

REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

Carlos M. Vilas*

1989 marks the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution and the 30th year of the Cuban Revolution; it is also 10 years since the Sandinista Popular Revolution. The coincidence of these three anniversaries is a propitious opportunity to reflect on the perspectives and significance of a social revolution today in Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, this multiple commemoration occurs in the moment of glasnost and perestroika, of an advancing process of 'rectification of errors and negative tendencies' in the Cuban Revolution, and of a return to market mechanisms in China. The implication in every case has been a profound self-criticism – albeit with different consequences – concerning the ways in which the construction of those different versions of socialism has been **carried** through.

In the social revolutions of the Third World, three basic issues are fused: democracy, national self-determination and development. The way in which each issue is posed, and their reciprocal articulation, is determined in the final analysis by what classes and social groups give impetus and leadership to the **revolution**¹. In this essay, I shall consider the question of democracy from the perspective of social revolution, paying particular attention to aspects of the relationship between institutionalised political systems and the revolutionary struggle as it has arisen in Latin America. But is there any point in discussing social revolution in Latin America and the Caribbean, when it would seem self-evident that social revolution is not on the political agenda in the great majority of societies in the region, and when the revolution in Central America is facing such enormous difficulties in its attempts to transform socio-economic structures in Nicaragua, or to achieve power in El Salvador and Guatemala? Although the question will be answered directly at the end of this essay, it is hoped that the following discussion will lay the basis for a response.

I

What is generally meant by revolution is above all the violent overthrow of the institutional political order and the rapid transformation of socio-political structures.² Since the Cuban Revolution, that rupture has tended to be associated in Latin America with the successful outcome of a process of *guemlla*

struggle, the constitution of popular politico-military organisations and their victory over the coercive mechanisms of the state. It is obvious that, in these terms, the Latin American scene today is desolate compared with a couple of decades ago. With the outstanding exceptions of El Salvador and Guatemala, and to a lesser extent Colombia, there is a general absence of armed revolutionary organisations. Even in the three cases cited, the revolutionary struggle is relatively stagnant. In Guatemala and El Salvador, the movement has had to face the strategies of institutional democratisation promoted by the U.S. government in alliance with sectors of the local ruling groups; in Colombia, the guerrillas have been contained within reduced territories; and none of these movements has escaped the deterioration that is the inevitable cost of any struggle that continues over a period of decades. The cycle that opened in the 1950s with the Cuban Revolution seems now to be reaching its close, as the 1980s draw to an end, with the revolutions in Central America.

To reduce the extremely complex problem of the viability of revolutionary alternatives for social transformation to the question of the existence or otherwise of politico-military organisations would be much closer to the crudest voluntarist explanations offered by the proponents of guerrilla politics (*foquismo*), than to an objective analysis of the question. The small number of revolutionary successes in Latin America and the Caribbean have to do not only with the existence of politico-military organisations, but with their articulation with the mass mobilisations of popular classes. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution was not just a military victory over an army trained by the United States; the military victory was built on the political capacity of the 26th July Movement guerrillas to articulate the 'mountain' (*la sierra*) and the 'plain' (*el llano*), the guerrilla struggle and the struggle of workers, students and urban masses.³ It is well established how decisive was the role played by the mass insurrections in Nicaragua in 1978 and 1979 in the final victory of the Sandinista struggle, as is the combination within them of elements of spontaneity and organisation. In the final analysis, it was the insurrectionary urban masses who advanced against the Somoza regime *with guerrilla support*, and not vice versa.⁴ The conditions for these mobilisations were many and varied, and owed as much to internal and international political factors as to economic causes. Without the masses, the guerrilla struggle can become endemic, isolated from the people; without a vanguard, the protests of the masses can prove fruitless, and be either integrated into the dominant system or simply repressed.⁵

Above all, social revolutions have to do with the transformation of the socio-economic structures and the political system of a country. In this sense, revolutions are broad and deep processes of political and socio-economic transformation, affecting directly the economic and social structures: the transformation of the relations of power between the classes; the development of socialised forms of property, of access to resources and of the administration of the means of production; the consolidation of sovereignty

and national self-determination; the development of political and social institutions with extensive and effective participation by the classes and groups that are subordinated under capitalism; the elimination of forms of racial and gender discrimination; and the development of values, attitudes and forms of individual and collective behaviour based on solidarity and cooperation.

