Role of the Intellectuals in social change

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Rebelión

Introduction

To speak or write of "the intellectuals" today is to refer to a range of political positions from the extreme rightwing (neo-liberal, neo-conservatives), through the center right (social-liberals) to the center-left (social democrats) to the revolutionary left (Marxists). Within and outside of these political categories we have a range of political ecologists, feminists, gays, and racial and ethnic identities.

In addition these political intellectuals are located in different institutional settings, some are leaders in NGOs (non-governmental organizations), others are found in Academia, while others are engaged as "public intellectuals", journalists, professors, trade union advisers, political party leaders, theologians and free-lance writers.

For purposes of this paper I want to focus on intellectuals of the center-left (CL) and the revolutionary left (RL), since these groups are most directly identified with the process of progressive social change. The CL intellectuals are found in most of the institutional settings, while the RL intellectuals are found mainly among the "public intellectuals" and in the universities.

The distinction between CL and RL intellectuals is far from fixed over time. In fact one of the main features of left intellectuals is the fluidity or movement between political identities. The greatest traffic is the movement from the RL to the CL and beyond to center-right (social liberalism) and neo-liberalism. Past political identities are poor predictors of present or future political positions. There are numerous ex-guerrillas throughout Latin America who were revolutionaries during the 1960's and 1970's but who are now neo-liberal ministers, senators and congress people and defend the military, imperialism, agro-business and counter-insurgency. There are few, rare, exceptions of CL intellectuals moving toward the revolutionary left particularly after the 1990’s, especially those greater than 50 years of age.

Whatever the shifts in politics and their political loyalties the intellectuals have a relatively important role in politics, especially in Latin America - under certain circumstances. Intellectuals do not usually directly influence mass politics, nor do they lead or organize mass struggles, despite the claims and pretensions of some of them.

Intellectuals are important in (1) influencing leaders and militants of parties, social movements and the politicized social classes; (2) legitimizing and propagandizing in favor of a regime, leadership or political movements; (3) providing a diagnosis of the economy, state, politics, imperialist policies.
and strategies; (4) elaborating prescriptions and political strategies and programs for regimes, movements and leaders; and (5) organizing and participating in political education of party or movement activists.

In this paper I will focus on and critically compare the role of the CL and RL intellectuals in providing the movements and parties with a diagnosis and political prescriptions.

Methods and Analysis

Our discussion will focus on the role of the CL and RL intellectuals in Latin America over the past 25 years. We will focus on two lines of inquiry: (a) the role of reformist and revolutionary intellectuals with regard to several pivotal events; and (b) a critical analysis of the principle concepts elaborated by the CL and RL intellectuals.

There are four central events which we will discuss: (a) the “transitions” from military rule to civilian elected politicians; (b) the emergence of the “new social movements” of the 1980s (identity movements) and the 1990s (mass peasant, unemployed and Indian movements); (c) the rise of the “center-left” elected regimes in the new millennium; and (d) the world-wide expansion of capital and the proliferation of imperialist wars.

The concepts, which were popularized by the CL intellectuals, will be contrasted to those used by the RL intellectuals. This will include a discussion of “democratic transition” versus “transition to authoritarian electoral politics”; new “identity-based” social movements versus class-based social movements; and “globalization” versus imperialism. In the last section of the paper we will evaluate the performance of the CL and RL intellectuals in terms of their diagnosis of politics, their political prescriptions and the consequences for social change.

Reformist and Revolutionary Intellectuals: Confronting Key Events

Let us begin by noting that throughout the period under discussion (1980-2005) the great majority of left intellectuals were largely in the reformist camp; the revolutionary left was and remained a minority throughout this period. It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze and explain why this was the case; however it is not surprising given the heavy preponderance of university academics who now make up most of the public intelligentsia. Our purpose is to analyze the relevance and validity of the political positions adopted by these two groups of intellectuals.

