

From Iain Brown
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8 Theses on Local Government and the Struggle for Socialism¹

Raul Pont

The first World Social Forum allowed us to share many varied experiences from every continent of people's resistance to the effects of neoliberal globalisation. Porto Alegre became a huge stage where the exchange of ideas and information made us realise that while our struggles may be local and isolated, they resemble and have the same objectives as many others throughout the world.

We came away more convinced than ever that we are not alone. We understood that there is a common denominator to struggles against national and social exploitation, against racial and sexual discrimination, in defence of the environment – criticising a concept of progress based on a productivism that preys upon nature – against unemployment and exclusion, and in defence of children and youth.

This shared identity comes from an understanding that the battle against neoliberal globalisation takes place on many different levels and that we need to find ever-greater unity amongst these different fights, in terms of both their objectives and their impact.

One example involves movements in underdeveloped countries against paying the foreign debt. A few international campaigns centralise this struggle. But their networks of supporters and activists stretch through dozens of countries, and within these countries are multiplied regionally and locally. Together they keep opposition to the debt alive, share information and organise demonstrations.

In a different way, across Latin America and the Caribbean, the São Paulo Forum has been bringing together political parties, groups and movements every year for over a decade, giving them the chance to learn more about each other, exchange information and experience, and agree on motions and joint actions by consensus. The sense of identity, solidarity and confidence that comes with these meetings is an essential part of preparing for future actions and resolutions, and for bringing together the struggles we have in common.

The second World Social Forum should continue this process. We've already seen how much we have in common. Our activities grow stronger through bringing them together and comparing them. Activists nourish each other and discover new ways forward.

Our thematic group² has been discussing relations between society and state, in the context of a crisis in the classical institutions of representative democracy.

Here the question of local power becomes especially important. By that I mean the local and regional governments that anti-neoliberal parties and social movements have been winning control of in several countries around the world. Of course there is a big difference between local government victories in European countries, for example, and Latin America. In Europe the legal, social and political framework is much more deeply rooted and local party contests are much more clearly determined by the national political scene – not that this eliminates the importance of local government even in those countries. In Latin America, however, we have been seeing a rich variety of victories in local government by popular democratic forces and social movements (community organisations and indigenous, trade union and youth groups). These experiences go beyond the national political framework dominated by traditional parties.

These experiences, among which Porto Alegre occupies a prominent position, have spread to many other countries and continents. Today there are hundreds of municipal administrations run by political parties, fronts and broader movements, including indigenous communities, that give another meaning to the public policies they implement.

These local governments involve local communities directly in their decisions and put policies into practice that are opposed to neoliberalism.

Our aim in this text is to try and summarise, in a series of theses, the key characteristics of these experiences in Brazil and in various other countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe that we've had the opportunity to visit and follow. We hope this will help the World Social Forum play its part in reflecting on our various social practices and developing ways of going beyond exclusionary, neoliberal capitalist society.

THESIS I

Local and regional governments provide an experience of participatory democracy through a variety of mechanisms (participatory budgets,

municipal councils, city congresses, regional and sectoral forums, neighbourhood boards and even parish groups) that challenge the idea that the classical representative system is inevitable or unchangeable.

Direct, participatory democracy and the sovereignty of popular decisionmaking go beyond the classical notion of citizenship, where delegation through the ballot box transfers decisionmaking power to governments, members of parliament and their parties with no guarantee that they will carry out their mandate. In some cases, like the election of George W. Bush in the US and the Argentine elections later in 2001, abstentions and spoiled votes added up to more than half the electorate, showing just how much the system lacks legitimacy. Direct popular participation and sovereignty make a different kind of relationship possible between people and their government. They can raise people's consciousness and thus revive, in a positive way, the old debate about new kinds of relationships between society and the state.

When they gain access to the detailed figures of the public budget and the city's various development plans, when they get the chance to draw them up and change them, and above all when they win the sovereign power to decide directly how public money should be spent, then ordinary individuals go beyond the limits of citizenship set by bourgeois democracy. They take over the public sphere and are prepared to take up and fight for a project of genuine, substantive democracy, with less bureaucracy and the least possible delegation of power.