A revolutionary transformation is also, therefore, a much longer process than it is generally thought to be. The image of a revolution as an instantaneous break with everything that has gone before and a rapid construction of the new is infantile. The establishment of new economic structures, of a new political system, and of new attitudes, values and forms of behaviour, is a long process. The violence, the accelerated transformation, are at any event aspects of the 'destructive' political dimension of revolutions, of the transfer of political power from one class to another, or from one class to organisations that assume the representation of other previously subordinated classes, a transfer that is carried out by non-institutional means. The old material regime – the political and economic institutions etc – is quickly destroyed; but the construction of the new, and particularly the transformation of mental structures, is a long and complex process.⁶

Nevertheless this distinction between the means and the content cannot be taken too far. The possibility of carrying through socio-economic changes that produce a society whose class configuration is different from that which has hitherto existed in peripheral capitalism, has been associated historically with the collapse of the prevailing political order – even if, as we shall discuss below, this has basically been the result of attempts to oppose the advance of the popular movement. Both revolutions as such and some populist processes which modified the power relations of their respective societies, have either rested on or had as their context a break with the previously existing institutional order. Even the **Cárdenas** period in Mexico (1934 – 1940) – which altered the relations of power in the countryside, (as well as the relationship to North American interests in the country) through a far-reaching agrarian reform and the nationalisation of the oil and railway industries – occurred in the context of a political system which had not yet achieved stable institutional form, and which in any event was part of an agrarian revolution that shook Mexican society to its very foundations.

II

The Latin American political scene today offers no perspectives for revolutionary change in the sense of a break in the class politico-institutional order, even though the factors that traditionally create the substantive or objective conditions for the unfolding of revolutionary processes are present: namely, growing poverty, a general deterioration in the standard of living, a lack of socio-economic perspectives, insufficient access to basic resources for large sections of the Latin American population, both rural and urban. But a

revolution requires something more than socio-economic detonators, and this 'something else' is fundamentally related to the political configuration of a society, and to a shared perception among broad sectors of the dominated groups and classes of the impossibility of successfully articulating their demands within the prevailing institutional order. It is obvious that as long as the economically and socially dominated groups do not feel themselves to be politically oppressed, the possibilities of a revolutionary break remain remote. Consciousness of political oppression is undoubtedly related to the existence of popular organisations (political parties, trade unions, peasant organizations, student movement etc); but it also has to do with the capacity of the existing political institutions to channel effectively the discontent of the people.

These two factors are not independent of one another. Experience shows that the call for a revolutionary alternative will not arise as long as the masses are integrated in one way or another into the existing political system, and thus as long as there exists a possibility of a positive institutional response on the part of the political system to the demands and dissatisfactions of the people. Thus the factor that ultimately explains why there are revolutionary processes under way in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador (each with their own particular characteristics), but not in Honduras or Costa Rica, is not fundamentally economic (for the five societies of Central America are substantially alike in their socio-economic structures) but political. In Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, the capitalist modernisation that created the socio-economic conditions for the development of revolutionary alternatives occurred under intensely repressive and dictatorial political systems which had closed off any possibility of institutional articulation of popular demands, and thus removed any possibility of legitimation.⁷ In Honduras, and above all in Costa Rica, the political institutions demonstrated a greater receptivity and provided more space for the popular organisations – by giving legal recognition to peasant organisations and a measure of agrarian reform in Honduras, for example, or through broad institutional democratisation and the abolition of the army in 1951, in Costa Rica – and a more positive response to the demands of those social groups and classes most affected by agro-exporting capitalist **modernisation**.⁸

The option of revolution by violent means has always been a popular response to the violation of the law by the dominant classes. In contrast to what is suggested in the discourse of the ruling classes and the repressive apparatus – which has certainly found acceptance among some sectors of the population – there is no preference in principle for a violent revolutionary alternative. Traditionally, the popular revolutionary organisations have approached the question of the use of violence in terms of the collective exercise of legitimate self-defence in the face of ruling classes who violate their own legality or systematically turn to the repression of protest and of popular demands for better living conditions, effective democracy, and

national independence. This is the consistent position expressed in Marxist and Leninist **thinking**,⁹ and in revolutionary practice, up to the present.

Practically all the Latin American political organisations that at one moment or another have opted for the revolutionary road, have done so in response to dictatorial regimes, to violations of the legality of the regime itself, to the absence of institutional alternatives through which to press for social and political transformations. In Mexico, **Emiliano Zapata** rose up in arms after years of fruitless efforts to obtain by peaceful means the return of illegally appropriated communal lands.¹⁰ The FSLN emerged and developed in response to the absence of institutional means of removing the Somoza family from power and improving the conditions of life of the popular classes. The formation and growth of the revolutionary organisations of El Salvador were responses to the fraudulent elections or their cancellation whereby the army and the dominant groups opposed any advance by the democratic opposition. In Guatemala the revolutionary struggle began early in the 1960s as a means of confronting the counterrevolutionary state established in the country after the U.S. government-sponsored invasion that overthrew the popularly elected government of President **Arbenz**.¹¹ The electoral proscription of **Peronism** from 1955 onwards, and the military coups of 1955, 1963 and 1966, were the framework for the emergence of the guerrilla organizations in Argentina. The same coincidence of a reactionary coup d'etat, the closure of the institutional political system and the emergence of **guerrilla** organisations can be seen in Brazil after 1964. In Grenada the New Jewel Movement directed its struggle against the dictatorship of Eric Gairy and the repression of all legal instruments of change. But in every case the success of revolutionary initiatives has depended fundamentally on the emergence of conditions that allowed these organisations to insert themselves in the masses, give expression to their conflicts with the system of domination and advance together with them.

