

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.

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legacy of colonial slavery, underdevelopment and a bourgeoisie that has always been submissive, first in the colonial epoch to Portugal, later to Britain and more recently to the US and the centres of international capital. The left has produced very little in this area. Its vision and understanding of democratic issues have often been limited.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the achievement of trade-union and party organisation and the right to political representation brought a series of social and political victories and reforms that contributed to seeing the representative system as an important tool for winning social demands. The project coming out of the 1917 Russian Revolution for governments based on 'councils' (soviets) did not spread to the rest of Europe and lasted only briefly in a Russia that had hardly any experience of the liberal representative system.

Throughout the twentieth century and especially during the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union, the dominant attitude towards democracy among socialists was a utilitarian one. Very little attention was given to how masses of people could really become the subjects of society, to the control of public affairs by the great majority. The unbreakable link between democracy and socialism was forgotten. Nobody did the theoretical or programmatic work that would point towards replacing bourgeois democracy with experiences based on self-management, recallable mandates, a reduction in the delegation of power and more direct forms of control over public spending and the state. What predominated was a simplistic vision of 'bourgeois dictatorship' versus 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

In Brazil, the left's backward approach to democracy was revealed in the debate about an amnesty for political prisoners during the military dictatorship. The older ones among you may remember that shortly before the PT was founded, when we still had political prisoners in Brazil, we went through a debate in which some people insisted – and this is in the documents written at the time – that struggling for an amnesty and in defence of political prisoners was wrong and a waste of time. For them the political prisoner was a fighter in enemy hands. When 'our turn came' we would pay them back in kind. Quite simply, the dictatorship of the proletariat would supersede the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

This made it difficult to carry out concrete struggles and develop greater popular participation. It trapped many of us in a purely doctrinaire position. Even after the PT emerged, this debate

continued. We spent two or three years in the PT discussing whether the constituent assembly was or wasn't an adequate slogan to sum up the popular movement's alternative to the military dictatorship. Thousands and thousands of words of documents and theses were written to prove that this would be a simple surrender to bourgeois ideology, that the masses had no interest in such questions because 'you can't eat a constituent assembly'.

So as we see, we suffer from a huge programmatic weakness on the question of democracy. Nonetheless, if we really want to think about changing the balance of forces and broadening the very restricted space that we operate in, then we need more than anything to have popular participation and support. People's concrete social struggles and the victories they win by mobilising around things like housing, wages and unemployment, as well as their experience in our local governments of deciding how the city's money should be spent, are fundamental to guaranteeing a change in the balance of forces.

Popular participation is essential if people are to develop a clearer understanding, in each struggle and at every stage, of how municipal governments, state governments and the national state itself all work – of who decides on taxes, how tax revenues are split up, who pays and who doesn't.

This demands a huge effort from us. We must build mechanisms that can make the link in practice between the struggle for socialism and the extension of democracy. This is precisely where our struggle for the participatory budget comes in, along with strengthening and giving real decisionmaking power to the municipal and state councils³ and other, more direct forms of popular participation.

But unfortunately, many of our PT local governments simply reproduce classic representative democracy, limited to the delegation of power to city councillors and mayors. This approach to politics suffers from all the familiar problems of bureaucracy and fraud generated by parties, candidates and the electoral system itself.

In opposition to this, and taking account of the real circumstances and possibilities that face us, we need to insist that another kind of democracy is possible. That means thinking through at every stage what other kind of democracy we can implant and develop, in accordance with people's lived experience and level of awareness.

In the debate over the Lula government and how it will win support, I see no sign of any policies to extend democracy and popular participation as key elements in winning such support. On the contrary, all the government team's early efforts seem directed

towards building a coalition of centre and even conservative parties in order to achieve a majority in Congress. All the reports in the press of negotiations with fractions and dissident currents of this or that party indicate that this is the path that has been chosen – to give the government room to manoeuvre and get its legislation through.

In my view this tactic will run into problems. It will tie us to conservative parties and politicians who are long-schooled in corruption and influence peddling. They will make us pay dearly, politically and financially, for their votes. They will seek to protect the social and regional interests they represent.

There is another way. Encouraging and strengthening people's participation in discussing and deciding the direction of public policies is a real and possible alternative. Brazil's presidential system gives the executive considerable scope for initiative in the areas of taxation and the budget. This is something we have learned through our city administrations and here in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

This does not imply abandoning Congress or ruling out tactical agreements to approve specific projects. It is not about sidelining our representatives and senators, much less about wanting 'to close Congress down'. But there are serious problems with limiting the question of government and government support to winning victories in a Congress that has an in-built conservative majority.

As well as signalling a desire for good relations and peaceful co-existence with parliament, we should be sending out very clear signals to the Landless Workers' Movement, the CUT and other trade union federations, to all the social, community, student and anti-discrimination movements.

