

Separatism and Class Politics in Latin America

By James Petras

Introduction

Throughout the world there is an upsurge of regional, 'sub-national' movements whose demands range from greater 'autonomy' to complete independence. Many analysts have commented on the apparent paradox of increasing global integration of economies and the increasing fragmentation of nation-states. A deeper look at the internal dynamics of regional conflicts and external imperial strategies unravels the 'paradox' – by revealing the inter-relationships between competing empire building strategies and national fragmentation and regional conflicts.

Several points of reference highlight the underlying dynamic of regional and global politics.

- a. Some regions within existing nation-states 'integrate' more with 'global markets', especially with older and newly emerging imperial centers than with their own 'hinterland', marginalizing domestic regions, while serving as transmission belts for transferring resources, profits and income to imperial 'partners'.
- b. Regions serving as imperial entrepôts induce "globalist" consciousness among its regional rulers (based on their imperial preference) and provoke 'separatism' among the exploited and marginalized regions.

- c. Advanced economic regions subject to national governments dominated by less advanced economies not infrequently demand greater autonomy, including retaining a greater share of tax revenues, as well as the right to establish its own foreign trade policy and links to the world market independently of how this greater “openness” to the world market affects less competitive enterprises in the rest of the country.
- d. Regions and political and business leaders who link up with imperial centers and promote “free trade” receive political backing and financing from imperial financial institutions, deepening the ‘disconnect’ with the domestic economy and increasing regional and class inequalities.
- e. “Uneven development” appears as a “regional issue”, but in essence is a class-ethnic question based on the division between big international traders, manufacturers, IT and financial elites and on the other hand, the peasants, farmers, manufacturers, artisans and workers embedded in the local market.
- f. To the degree that politics revolves around regional political-economic divisions, political demands for autonomy, independence and self-determination become central points of conflict. The long-standing imperial policy criteria for evaluating the political legitimacy of these demands revolves around the class character and external links of the regimes and movements in question.

With striking consistency imperial countries back demands for “autonomy” and independence put forth by ruling classes linked to world markets and supporting imperial policies – including the stationing of military bases. In contrast faced by regional movements

backed by popular classes and opposed to imperial penetration, the imperial countries consistently oppose them.

In contrast to imperial criteria, conventional “progressives” claim “self determination” is a universal right independently of its class character, links to imperial interests and consequences for other fundamental principles. Hence the recent spectacle of Western progressives supporting NATO bombing and invasions of Yugoslavia in defense of the extreme rightist Kosova separatist movement.

In considering the legitimacy of “self-determination”, a prior set of questions must be raised. For example, what are the leading classes constituting the “self”? What policies and interests, besides separation do they advocate and how do these positions impinge on the mass of the population? Likewise the term “determination” requires an analysis of the political forces, “internal and external” promoting separation. Numerous historical and contemporary examples abound of Western financed separatist movements – including Western and Israeli funding of Kurd and Arab separatists in Iran.

Of prime importance is the issue of separatism for what. In recent times, in the post Soviet period, throughout the Baltic, Eastern European and Balkan states, elites proclaimed their ‘independence’ from communist rule while subjecting their countries to NATO military bases, selling off entire strategic public sector enterprises to imperial capital and becoming heavily indebted to Western banks and subject to IMF dictates.

In other words to what degree is self-determination and demands for “independence” a pretext for exchanging one external oppressive ruler for another hegemon? Clearly issues of

popular sovereignty, ownership of national and natural resources, territorial exclusion of imperial military bases form core ideas constitutive of any definition of national self-determination. In other words “self determination” as a legitimate demand exists in a matrix of other basic concerns of the majority of the population.

Procedure and Method

Prior to a discussion of Latin American separatist movements we will briefly summarize the results of the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe to highlight the costs of rightwing led separatist movements.

We will then proceed to map out the setting for different contexts and cases of “regional separatism” in three Latin American countries – Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador. We will examine the politics, class base and external supporters of regional separatists

A summary examination of the consequences of separation based on the recent experiences in the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe, and the Baltic states reveals a greater loss of economic sovereignty than existed prior to separation, an equal degree of subordination to hegemonic imperial powers as evidenced in membership in military alliances and the stationing of military bases and servicing overseas imperial conquests. Furthermore, the now “independent” regimes are subject to an unprecedented degree of financial indebtedness and loss of control over their banking system. Finally while imperial foreign capital has invaded and captured the commanding heights of the economic system, regions

have experienced a massive “brain drain”, an unprecedented loss of skilled workers and professionals to the West, paid for and subsidized by local taxpayers.