The armed insurrection launched in April 1952 by the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) in Bolivia followed the same lines. After the bloody overthrow of the nationalist government of Colonel Villarroel in 1946, the MNR was systematically persecuted by subsequent governments, each of them expressing the interests of the tin mining oligarchy known as the *rosca*. The great majority of the leaders of the MNR and their middle political and trade union cadres were forced into exile, and their press was banned. Although the MNR presented candidates in elections, and despite the considerable support they enjoyed, they were prevented from taking up their posts, which often meant that they were driven into exile. The trade union movement was brutally repressed and its leaders deported. The Presidential elections of 1951 were won by the **MNR** candidate. The government and the armed forces refused to recognise the result and formed a military junta, which then assumed control of government. In these conditions, the MNR called for an armed insurrection and, with the decisive support of the

mining proletariat, overthrew the military junta and took power.¹²

Much the same can be said of the Cuban Revolution; the assault on the Moncada barracks, the subsequent formation of the 26th of July Movement and the development of the guerrilla struggle were all in their origins responses to Fulgencio Batista's military coup of March 10th 1952, and the closure that this implied of any type of political struggle within the framework of legal institutions. Those institutions were, of course, very limited in their application. Between 1946 and 1952, during the governments of Grau San Martín and Prío Socarrás, the struggles for working class demands were severely repressed, and the main leader of the sugar cane workers union was brutally murdered. The student movement, which had a long democratic tradition, maintained its existence through tolerance and repression. Corruption and graft were rife at all levels of the state apparatus; the subordination to United States economic interests – above all, in sugar – was almost total. Nonetheless this corrupt and limited system still made it possible for the Authentic Revolutionary Party (known as the Ortodoxos) to win the elections, given that it represented the most progressive forces in Cuban society: the working class, the democratic petit bourgeoisie, the non-sugar industrial bourgeoisie. Batista's coup d'état took place in order to prevent the electoral victory of a political party that was certainly progressive, but which was not a revolutionary party.¹³

III

There are powerful reasons for this recurrent articulation of political democracy, the rupture of legality by the ruling classes, and revolutionary struggle. Obviously, different groups and social classes see democracy from different points of view and with different horizons. Initially, the popular classes and their political expressions accept the democratic institutions as a framework and a means for carrying through their programmes for political and socio-economic transformation; in principle there is no contradiction between a democratic institutional order and structural transformations. The contradiction between them is the result of resistance on the part of the ruling groups and classes, and of imperialism, to accepting the consequences of an established democracy when this implies significant alterations in the relations of power. Democracy ceases to work as soon as the dominant classes see that its continuing existence can lead to a questioning of the reproduction of their own domination. As they did in the old film 'Rollerball', the ruling classes establish the rules of the game, and reserve the right to change them whenever things begin to go wrong.

From the point of view of those people who in the end join the revolutionary struggle, especially in the mass insurrectionary phase, there are equally important considerations to be borne in mind concerning the seriousness of this option, its difficulties and the enormous burden it places upon the popular

classes. For a distant observer, or from a romantic or even a naive point of view, revolutions can be beautiful moments in the history of a society; for their collective protagonists, however, they are usually a tremendously difficult, painful and costly experience. A revolution is something that people enter into when they see no other means of improving their lives or of defending the little which has as yet not been illegally taken from them. Fidel Castro recently put it very clearly:

That's why it is my conviction, and I believe it should be the conviction of every real revolutionary, that violence is the last resort, when no other road is open, when there is no other means of effecting change. And I hope that the men who have the responsibility in our hemisphere will be able to take the steps and carry through the measures that will resolve these problems, that will make it possible to avoid the trauma of a great social explosion; if they don't, then the ruling classes of today will play the same role that was played in their times by the last king and queen of France or the last czars of the old Russian empire. . . . And hopefully the political leaders are aware, and are wise enough first to resolve the objective problems faced by the economy of our countries, and secondly to carry through measures that achieve justice, equality, the redistribution of wealth, that is, the social changes that are inescapably necessary if social justice is to be achieved, without the **terrible** traumatic experiences that the classic revolutions of the past or indeed all revolutions have **been**.¹⁴

The option of revolutionary struggle, as far as the popular classes are concerned, is a matter of life or death. This is not literature. Almost all the accounts of those who participated in the Sandinista insurrection, for example, show that the decision to join the insurrectionary struggle against the Somoza dictatorship was taken only when there was no alternative, other than to resign oneself to being a victim of certain repression. People go out to fight, or to work with those who are fighting, because they face repression in any case; and this feeling that it is a matter of life or death tends to become stronger and more decisive the more limited has been the level of previous participation in **politics**.¹⁵ This contributes to giving mass revolutionary struggle the defensive character that has been identified by Barrington Moore in his study of the reasons why people rebel or fail to rebel against **injustice**.¹⁶ But it is also testimony to a belief in the real political possibility of changing things, over and above the collective and personal cost.