Transition to Democracy

The reformist intellectuals were deeply immersed in propagating the idea that the shift from military rule to civilian electoral politicians represented a “transition to democracy”. They argued that the legalization of parties, press, elections and individual freedoms were sufficient conditions
for defining “democracy”. The revolutionary left pointed to the continuity of the class structure, the state apparatus (military, judiciary, intelligence and central bank), the economic model and the decision-making power of the international financial institutions as primary determinants of macro-socio-economic policies. The reformists tacitly accepted the RL's argument that authoritarian structures remained in place and imposed constraints on the political system but argued that "incremental changes" were possible and that these advances would gradually lead to greater justice. In opposition, the revolutionary intellectuals argued that the electoral political framework was subordinated to the institutional forces of the capitalist state and the ruling class and was organically incapable of transforming society or even in redistributing wealth and raising living standards.

A detailed survey of the 24 years of electoral politics in Latin America demonstrates that all the assumptions put forth by center-left intellectuals in favor of electoral politics as an instrument for social change have proven false. In a quarter of a century a whole variety of political regimes throughout Latin America have failed to raise living standards, redistribute wealth, promote national development or solve the elementary problems of housing, land distribution, employment and denationalization of the economy. On the contrary, the electoral regimes have deepened and extended the regressive policies that preceded their rule. Land and property ownership has become more concentrated; the difference between the upper 10% and the lowest 50% has widened; vast sectors of public enterprises have been privatized and denationalized; and hundreds of billions of dollars have been extracted from workers and transferred to overseas banks paying the foreign debt many times over.

In every way and in every country the electoral system has expressed its profoundly class character - confirming the analysis of the revolutionary left. Every "reformist leftist" who has entered these regimes has ended up administrating regressive policies and repressing popular discontent. It is clear that the diagnosis and prescription of the reformist left - that a democratic transition had taken place in which electoral politics would lead to social change was wrong and a failure. The analysis of the revolutionary left emphasizing the continuity of bourgeois power and capitalist constraints of the "transition" proved correct and vindicated.

New Social Movements

As more and more left intellectuals realized that the electoral process was not leading to social change, many turned to the "new social movements". Once again a debate ensued about what was the social composition and social agenda of these movements. The reformists - some called "post-modernists" - emphasized "social identities" as opposed to class definitions. During the 1970s to 1980s the reformist intellectuals claimed that new "identity"-based movements had replaced class-based movements, pointing to ecology, ethnic, feminist and gay movements. The revolutionary intellectuals, while not dismissing these identity groups, pointed to the mass struggles of class-ethnic-based social movements like CONAIE in Ecuador, the cocaleros in Bolivia, the Zapatistas in Mexico and class-based rural movements in Brazil like the MST as the leading forces for basic social changes. The reformist intellectuals could point to limited changes which benefited only a few "elite" groups within the "identity" movements. In contrast, the class-based social movements were very successful in realizing some basic changes, in overthrowing corrupt neo-liberal regimes and blocking regressive legislation and Presidential edicts. The MST in Brazil based on class struggle, forced the expropriation of millions of hectares of land and the settlement of 350,000 families (over 1.3 million persons) on farms. CONAIE overthrew two neo-liberal presidents; the unemployed workers and impoverished middle class in Argentina overthrew President De La Rua; the workers and peasants movements of Bolivia overthrew President
Sanchez de Losada in defense of petroleum.

**Electoral Politics and the Center Left**

The debate between reformist and revolutionary intellectuals deepened over the question of the electoral via the revolutionary road to political power and social change. The vast majority of reformist intellectuals and most "revolutionary" intellectuals supported electoral candidates of the "center-left", including Toledo in Peru, Guitierrez in Ecuador, Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Vazquez in Uruguay and Kirchner in Argentina, as instruments of social reform. A small minority of the revolutionary intellectuals rejected these politicians, arguing that they and their parties were no longer on the left but had moved to the right and embraced the IMF, neo-liberalism and ALCA.