While the Soviet regime maintained military control over these regions through local client, Communist Party rulers, nevertheless the entire ensemble of economic institutions, enterprises and cultural establishments were nationally owned and controlled. Today the entire cultural sphere – especially the mass media, including film showings, TV programming, newspapers, magazines etc. are owned by Western imperial capital and are saturated with their cultural commodities and political biases. The social consequences of separatism are also disfavorable to the separatist discourse: inequalities of income, property, economic power have grown geometrically. Unemployment has grown anywhere between three fold (Czech Republic) to ten fold (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania). The long term, large scale levels of pillage of public resources – in the form of transfers of lucrative public enterprises/resources to private oligarchs and foreign multi-national corporations – exceeds that of any previous conqueror. While prior to separatism the regimes experienced a slow down and tendency to stagnation, they never experienced double digit negative growth as was the case both in the immediate period after shifting hegemonic rulers (“independence”) and during the present crises in the latter part of this decade.

What these empirical and observable experiences suggest is that separation can have a highly costly socio-economic outcome without the political benefits of “independence”. It seems that regime separatism taking place among late developing countries, led by pro-western elites against bureaucratic collectivist (“socialist”) regimes can lead to historically

regressive social formations, subject to severe destabilizing conditions caused by their increased exposure to world market volatility.

Regional Politics and Uneven Development

Inequalities of wealth, income and power between regions are reinforced by inequalities within regions, because of the linkages between dominant classes in both geographical entities and the “diversified portfolios” which characterize “dominant classes”. Landowners in ‘poor’ regions invest in banks in rich regions, as manufacturers in the latter invest in real estate in less developed small farmer regions.

Uneven development is not simply a product of “market forces” or even “resource endowment” but in large part a result of state policies which subsidize and finance ruling elites in one region engaged in banking, commerce and processing while extracting taxes, and low cost resources from another, thus concentrating wealth and operating a kind of internal colonial mechanism for capital accumulation. The mechanisms and system of transfer of internal wealth defend and perpetuate pre-existing caste-race-class-ethnic differences – creating the political bases for regional conflicts rooted in the politicization of social differences/inequalities.

Politization of Ethno-religious Differences

Where class based movements have been severely repressed or where they have self-destructed through internecine warfare or where their leaders have been co-opted, popular discontent is channeled via ethno-religious movements (ERM). In many cases ERM are promoted by ruling classes in the dominant regions to marginalize secular – class movements.

However in some cases over time the ERM take on a political character of resistance to extra regional impositions as a result of pressure from below.

Nevertheless in numerous country experiences, the politicization of ethno-religious differences is a tactic used by a variety of elites to divide and weaken majoritarian popular organizations that are made of diverse groups. Two equally nefarious practices challenge popular liberation movements. On the one hand national and international elites, in the name of national “unity” or “integration”, (or more latterly in behest of “globalization”) oppress and exploit regionally based ethno-religious populations. On the other hand local potentates, tribal and religious hierarchs and/or upwardly mobile provincial lower middle class-lawyers and teachers argue for “regional power” and “autonomy” to retain their control over the local populace.

Frequently in the name of ethno-religious diversity, religious elites oppose the separation of church and state, and public scientific education. It should be abundantly clear that “diversity” does not mean ‘equality’ as we have witnessed too many cases of reactionary leaders of “native”, “female” and “minority” backgrounds who only to well serve their imperial and local master classes with a highly demagogic display of ‘local dialects’ when convenient.

The problem is not to ‘reconcile differences’ among diverse ethno-religious and regionally based ruling classes but to eliminate or sharply reduce inequalities in living standards, undercut culturally hegemonic manifestations of ruling class power and fight for equality of conditions independently of language and ethno-religious identity.

Diverse identities become sources of political and social conflicts because of socio-economic inequalities, loss of power, internal/external imperialism and the appropriation and transfer of wealth from one region to the ruling class of another.

To the degree to which the dominant ruling class clothes its exploitative relations in the religious supremacy of its own beliefs in order to secure lower class support, it is inevitable that one of the components of the resistance movement will also take on a religious connotation. The key issue defining liberation movement is to determine which of the multiple components of its make-up (ethnic, religious, nationalist/regionalist/ and class) is 'hegemonic' since this will determine the subsequent configuration of the 'liberated' society. Depending on this configuration a successful liberation struggle can lead to a new version of a class-ethno religious hierarchical society or secular egalitarian state with ethno-religious freedoms. Once again we return to the fundamental question: separatism, regionalism for whom? What will be the class make-up of the new state?

An equally important question is whether 'separatism' leads to any new state? Numerous cases abound in which neighboring big powers foment irredentist separatist movements on their borders in order to subsequently annex regions, frequently financing and arming the 'liberation' separatists.

Two related observations are in order². Separatism frequently has vague definitions of its parameters of action. Within each region there are minorities and sub-minorities which lead to infinite regression unless there are defining limits to self determination (or is it a question of a ~~too~~ strong majority that eventually puts an end to "self-determination" by fiat-force.?)