IV

The fact that violence appears in revolutionary thought and revolutionary practice only as a last resort helps to explain the connections initially existing in many cases, between revolutionary organisations and previously existing legal 'reformist' social and political organisations. The revolutionary alternative usually emerges out of organisations that have operated legally until that moment, either because they have become the targets of repression, or have been forced underground, or as is more often the case, when internal factions or tendencies turn to direct action in the face of what they see as a compromise on the part of the official leadership of the party; at any event

whenever legal, institutional political struggle is judged to have become ineffective. That was the case of the FSLN in Nicaragua in its relations with some elements of the Socialist Party; of the MIR in Venezuela in relation to the *Acción Democrática* party; of the Colombian M-19 with respect to ANAPO; of the Montoneros in Argentina with regard to Peronism; of the BPR (the Popular Revolutionary Bloc) of El Salvador in relation to the Christian agrarian cooperative movement. The same can be said of many of the best known revolutionary leaders, whose first weapons were forged in the very bosom of institutional political democracy: Fidel Castro in the Ortodoxo Party, Carlos Fonseca and Tomas Borge in Nicaraguan Socialist Party. That is, there is a line of both continuity and rupture between revolutionary organisations and their leaderships, and the previously existing political culture. In the peripheral capitalist societies of Latin America you are not born to revolutionary positions in political life – you *arrive* at them.

This also has important practical implications as far as the effectiveness of the political struggle is concerned. The transition from the initial pursuit of reform by legal means to the revolutionary alternative implies that, when the moment comes for the latter, there is already a body of experience of mass political work, of organisation, and that there is contact and mutual recognition between the vanguard and the real or potential social base. This was extremely clear in the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, which had a decisive basis in the mobilisation of the working class movement, a mobilisation made possible by a history of close relations between the MNR and the mining proletariat. In Cuba, Fidel Castro was already a figure of national significance when he disembarked from the *Granma* in December 1956; his active participation in the student movement and later in the left wing of the Ortodoxo Party facilitated his contacts with sectors of the bourgeois opposition and with the workers and peasant movements, which provided a broader base of support for the *guerrillas*.¹⁷ The same was true of the Montoneros in Argentina in the early seventies, and of M-19 in Colombia.

In fact this line of connection with previous political struggles goes far beyond its immediate precedents. All Latin American revolutionary **organisations** with roots in the masses, assume themselves to be and present themselves to others as the contemporary expression of a popular secular struggle against imperialism, political oppression and social exploitation. In this sense, the development of a revolutionary organisation can also be seen as a reading of national history whose key is the popular struggles against external domination of the nation, and at the same time, against internal domination by ruling groups allied to colonialism and imperialism. The clearest example is undoubtedly the Cuban Revolution, with its explicit connection between the struggle against the Batista dictatorship in the first place, and later against the Cuban bourgeoisie and North American imperialism in order to build socialism, and the independence struggle and political thought of Jose **Martí**. The same can be said of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, the

Tupamaros in Uruguay, the Montoneros of Argentina and the Cinchoneros of Honduras, the 'Farabundo **Martí**' National Liberation Front in El Salvador and the 'Manuel Rodríguez' Patriotic Front in Chile, and so on.

Each of these cases represents an attempt (with differing degrees of success) to link present to past struggles, to rediscover a historical dimension denied in the official history of the ruling classes and of external domination, a dimension in which contemporary revolutionary ruptures are set in the framework of a popular anti-imperialist continuity which links national sovereignty to the effective conquest of popular self-determination. In Latin America, and in fact in the whole of the Third World, the national (ultimately anti-imperialist) dimension of the revolutionary struggle emerges out of the respective history of each country insofar as that history is subjected to a class reading and interpretation. Democracy and national liberation are linked in a popular political perspective directed towards far-reaching social transformations.

V

All the social revolutions of the 20th century in Latin America and the Caribbean – irrespective of their later development – had as their detonator the issue of democracy: Mexico, Bolivia, Grenada, Nicaragua. In Mexico, it was the slogan 'effective suffrage and no re-election' that set in motion the revolution against the dictatorship of **Porfirio Díaz**; the other cases have already been referred to earlier. But in all these instances the question of democracy took on implications that carried it beyond the merely institutional sphere, posing the question of changes in the relations of power between classes, in their access to economic resources; of the nature of the state; of modifications in the structure of the relations of production; of an extension of the levels, instances and range of popular participation; of changes in the external articulation of the economy; of the reformulation of international relations. In the final analysis it is precisely this broadening of the content and extent of democracy in these processes (though they differ widely from one to another), that makes them true social revolutions.

