolivia* (Tinta Limón, 2008) by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar; and “*Se han adueñado del proceso de lucha*”. *Horizontes comunitario-populares en tensión y la reconstitución de la dominación en la Bolivia del MAS* (SOCEE/Autodeterminación, 2015) by Huáscar Salazar Lohman.

the concept of “common good” but also with that of *buen vivir*, installed within the governmental rhetoric in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia, and to a lesser extent in Venezuela.¹⁵ Both likewise appear in the pro-establishment rhetoric of certain international organizations.

Beyond the debates, it should be emphasized that the grammar of the common appears as an element of convergence between the countries of the north and those of the south. But the nuances must also be emphasized: while in the countries of the north the grammar of the common is oriented toward the public, that is, against policies of adjustment and privatization (against neoliberalism), against the appropriation of knowledge, the new economy of knowledge (cognitive capitalism and its forms of appropriation), and only more recently against extractivism (particularly against fracking), in our peripheral countries, the common is opposed rather to the various forms of developmentalist neoextractivism, which include land grabs, privatization of seeds, and overexploitation of natural resources as a whole.

From a perspective consonant with the reality of Latin America, the Belgian François Houtart associates common goods with *the common good of humanity*, in the most general sense, which implies the foundations of the collective life of humanity on the planet: the relation to nature, the production of life, collective organization (politics), and the interpretation, valorization, and expression of the real (culture). It’s not, however, a question of patrimony, but of a “condition” (wellbeing, living well), a result of all the different aspects of the life of human beings, of men and women, on the earth.¹⁶ The Common Good of Humanity as a democratic horizon of emancipation refers to the defense and reproduction of life, which are threatened today. Its potentiality, within the framework of the current civilizational and environmental crisis, is huge.

GM: Lastly, in *Maldevelopment* you reflect on the role of women in relation to forms of resistance that are not domesticated by state power, but expressed

¹⁵ On the concept of ‘buen vivir,’ see *Plurinacionalidad y Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir: dos conceptos leídos desde Bolivia y Ecuador post-constituyente* (Ediciones Abya-Yale, 2015), by Salvador Schavelzon.

¹⁶ François Houtart. ‘From *common goods* to the *common good of humanity*’ *HAOL*, No. 26, Otoño, 87-102.

within a logic of **solidarity and of the common**. You write: “... it is necessary to underscore the role of popular feminisms in the emergence of a pro-communal ethos, especially those visions tied to feminist economy and eco-feminism, based on an ethic of care and values like **reciprocity and complementarity**.”¹⁷ Do you think that feminisms and these new struggles for the commons reappear now at the center of the agenda in the face of the exhaustion of state progressivism?

MS: I don't know if these new struggles will be at the center of the agenda with the crisis of progressivism. We must not forget that these progressivisms have absorbed part of the creative energy of the various social movements and organizations, which they rewarded with certain policies, but while taking away their autonomy, in the sense of lessening their capacity to determine an agenda, a political agenda independent of the government.

Of course, there are a number of territorial, socio-environmental, indigenous, and feminist struggles that through their persistence, their insistence on the protection and reproduction of life, on the quest for a non-exploitative relation to nature, from a perspective that emphasizes eco-dependence, open up new relational ontologies, that question dualistic and hierarchical views, that appear independently of the market and the state. But the danger is that, in the face of the failure of state progressivism and the loss of power of the social organizations and movements that are organically linked to these states, a disenchantment will spread and the new grammar of life, of the common, based on the principles of complementarity and reciprocity, will be considered unrealistic. We know that it is necessary to recreate the very idea of a pluralistic, democratic, emancipatory project of the left, but this is not the same task today as it was fifteen years ago. The experience of the progressive governments has opened many wounds, not only in the social movements and organizations but also in Latin American critical thought.

¹⁷ Maristella Svampa, *Maldesarrollo*. 398.