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450 years later: the return of the Bolivian jumper*

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The inauguration last month of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, is an event that must be marked in any consideration of contemporary postcolonial politics. Morales is the first President to be drawn from the Indian majority since the Spanish conquest 450 years ago. His victory continues a movement that has been gradually developing in Latin America since the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) in Brazil in 2002 and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. Latin America has been quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) re-establishing the credentials of socialism as a viable political force in the twenty-first century. Attention on the Middle East has made this a comparatively low-key political development, but the historical significance of the project of Bolivarian socialism in Latin America should not be underestimated. Although Chávez in particular has played into some traditional and recidivist Presidential roles, and there are difficult issues of real cultural differences that have emerged, what is striking in larger terms about this form of socialism, which contrasts it to the revolutionary socialism of Cuba or that of the Soviet Union or China (such as it is), is that it has been inaugurated democratically. And, as a corollary of that, that it has been established as the result of long campaigns of popular and grass-roots political work. Stable forms of politics, whether of democracy or socialism, must be founded on consensus. These election victories mark the first political triumphs of a different politics, a politics that represents the triumph of a new political order that has close affiliations with a form first developed in Europe in the time of the Second International: social democracy.

The fall of the Soviet Union meant the end of old-style communism directed according to rigid party ideology emanating from Moscow. The end of colonialism and the Cold War also brought the end of the ideology of armed revolution. Socialism in Latin America has swerved away from the revolutionary politics that marked its former Guevarist mode and at long last has taken the more difficult path which ultimately can be the only way for any viable form of politics: popular grass-roots support. The triumph of this model can be directly linked to the phenomena known as the new social movements and the global justice movement. While these movements have been developed with individual political objectives (such as those of the MST in Brazil), they also represent the emergence of a political consciousness that represents a new phase in contemporary Latin American politics. That political consciousness, arguably, has been one of the indirect effects of the 'structural adjustment' policies of the Thatcherite regimes of the 1980s and 1990s, which instituted radical economic reforms. While these may have worked in Britain or other advanced and aging industrial economies, they proved far less successful elsewhere and

could rarely be sustained democratically. The form and specifics of these were generally mandated in detail by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These two institutions continue to be routinely demonised by activists such as Arundhati Roy as forms of interference by the globalising West. In fact, just as politics in Latin America has become more a product of social consensus, so both the World Bank and the IMF have become much more responsive to local needs and the advice of local knowledge. The fact that such institutions seem now to be largely run by NRI economists does not seem to have been considered as a new factor in their 'Western' identity, nor the fact that one of the few economically savvy critiques of contemporary globalization has come from the former chief economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz. In the postcolonial field, comments on globalization are generally much stronger on denunciation than offering a radical economic thinking that is informed and inventive enough to propose innovative alternatives. Yet as the election of Morales and Lula shows, if you are involved in real politics, then the moment of victory at the polls comes as the ultimate test: it is then that you have to have viable ideas about how to deal with the real world, particularly economics and institutional forms of production, organisation and regulation, and it is that knowledge, and that knowledge only, that will allow you to institute the social programmes that will bring relief to poverty and transform the lives of ordinary people.

*The icon of Morales' presidency has become the alpaca wool *chompa*, that is sweater or jumper, that he is often to be seen wearing on state occasions. *Chompa* is the origin of the word 'jumper', used in the UK but not the US.

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