The experience of the Cuban Revolution is a particularly illustrative example of the way in which the revolutionary process can transform the issue of democracy and national liberation into the context of the transition to socialism. In fact the advance of Cuba towards socialism began in the 1959 – 61 period, in the framework of a remarkably consistent democratic and anti-imperialist struggle with an increasing popular content (both in terms of the participation of people and of the content of policies), conducted in the face of an increasingly compromised Cuban bourgeoisie and a permanently aggressive United States **government**.¹⁸ The phase of the construction of socialism came as the culmination of a **struggle** that began by fighting a dictatorship, but which did not limit its objectives to the restoration of a lost institutional order; for it identified the bases of that dictatorship in

Cuba's capitalist socio-economic structure and its subordination to North American imperialism. Faced with a bourgeoisie that saw the overthrow of the dictatorship as opening a space for a more democratic capitalism, the Cuban Revolution made democratisation one of the foundations of socialism.

The processes of democratisation unfold unevenly in social revolutions; in the socio-economic arena such processes – for example, the nationalisation of the fundamental means of production, social participation, improvements in the living conditions of the popular classes, broadening of social services etc. – are set in motion sooner than the corresponding changes in the institutional arena, where what is involved is a political (in the conventional sense) and electoral process. As yet, Latin American revolutionary thought has not confronted the problem of how to integrate institutional political democracy with the problematics of socio-economic transformation and non-electoral forms of popular participation.

This failure has to do with the contradiction, specific to the capitalist state, between the abstract principle of political citizenship and the formal equality of all individuals, on the one hand, and the reality of socio-economic – and hence political – inequality between social classes on the other. On the one hand, the subordination of the popular classes is first socio-economic, and then political. Democracy is reduced in the practice and ideological discourse of the ruling classes, to the institutional and electoral sphere; and in the last analysis even this already restricted democracy is obstructed by the **ruling** classes whenever, in spite of everything, it threatens to allow a greater participation and presence of the popular classes in the political system. The result in these conditions – conditions which the revolutionary movement *does not choose* – is an attitude of scorn or indifference towards the institutional and electoral aspects of democracy, whenever the popular classes conquer state power by revolutionary means and are able to set in motion the process of socio-economic transformation and national liberation.

Insofar as political democracy in the past has been limited to the participation of the ruling classes now removed from power and hardest hit by economic transformation, concern for the issue is doubly discredited. Democracy becomes a closed question within the popular revolutionary camp, especially as the previous ruling classes progressively move on to the terrain of counterrevolution where imperialism is increasingly the dominant force. Finally, the counterrevolutionary war, from which no social revolution has so far been able to free itself, places still more obstacles in the way of any early development of democracy in its institutional and electoral aspects. Wars are always the least propitious environment for the full exercise of democratic institutions, and this is doubly true when we are dealing with societies that have no effective **democratic traditions**, that are economically weak, and that are obliged to concentrate all their resources on a struggle for survival in the face of the greatest economic and military power the world has known.

The degree of emphasis placed directly on the political and socio-economic dimension, or on traditional electoral considerations, also has to do with the particular social profile of each revolutionary process. Generally, it is the petit bourgeoisie and those fractions of the bourgeoisie who in one sense or another throw in their lot with the Latin American revolutionary movements, who put the greatest emphasis on the question of democracy understood in the electoral sense. There is a logic to that. The contradictions on the basis of which these sectors join some revolutionary processes are fundamentally political or ideological, rather than economic in the strict sense. Socio-economic transformations and new forms of social and labour participation etc are less important to them than the continuing existence of representative institutions.

The **Sandinista** Revolution offers an interesting case of an attempt to articulate from the first moments of revolutionary transformation the principle of electoral representation and party-political pluralism, with the principle of broad and direct popular participation, and the recognition in the workings of democracy at both levels of the problematics of ethnic minorities. The process is still in its earliest stages, and is unfolding amid tensions and limitations of every kind; it would be premature to make any definitive judgment on it.¹⁹

VI

Today in Latin America the relationship between political democracy and social revolutions is linked to the extent and content of the so-called *democratic transition* in the region, i.e. those non-revolutionary processes whereby some military dictatorships in South America have given ground on the question of political regimes based on the principle of universal suffrage.

From the perspective of the necessity of introducing profound political and socio-economic changes in order to improve the material and cultural conditions of life of the majority of the population of Latin America, these processes of democratic transition exhibit a number of common features over and above their particular characteristics. Briefly, the following are the principal elements:

1) These processes are restricted to the institutional political sphere in its strictest sense. They do not project into the economic sphere, nor, do they provide a framework for any substantial changes in the level of access of subordinate groups to socio-economic resources – by income redistribution, creating employment, improving living conditions etc.