We should propose to the movements that they meet, mobilise and decide on public policies that we will implement. We should not be frightened of talking directly to the movements or of creating forums and other mechanisms for direct, popular participation. This is where real support for the government will come from.

This is not a route that implies 'building barricades against Bush' right now, or an immediate break with the IMF and World Bank. Nor can it be claimed that it requires resources we don't have. What it does require is the political will. It requires a programmatic vision that this is a process of transition that really can overcome underdevelopment.

The experience in Porto Alegre and the popular democratic government in Rio Grande do Sul show that this process allows thousands of citizens to mobilise in defence of the material interests

they share as exploited members of society. They want quality public services in healthcare, education and social services. They're ready to struggle for this, and they understand that their government, which they elected, will put the resources at their disposal.

Everyone here knows that we didn't lose the 2002 elections for state governor because of the participatory budget and the participatory democracy we were practising. In fact it was this that allowed us, in spite of the mistakes we made in the electoral campaign, to obtain the same number of votes as in 1998, when we won by a tiny margin in a highly polarised state, where our political enemies are strong. And of course this is a vitally important lesson in politics – to recognise who really are your enemies, and how strong they are.

The experience of participatory democracy in Rio Grande and Porto Alegre made it possible for us to build on our traditional layers of support – urban and rural workers and youth – and extend the legitimacy and hegemony of our political project among other sections of society. Our relationship with small business people changed, for example. A number of such sectors drew closer, developed trust and came to believe in what we were doing.

The reason for our victories in Porto Alegre over the last 15 years has been precisely the fact that we have handed power back to the people that the representative system delegates to the mayor and municipal departmental heads. We have returned to them, organised in assemblies, the power to decide what to do with the public purse.

In my opinion it is through this democratic struggle, through opening up spaces for participatory democracy and inviting the people themselves to take the lead, that change can be achieved more quickly and more deeply. That is why the Lula government, *our* government, should encourage popular participation and make it the government's top political priority, as a means of building a new political hegemony in Brazil.

Finally, I'd like to refer to the question of political reform. I think we need to make a huge effort to ensure that it is the issue of democracy that shapes our approach to this debate. We need to take the initiative in this discussion of political reform. We need to reject all forms of 'first-past-the-post' voting systems, as well as the electoral swindle carried out in Brazil under the guise of a completely distorted proportional representation in parliament. In our country this produces first-, second- and third-class citizens. We haven't even come as far as the French Revolution and 'one person, one

vote'. States in Brazil still function as electoral colleges, with their minimum and maximum numbers of representatives carried over from the military regime. As a result the representation of citizens in parliament is a fraud.

We need to connect the debate on political reform with an understanding of the importance of extending democracy for our ability to lead a major political transformation in this country. This means building into our programme the quest for new political institutions and a whole new conception of the executive and legislature and their relations with society.

The question of democracy should be the guiding principle of all our political activity. For example, the struggle to decentralise administration is linked to our understanding of socialism. We do not seek a society governed from an all-powerful Brasilia, with all-powerful federal ministries. Our struggle is also a struggle for decentralisation, and for ever more direct control by citizens in the municipalities over public resources.

This commitment to the struggle for democracy, to a new logic of democracy, should shape everything we do, our relations with our supporters and with social movements, and the policies of our popular local governments. It is the starting point for a transition that will demand equally daring proposals and policies to deal with the economy and the world of work.

10 PT Local Governments and Socialism

*João Machado*¹

During the last century, the balance sheet of governments calling themselves socialist was a big disappointment. This goes for both those identifying with the Russian Revolution and its various offshoots and those usually called social democratic. The outcomes of the former, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its former satellites, are catastrophic (however much we may value the efforts of those like Cuba to keep going). The results of social democratic governments, though more nuanced – after all in a number of countries they did carry out reforms that improved people's living conditions, and these achievements have not completely disappeared – should also be seen as negative. In recent decades social democratic governments have become social-liberal governments. There has been a rollback of the rights won after the Second World War, and it has become difficult to make any clear distinction between social democracy and the prevailing neoliberalism.

This disappointing balance sheet does not mean that the chapter of socialist experiences is closed, however. In a way this current period, dominated by governments fully identified with capitalism, its values and methods, has shown just how little this kind of society has to offer humanity.

For most of the 1990s, the idea was promoted that the world was entering a new phase of solid technical progress, free from the old recurrent crises: the so-called 'new economy'. It is clear now that this claim was baseless. Instead the discussion is again going back and forth between how long the current downturn will last and how strong the next upturn will prove. True, the 1980s and 1990s were exceptionally favourable for the capitalist economy. Yet even its best years did not lead to an improvement in living standards for the majority of people on the planet. Even then capitalism offered most people very little.