THESIS II

Democratic issues are more and more clearly a source of contradiction between the neoliberal capitalist state and its people (as seen in authoritarian centralism, governments with the power to legislate by decree, weakened federal arrangements, and increasingly dictatorial powers for capital in the workplace). They have therefore become a key strategic element of any project for the transition to socialism.

Together with the national question, this is the big programmatic challenge for socialists. Both sets of issues have tremendous power to mobilise people. Both are integral parts of the strategic project that we defend. We cannot accept the conservative argument that experiences of participatory democracy are 'illegal' or 'contrary to classical representative democracy'. (This is the argument that

conservative members of the state and municipal assemblies use to take legal action against the participatory budget in Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul.) Such experiences of direct and participatory democracy are legal and legitimate according to both the Brazilian constitution and the country's various municipal charters, as well as in terms of modern constitutional theory, whose first principle is that 'power emanates from the people'.

Even in countries where there may be legal obstacles, we should stand up for the idea that sovereignty emanates from the people, and for the legitimacy of attempts to go beyond mere representation. Such attempts should be encouraged, developed and strengthened. The experiences of participatory democracy already gone through in various countries need to be integrated into our theory and programmatic thinking, so that we can move the political struggle on from local government to central government.

THESIS III

Local government experience is essential if we are to develop, encourage and put into practice people's autonomous, self-organised participation. There can be no democratic socialist project without workers' and producers' self-management in their communities and trade unions and other spaces where they come together. In some countries we can see how re-emerging indigenous community bodies are becoming vehicles for organising local government.

These projects' independence from the prevailing representative system is indispensable. The practical political education the population gains as it discusses and decides on public policies and budgets is a fundamental part of self-organisation.

That is why we strongly defend the principle that the procedural rules governing the participatory budget or other forms of participatory democracy should be drawn up by the participants themselves and open to change by them at any time, not dependent on legislation voted through the municipal council chamber or state assembly.

THESIS IV

Population growth and rapid urbanisation, especially in Latin America, mean that municipalities are taking on more and more responsibilities and services that are critical for the majority of the population: housing, sanitation, healthcare, education and social

services. These are areas that an all-powerful, central government cannot possibly run. They are services and historic rights that have never been fully achieved and that neoliberal capitalism is now cutting back. In most cases central government simply abandons its responsibilities and local administrations have to pick up the pieces, without receiving any increase in their share of tax receipts.

Our local governments have to prioritise these areas in their plans, but most importantly they have to transfer the power to decide these priorities to the population, always ensuring the independence of initiatives like the participatory budget and municipal councils.

Our challenge is not to evade the responsibilities of local government just because municipalities in Brazil today get only 14 per cent of the country's total tax income. Indeed in other Latin American countries the situation is similar or worse, because they are more centralised, less federal states.

Our battle must be to use these popular demands and the defence of local government's role to fight for a new distribution of the tax cake and a new kind of federation, in which municipal, provincial and state governments have their political and financial independence strengthened.

These objectives are not at odds with any wider strategy for popular and democratic goals. Such a strategy does not depend on a centralising state. In fact, decentralisation, municipal and provincial autonomy and strengthening local and regional government conflict directly with the authoritarian centralism of neoliberalism.

THESES V

Local governments are also important as a way of building political hegemony, through participatory democracy and by involving the population in organising and developing public services to meet their daily needs. In this way participatory democracy helps us confront the media and economic power, without underestimating them or thinking that popular participation alone is enough.

Clearly private property and several other institutions of the capitalist state, including concessions to national broadcasting networks, cannot be dealt with at municipal level. But a participatory democracy can build up a network of organisations and associations in areas like services, culture, leisure, sport and even manufacturing and trade through small and micro-businesses, a network that reaches thousands of citizens – forming a kind of social vanguard

independent of political parties. This is a network of opinion-formers, who will naturally defend the project that made them protagonists of their own day-to-day existence and the policies that they implement together with local government.