2) In general, the areas in which the power bases of the dominant groups are concentrated, and the apparatuses of the state to which these groups traditionally turn to defend their own interests, are left untouched. There is no restructuring of the military, for example, nor is there any discussion about the need to establish a new matrix of relations between society and the armed forces in a democratic regime. Limits are placed on the identification

and punishment of military personnel involved in brutal and mass forms of repression; those responsible are pardoned etc.

3) The economic policies developed in respect to some strategic questions – the external debt for example – show clear elements of continuity with the previous military regimes.

4) In general they are the product of negotiations between dictatorial regimes and political organisations which become possible when, for various reasons – military defeats, international pressures, internal divisions, economic crises – the direct control of the state exercised by the armed forces threatens to lead them into a blind alley and a consequent internal deterioration.

Let us be clear that these limited democracies represent objectively a step forward from the dictatorial regimes out of which they emerged. Anyone travelling from Chile or Paraguay to Argentina or from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, can see it clearly, particularly as far as improvements in the human rights situation (always the most traumatic issue in a dictatorship) are concerned. But what we want to emphasise here is the ambiguous character of these processes, and their instrumentalisation by the ruling groups and their political and military representatives. The turn to democracy is a means of reducing the levels of open or latent social conflict, not proof of a desire to encourage popular participation or set in motion a process of social transformation. In the case of Central America, it is part of the U.S. government's regional policy, whose aim is to destabilise the Sandinista Revolution and isolate it internationally. Once again different social groups and classes, and different political projects, see democracy in a very different light.

On the other hand, it seems clear that the popular movement is not in any position to impose more advanced alternatives. It serves little purpose to generalise in these matters, but it is certainly undeniable that one of the features of South American military dictatorships has been their intense, prolonged and general repression of social protest and popular opposition. The fact that they were not able to totally eliminate that opposition does not mean that the repression did not have a powerful impact on the capacity for action and organisation of the popular classes and the democratic forces. There is obviously a sharp difference in the capacity for popular mass mobilisation before and after the imposition of dictatorships, and the levels of **organisation** are equally severely reduced, as many leaders and cadres fall victim to repression or are forced into exile. There can be little doubt, therefore, that these processes of transition to democracy represent less than the popular movement might have demanded under other circumstances; but *under* these *conditions* it would not be realistic to expect very much more.

It is equally true that what the armed forces and the ruling groups see as a means of preventing more serious **political** breakdown, the popular movement may see as an opportunity for rebuilding the movement. There is thus an obvious tension between the content and achievements of a transition

to democracy seen as a means of restraining the popular movement from developing higher levels of organisation and autonomy, and the content and achievements that the popular classes expect from it. In general it is the political organisations and intellectual representatives of the urban middle classes who find themselves most trapped by these tensions – and in some societies in the region that embraces a significant proportion of the total population.

Much of the recent literature concerning the transition to democracy has expressed the discomfort of these middle classes in the face of the express intention of the workers movement, the radicalised petit bourgeois groups, some political organisations, and others, to approach democratisation as an opportunity to consolidate a popular movement oriented towards achieving social and economic transformations in a number of areas: income redistribution, reduction of the political power of the armed forces and of some sectors of the **ruling** groups, national self-determination. From their point of view, popular demands and the mass mobilisations in support of them, the criticism of previous dictatorships – for example, in the demand that those responsible for torture, disappearances, and general violations of human rights should be punished – ~~the~~ demand for a nationalist response to the foreign debt, the demand that part of the profits appropriated by the traditional ruling classes be redirected towards the kinds of investment required by less exclusive forms of development etc, are so many threats to the process of democratisation, insofar as they provoke the hardliners within the armed forces or induce reprisals from the affected groups or **institutions**.²⁰ In other words, the fear is that the effective and pluralist exercise of democracy might lead to the weakening of democracy itself, rather than to its consolidation, precisely because it might reduce the power base of those very groups that have traditionally conspired against democracy. In the final analysis, such a view rests on an implicit or explicit assumption that it will still be these groups that will oversee the exercise of democracy, and set its limits.