The reformist intellectuals influenced the leaders of the social movements and their mass supporters to support the "center-left" politicians. The revolutionary left had little or no influence at the time of the elections and in the immediate aftermath. The results are now well known: Lula, Gurtierrez, Toledo and the rest of the re-cycled leftists-turned-neo-liberals deepened and extended privatizations, promoted agro-business at the expense of small farmers and landless labor, transferred hundreds of billions of dollars to overseas banks, passed regressive labor and pension legislation and promoted exploitation of the Amazon at the expense of indigenous people. The reformist intellectuals' electoral strategy of supporting the "center-left" had disastrous consequences for the social movements. In Ecuador, the oil workers union was repressed, CONAIE lost support from disenchanted members while some leaders were co-opted by Gutierrez. In Brazil, the MST was politically disoriented, suffered repression and frequent expulsion from land occupations while land expropriations moved at a turtle's pace. In Uruguay, the Vazquez regime followed the IMF directives, promoted foreign investment by major polluters (cellulose companies) and imposed general wage [restraints] on the trade unions, undermining the prestige of trade union leaders and prominent reformist leftist intellectuals, who supported him.

After months of brutal neo-liberal policies, many of the reformist intellectuals who originally supported the "center-left" governing parties became critics of the regimes criticizing "mistaken policies" rather than following the systematic critique advocated by the revolutionary intellectuals. The revolutionary left intellectuals increased their influence among sectors of the disenchanted reformist intellectuals who recognized the validity of their diagnosis. The prescriptions for revolutionary political action for social change advocated by the RL intellectuals began to resonate with some sectors of the mass movements. The leaders of some social movements accepted the revolutionary methods of struggle but not necessarily the revolutionary goals.

**Globalization or Imperialism**

The fourth area of debate between the reformist and revolutionary intellectuals was over their diagnosis of the nature and driving forces of world capitalism. The reformists spoke of globalization and the creation of a new world order dominated by multi-national corporations (MNC) which transcend national boundaries and which were opposed by classless "multitudes" meeting in "social forums" or demonstrating at international elite meetings.

The revolutionary intellectuals argued that the main feature of our epoch is the rise of a virulent militarist US imperialism competing with European and Japanese imperialism for control of the
world, in which an aggressive imperial state was at the cutting edge of capitalist conquest and wars. The reformist focus on MNC economic expansion did not anticipate the imperialist wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, the CIA intervention in the Venezuelan coup and the US threats of multiple wars in the Middle East. The revolutionary intellectuals focus on the centrality of the imperial state, imperialist wars and colonial occupation proved much more relevant to understanding the nature and driving forces of the contemporary world.

Moreover the class analysis of the revolutionary intellectuals was a far more powerful tool in understanding the nature of the effective resistance to imperialism than the amorphous concept of multitudes. The mass movements of unemployed in Iraq formed the backbone of the armed resistance to the US colonial occupation. The peasants, workers and unemployed in Latin America provided the leadership in defeating imperial clients and preventing the privatization of electricity (Mexico), water (Bolivia) and ports (Uruguay). It is largely peasant-based armies which are resisting imperialism and neo-liberalism in Colombia, Nepal and the Philippines. Once again the reformist ideologues of globalization have failed to provide an adequate diagnosis and their political actions (Social Forums, mass events) have lost effectiveness, while the revolutionary intellectuals focus on imperialism and class-national resistance have gained widespread acceptance as they correspond to realities.

Conclusion

The contrasting conceptual-theoretical approaches of the reformist and revolutionary intellectuals have been a major factor influencing the struggles for social change. We have demonstrated that the reformist appeals have initially been more influential over the social movement leaders and masses than the revolutionary left analysis. However over time we have found that the diagnosis, descriptions, predictions and practices of the reformist intellectuals have led to disastrous socio-economic and political consequences. The results strengthened the new "neo-liberal" regimes and their alliances with imperialism, and led to the division and disorientation of the social movements. In contrast, the diagnosis and prescriptions for social change of the revolutionary left intellectuals initially were adhered to by very few popular leaders and had little impact on the masses. However, over time, their influence grew, insofar as they had a presence in the social movements and roots in the mass movements and among the intellectuals. The key problem facing some of the revolutionary intellectuals is their isolation from the mass struggle and their lack of access to media to circulate their ideas.

Consequential social changes will come about through the linking of revolutionary intellectuals and the mass movements. This requires struggles over immediate reforms via revolutionary methods leading toward a struggle for state power by independent class organizations. Only a revolutionary regime can ensure that structural changes in property relations, class structure and the state are irreversible and sustained.

March 6, 2005