The second related point is that “independence” more likely than not involves changing the dominant imperial powers (from European to US to Asian) rather than a means for maximizing national-popular control over resources and limiting imperial dependence. Not infrequently in a world of competing hegemonic imperial powers, local elites tied to different external ruling classes engage in selective anti-imperialism, attacking their opposing elite and cloaking their own divided loyalties with benign accounts of their imperial hegemon.

These and previous observations lead us to the basic conclusion of relativizing self-determination in terms of other principles, including principles of class interests, opposing imperial encroachments, and neo-colonial bi-lateral, multi-lateral accords.

Case Studies of Regional Politics: Latin America

Using the tools of class and anti-imperialist analysis we will discuss several complex cases of separatist movements (SM) in three Latin American countries: Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. In the three cases there are competing SM: movements from ‘below’ by oppressed Indian minorities and movements from ‘above’. In each case the national governments which happened to be ‘left’ or ‘center left’ have developed contradictory relations, speaking favorably to those from below while formally opposing those from ‘above’. “Paradoxically” the center-left regimes pour greater state resources in the lucrative separatist regions who oppose them while only providing symbolic recognition to those ‘below’.

The Venezuelan government of leftist President Hugo Chavez faces a separatist movement led by rightwing notables and the governor of the oil rich state of Zulia, on the western frontier with Columbia. His government has also faced demands from Indian and

Afro-Venezuelan communities for a greater degree of “autonomy”. The national government has responded to the rightwing led separatist movement by intervening in provincial politics and centralizing control over a number of public facilities and expenditures. The justifications were charges of aiding and abetting subversion including support for a corporate oil company lock-out. President Chavez justified the centralization of power by citing the entry of Columbian paramilitary forces and the general problems resulting from the rightist Columbian regimes decision to increase the number of US based ground and air force units in the country, at a time of intensifying US hostility. Some critics of Chavez “centralizing” moves claim that it is an electoral-clientelistic measure, to appoint his own followers in positions to strengthen the electoral prospects in forthcoming political contests.

With regard to the demands for autonomy from below, by Indian and Afro Venezuelan movements, President Chavez has substantially increased funding of social programs, especially in health and education and subsidized food stores and recognized and given legitimacy to their claims, while providing limited autonomy for managing local affairs, excluding decisions on mining and energy exploitation.

The Zulia separatist movement was strictly based on economic and ideological reasons: there are no ethnic-religious or cultural differences with the rest of the country. The separatists seek to monopolize the oil wealth and draw closer to the US government and its oil multinationals and perhaps to facilitate a passageway for any Columbian military intervention. The ‘separatist movement’ is based on the geographical uneven endowment of mineral wealth

and the political polarization between a rightist oligarchical provincial regime and a populist-leftist national government.

The favorable response of the government to autonomy for the Indians reflects their lower class status and political support for the Chavez government: social-political criteria provide the bases for the different responses to similar demands for 'autonomy'. One set of demands created a danger to national security, the other fits in with the government's social alignment. One claim for autonomy was racist the other 'pluri-racial'. One lent support to an imperial power, the other opposed imperial exploitation – including its mineral resources.

Ecuador: Separatism and the Coastal and Highland Movements

The center-left government of President Rafael Correa faces two types of separatist movements: a coastal movement centered in the port city of Guayaquil, backed by the agro-export, banking and commercial bourgeoisie; the second anchored in the Andean highland Indian communities led by CONAIE.

The coastal separatists reject the ascendancy of a relatively new Quito based bourgeoisie backing President Correa, and receiving favored state financing, contracts and subsidies. The CONAIE are hostile to President Correa because of his concessions to foreign owned multi-national mining and petroleum companies which have plundered and undermined the livelihood of local fishers and farmers and contaminated the air, earth and drinking water.

In contrast to the dubious coastal comprador claims for greater autonomy based on a specious cultural identity, CONAIE has a long standing critique of centuries of exploitation and pillage by the European-Mestizo elite, legal claims to territorial control and a political

practice of self-government. The middle class professionals, public employees and small business people who speak to progressive urban politics largely benefit from the revenues and taxes accruing to the Correa regime in the form of salary hikes, contracts, consultantships, and political appointments and therefore offer littlefew support to the demands of CONAIE.

During the early part of the present decade, CONAIE and its political arm Pachacuti were able to forge various alliances with urban forces in overthrowing rightwing electoral regimes, briefly occupying the Presidential palace and later holding ministerial posts under a rightwing pseudo-populist President Lucio Gutierrez. Forced out of office and fragmented by US and EU funded NGO's CONAIE was severely weakened. Now facing a "progressive" center-left regime, it has not been able to reconstruct an urban-rural alliance capable of realizing its demands for a pluri-national state.