The transition to democracy inevitably becomes an arena of political tensions, and ultimately of class conflict, between the extension of the process that the popular organisations seek to achieve, and the limitations that the traditional power groups try to set upon it. It is undeniable that the Latin American revolutionary movements have had difficulties in adapting to these processes of democratisation, for reasons which we can only briefly touch on here. First, the prevailing view of the question of democracy places the initial emphasis on socio-economic transformations, as was discussed earlier. Secondly, the replacement of dictatorial regimes by forms of restricted democracy that are a product both of popular pressures and also of the needs of the ruling groups, the armed forces and in certain cases of the United States government, **substantially changes** the political space in which the revolutionary struggle had been unfolding until then. The revolutionary organisations often find themselves pushed to one side, as the population are offered obviously less extreme institutional alternatives. Many sectors which

had thrown in their lot with the revolutionary struggle begin to demobilise, to reduce their levels of commitment, to accept other forms of confrontation, and even to desist from confrontation with a regime that now seems to be more open. The result is a real possibility that the vanguard will become alienated from its mass support.

In the third place, experience shows that it is impossible for the revolutionary organisations to totally reimplant themselves under legal conditions, not because the organisations themselves resist the change, but because of the resistance that comes from those groups and sectors that had perceived the transition to democracy as a means of demobilising the popular movement. The negotiations between the Colombian revolutionary organisations and the then President Romulo **Betancur** produced an extremely enlightening outcome; the Colombian revolutionary movement lost more of its leaders and middle cadre as a result of the repressive measures taken against it, once it had accepted reintegration into the legal political system, than it had in more than a decade of armed struggle. The basic principle of every modern state is the monopoly over the means of legitimate coercion – a single army; for the revolutionary organisations, therefore, their reentry into the legal system implies by definition that they must disarm. The Latin American experience has been that sooner or later the coercive state apparatuses try, and generally succeed in making that monopoly effective at the expense of a disarmed enemy.

It is clear that these *transitions to democracy* enjoy greater support among the middle classes and the modernising segments of the bourgeoisie than among the working classes, the peasantry or the impoverished petit bourgeoisie; that they have more credibility among social scientists influenced by the work of their colleagues in the United States than among the Latin American popular masses. Over and above the theoretical discussions about their extent and their limitations, their merits or disadvantages, some results of these processes can already be seen in South America after several years of operation. It is the government of President Alfonsín in Argentina that offers perhaps the most pathetic testimony in this sense; an external debt almost 50% higher than it was at the beginning of his six-year Presidency, despite the fact that throughout this period the debt has been systematically repaid; successive concessions to the armed forces whose effect was to severely limit any real possibility of punishing those responsible for the massive violations of human rights, the murder, torture, abduction and rape of tens of thousands of people; the most regressive distribution of income the country has seen in four decades. The transition to democracy in Argentina has not to date produced any improvement in the living conditions of workers, any reduction in the external debt, or any justice. The situation in Brazil does not look very much more promising.

The failure of these restricted **democracies** to resolve the most pressing problems of their societies, and the declining living standards of the Latin American popular masses, seems in some societies – Mexico, Argentina,

Brazil, Peru, Venezuela – to be creating the conditions for an advance, within the existing institutional framework, of political projects with broad mass appeal, and ranging from populist to social democratic in character, which set out to reach government by electoral means. While they are the product of specific local conditions in each case, these proposals do share certain common features; an appeal to broad sectors of the popular and middle classes on the basis of the articulation of demands for broad democratisation, economic development, social justice, an opening up of the internal market, greater autonomy in the development of international relations and substantial changes in the ways of responding to the foreign debt.

To what extent it is possible to use the democratic spaces that have begun to open in Latin America to create the conditions for an advance in a socialist direction, is a matter that depends on a number of factors specific to each country – and which in many of the options which are now emerging are not even posed as a possibility. The tragic experience of the Popular Unity government of President Allende in Chile, and the current tribulations of the APRA government of Alan Garcia in Peru, offer little room for optimism about the possibilities of institutional strategies for socio-economic and political transformation leading in a socialist direction, or indeed for an extension of democracy. At the same time the real configuration of the Latin American political map, and the impact that the strategies for restricted democratisation have had in any event on broad sectors of the population, have removed from the agenda the more radical strategies for political action.

This should not be seen as a pessimistic conclusion. All rhetoric aside, it must be acknowledged that revolutions are rare events in history. Their development, especially their degree of mass involvement, responds to an extremely complex set of causes in which accidental factors can act as detonators. There is nothing in the structure of a society that makes a revolution inevitable; but neither is there anything in the armoury of the ruling classes which ensures that revolutions will always by definition be defeated.

After two hundred years, many of the propositions of the French Revolution remain a dead letter in Latin America. In one way or another, a large part of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, not to speak of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, form part of the present list of demands put forward today by the popular and working classes of region. In fact, the reverse is the case; the dependent insertion of Latin America into the international capitalist market, and the close alliance between the local ruling classes and first English and German and later U.S. imperialism, have meant that the progressive demands of the 18th century have become so many slogans justifying the pillaging of natural resources, the degradation of the standards of living of vast masses of the population, growing indebtedness, and the establishment of repressive political regimes. Free trade and un-free people: capitalism brought freedom of commerce but not fraternity or equality.