If we bring together the hundreds of neighbourhood and trade union bodies, the community associations working with children and adolescents, cultural, religious and sporting bodies, and we build a participatory democracy with them that decides on public policies and budgets – as we have with the participatory budget and municipal councils – then we will be building a powerful network of support for our political project.

This also applies to those areas of responsibility taken on by local government because the neoliberal central government has abandoned them. When we build health, education and social service networks involving democratic participation by service providers, public sector workers also tend to embrace our political project and free themselves from the influence of central government.

THESES VI

Local governments can also provide a potent example for a whole range of anti-neoliberal policies.

When we put a stop to tax breaks and other fiscal benefits for capitalists, we demonstrate that it is possible to balance the books without resorting to cuts in jobs or services. Similarly, in opposition to the neoliberal right, we can show in practice that we can have well-managed public enterprises capable of generating a surplus for reinvestment. The defence of public utilities in electricity, water, transport and, in the case of state governments, public banks operating on new lines are all concrete ways of confronting the wave of privatisations implemented by our countries' central governments.

When we implement wage increases in line with inflation, when we attack the huge disparities in public-sector pay, when we defend a state pension system run by the state employees themselves, we are also challenging neoliberal ideology. These policies serve as an example for thousands of other workers who see them as justifying their own struggles for similar gains in the private sector and throughout society.

THESIS VII

The electoral victories that have opened the way to such experiences of local government have been achieved in Latin America by fronts of left-wing political parties or by fronts of urban, rural and indigenous social movements.

In the year 2000 in Brazil we won major electoral victories in almost 200 municipalities, including seven state capitals. Our victories were based on a popular and democratic front of political parties, which also sought to represent environmental, feminist and urban social movements. For us it was proof that this is the fundamental, strategic social base underpinning a programme for social change, for a real break with underdevelopment and a transition to socialism.

If this is possible in municipalities, large and small, it is also possible in our countries' states and provinces, based on a programmatic identification with the interests of the majority of the population.

Such results are particularly important given the history of the left in Brazil and in Latin America, with its long subordination to populism and cross-class alliances. They help consolidate the policy of alliances needed to put an anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist programme into practice.

Nothing could be more urgent for a continent in deep crisis as a consequence of structural dependence and the devastation wrought by the foreign debt. We are already seeing ruling-class governments overthrown by desperate, spontaneous action of the popular masses, thanks to their own historic inability to defend national sovereignty at all.

May our local experiences and the World Social Forum help the peoples of Latin America and other continents practically and theoretically, so that they become the protagonists of this new world.

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The Question of Democracy Today¹

Raul Pont

The theme of this seminar panel, 'The Lula Government and Socialism', obliges us to concentrate on just a few issues. A variety of other topics may of course come up in the discussion. That's fine by me. But I want to prioritise the discussion around an issue that seems to me to offer us the best chance of exerting influence where we are active.

If our central, almost obsessive, aim is to defend, consolidate and improve the balance of forces so that we can advance further, then I believe that our over-riding concern at present should be extending democracy in Brazil. Some may think that now that we have the president and a sizeable group in parliament,² the democratic struggle is just a matter of ensuring respect for the rules of the game. But I want to address the issue from a broader, programmatic and strategic point of view. Tackling the question of democracy does not mean limiting ourselves to reproducing the representative system. We know very well that the classic liberal state we have inherited from previous centuries was and remains the political expression of capitalist domination.

The struggle to extend democracy is important for the left everywhere, not just in underdeveloped countries. In general the left around the world is weak, theoretically and programmatically, on this question. Socialist thought has not come very far in its critique of the representative system. Experiences of democracy in the countries of 'really existing socialism' were ephemeral or non-existent.

Without wishing any offence to our European visitors, there are countries in Europe, which we call the First World, where we still see monarchies, where some people are born noble, born unequal – something that republican liberals tried to put an end to in the eighteenth century.

This shows that the struggle for democracy is a live issue in all bourgeois societies. In the Brazilian case, this is aggravated by the