Bolivia: A President who Talks to the Indians and Works for the Multi-nationals.

Evo Morales, the center-left self-styled "indian president" was elected President by politicizing ethnic difference between the exploited indian majority of the highlands against the wealthy European mestizo oligarchs of the fertile lowlands. Openly identifying the issue as one of enfranchising and giving voice to the legal, cultural and "autonomist" demands of the indian communities he downplayed the once prominent programmatic demands for a socialist transformation for which his party was named "Movement to Socialism". His road to electoral victory was driven by two major urban-rural insurrections which overthrew neo-liberal presidents. Yet upon taking office, Morales made it clear that his "revolution" was more cultural than social: state recognition of the language, community, structures, customs and

traditions of the Indians. Through demagogic linguistic manipulation he claimed that “nationalization” did not mean expropriation, in order to justify his joint ventures with over a half a hundred of the biggest oil, petroleum and mineral multi-nationals from 5 continents, including the biggest and most lucrative agreement with the Indian multi-national Jindal.

Once the local landed commercial, banking and mineral oligarchy recovered from the mass popular offensive, they organized the 5 richest provinces, where they ruled, and aggressively pursued a separatist movement dubbed the “half-moon” (Mmedia Luna) alliance – after the geographical arc of the provinces involved. Aided and abetted by US Ambassador Goldberg, they sought to destabilize the regime via violent assaults on local peasant movements and obstructionist parliamentary tactics.

The Morales economic strategy was in a quandary because it was entirely geared toward promoting growth precisely through the promotion of the economic elites which politically rejected an “Indian capitalist government” rooted in the mass movements.

Throughout the first four years of his regime the Morales regime, with a great deal of ethnic theater and displays of traditional folklore, fashioned a policy of granting the indian communities local control over their impoverished villages, while refraining from any policies redistributing fertile lands from the 100 families and agro business enterprises which controlled 80% of the fertile lands, the major wholesale and retail commercial enterprises, the banks and mass media.

While Morales spoke to the rural indian masses in their own language and recognized their rights to govern in their impoverished villages, he acted for his erstwhile enemy

“European” oligarchs by granting them hundreds of millions dollar financing for cultivation and export promotion.

While embracing a radical rhetorical style condemning imperialism and embracing Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Morales foreign economic policy was an open invitation to foreign capital to join in exploiting the country’s resources.

“Regional-ethnic” politics was a trampoline for lower-middle class ‘movement leaders’ to gain political power, in order to join the elite, especially the foreign elite, in sharing the wealth. Ethnic-cultural politics was used to sideline class politics and to satisfy the mass base through symbolic gratification – “an indian president” who insults the rich while rewarding them from the public treasury.

There is no doubt that under Morales, the status and legal rights of the Indians has improved - but not their economic conditions: the inequalities in landownership, income, education, health are as glaring as ever. The Morales regime’s celebration of indian traditional rites and holidays serve to successfully obfuscate the socio-economic continuities. The blatant racist hostility of the oligarchy to all things and persons “indian” provides a useful foil for the government, allowing it to present itself as a champion of highland Indians and an enemy of the entrenched European ruling class. The beneficiaries are the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie which runs the government side of the lucrative joint ventures and provide contracts and lesser posts to loyalist movement leaders who can turn out the indian vote on election day. Having taken over the national government, the former regionalist ethnic President pays lip service to regional claims of the poor while heightening the regional – class disparities between highlands

and plains by deepening the internationalization (Imperial penetration) of the economy especially its mineral-energy enclaves. While opposing elite separatism and the independence of lucrative regions, Morales depends on its wealth to float his regime. His regime denounces elite separatism in order to share the wealth between racist capitalists and “progressive” bureaucrats.

Conclusion

The promotion of regionalism and ethnic diversity is not the same as ending class inequality and injustice. In many cases the politics of ethnic identities have been a vehicle to oppose oppressive national regimes, in the name of an undifferentiated “people” in order to construct local power base and negotiate quotas of national power.

Rural based ethno-regional movements have turned ‘inward’ to vindicating traditions and linguistic hegemony but frequently have been deflected from challenging national class power structures.

Not an insignificant role has been played by imperialist funded NGO’s who call for “respect” of “cultural-autonomy” at the local level and fragment and divide class based movements as is the case in some regions of Ecuador.

On the other hand, traditional solidarity of language, family religion and community has played a major role in overthrowing reactionary regimes and putting forth a progressive agenda when it is combined with modern class and anti-imperialist analysis.

Untangling the confused and apparently contradictory response of the left to the issue of self-determination and therefore to separatist movements revolves around recognizing that

other basic principles have greater salience. By revitalizing the notion of self-determination and locating it in the context of the class and anti-imperialist struggle, we can begin to approximate an answer to when, where and with whom we side in the national and social liberation struggle.