To return to the initial question: yes, **there** is still a great deal of point in discussing social revolution in Latin America.

Translated by Mike Gonzalez

NOTES

1. Cf. C.M. Vilas: *The Sandinista Revolution*; (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1986); Chap. 1.
2. For example: 'A rapid, fundamental and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership and government activities and policies'. Samuel Huntington; *Political order in changing societies*; (Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1968) p. 264
3. An articulation that was neither easy nor free from tensions; cf: Ramon Bonaechea & Marta San Martin: *The Cuban Insurrection 1952-1959*; (Transaction Books, New Brunswick, N.J., 1970).
4. 'The truth is that the masses were always considered, but they were viewed more as a support for the guerrilla, so that the guerrilla as such would break the National Guard, and not as happened in practice; it was the guerrillas that served as support for the masses, so that they, through the insurrection, could demolish the enemy'. Comandante Humberto Ortega, quoted in Vilas; *op. cit.*; note 1, page 124.
5. Cf: C.M. Vilas: 'Popular insurgency and social revolution in Central America' in *Latin American Perspectives*, 56, Winter 1988, pp. 55-77.
6. One of the central aspects of the current process of rectification in Cuba is a critique of the reproduction of individualistic, mercantilist attitudes, of gender discrimination, of consumerism in Cuban society thirty years after the revolution, when 55% of the Cuban population is under 30 years of age. Cf. Fidel Castro, *Por el camino correcto*; (Editora Política, Havana, 1988).
7. Cf: M. McClintock: *The American Connection*; (Zed Books, London, 1985).
8. Cf. C.M. Vilas: 'On the uneven development of revolutionary conditions in Central America' in *New Left Review*, forthcoming.
9. Cf: the discussion of the issue in the classic writings of the Marxism-Leninism. in A. Emanuel: 'The state in the transitional period', *New Left Review*, 1131114 (1979), pp. 111-131; cf: a comparative perspective on Africa, Asia and Latin America in J. Walton; *Reluctant rebels. Comparative studies in revolution and underdevelopment*; (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984).
10. Cf. J. Womack jr.; *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*; (Vintage Books, New York, 1968); chap. III.
11. Cf. On Central America in general, James Dunkerley: *Power in the isthmus*; (Verso, London, 1988).
12. Cf. Robert J. Alexander: *The Bolivian national revolution*; (Rutgers University press, New Brunswick N.J.; 1958); pp. 38 ss; Herbert S. Klein: 'Prelude to the revolution' in James Malloy and Richard S. Thorn (eds); *Beyond the revolution, Bolivia since 1952* (Pittsburgh University Press, Pittsburgh, 1971); pp. 25-51.
13. Cf. Antonio Annino; *Dall'Insurrezione al regime. Politiche di massa a strategie istituzionali a Cuba 1953-1965*; Franco Anegli Editore, Milan. 1984; pp. 69 ss; A. Silva Leon; 'El 'Moncada': la respuesta al 10 de marzo', in *Cuba Socialista*, 34. July 1988, pp. 67-87.
14. Press conference in Quito. quoted in *Granma*, 16 August 1988. p. 4.
15. Cf. Vilas; *op. cit.*; note 1, chap III.

press. New Brunswick N.J.; 1958): pp. 38 ss; Herbert S. Klein: 'Prelude to the revolution' in James Malloy and Richard S. Thorn (eds); *Beyond the revolution, Bolivia since 1952* (Pittsburgh University Press, Pittsburgh, 1971); pp. 25–51.

Cf. Antonio Annino; *Dall'Insurrezione al regime. Politiche di massa a strategie istituzionali a Cuba 1953–1965*; Franco Aneгли Editore, Milan, 1984; pp. 69 ss; A. Silva Leon; 'El 'Moncada': la respuesta al 10 de marzo', in *Cuba Socialista*, 34, July 1988, pp. 67–87.

14. Press conference in Quito, quoted in *Granma*, 16 August 1988, p. 4.
15. Cf. Vilas; *op. cit.*; note 1, chap III.
16. Barrington Moore jr; *Injustice; the social bases of obedience and revolt*; (M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, N.Y.; 1978).
Cf. for example: M. Winocur; *Las clases olvidadas en la revolucion cubana*; (Grijalbo, Barcelona, 1980).
18. Cf. for example: Jose L. Rodriguez, 'Política económica de la revolución cubana (1959–1960)' in *Economía y desarrollo*, 54, July–October 1979, pp. 129–153.
19. On the ethnic question see for example C.M. Vilas: 'Democratización y autonomía en la Costa Atlántica' in *Revista Nicaragüense de Ciencias Sociales*; 4; April 1988, pp. 50–64.
20. Possibly the most developed academic expression of this literature is in G. O'Donnell, P. Schmitter and L. Whitehead; *Transitions from authoritarian rule*; (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986).