

# DE-CENTRING OUR GAZE: The Urban Slums of Brazil, Venezuela and Bolivia

*Enormous political, economic, social and cultural changes are currently having an impact on the entire region of Latin America.*

*Dr Jeremy Lester has been studying the new configurations of social and political protagonists, and here describes some emerging challenges to the traditional order.*

THEY emerge out of a desolate, grey wasteland not so much as if they have taken root, but more like they have been deposited there, abandoned. And as they ascend higher and higher, layer upon layer, not only do they defy any sense of order and meaning, they seem to defy the very laws of gravity itself. Only a mysterious counterplay of forces holds them upright. Both in their form and in the overall impact they have on one's perceptions, these constructions of reinforced concrete and lead by the contemporary artist Anselm Kiefer are both symbols of claustrophobic suffocation and memorials to precariousness (Figure 1). Looking at them, one can almost feel oneself teetering on the edge.

Kiefer's works have often been described as expressive of great violence and great humanity. These Babel-like bricolages are also concrete expressions of the miserable conditions of much of the global urban landscape today; a boundless world-space of infinite uncertainty, and an all too clear recognition that along with a 'new global order' has come a 'new spatial order' as well. As the



Figure 1: Anselm Kiefer, 'The Seven Heavenly Palaces', in Hangar Bicocca, Milan. Photo source: <http://alexvcook.blogspot.com>

This UN report – which bears the main title *The Challenge of Slums* – has been rightly described as the first truly global audit of urban poverty. But it was, and it remains, much more than that. It is also a veritable *j'accuse!* of global proportions and pulls no punches in fully indicting neo-liberalism and its concomitant 'structural adjustment programmes' as the biggest single cause of this urban

poverty, inequality and deprivation. Unfortunately, though, as is so often the case with UN reports, it was a *j'accuse* without political bite. It could lament, harangue, blame and shame, but it could do little else besides. Even more unfortunately, it could seemingly take soothing comfort from what it saw as evidence that poor people remain far more politically apathetic than affluent groups. The age-old fear of the wealthy elite, that the poor would rise up *en masse*, was without foundation it assured us.

It was also a report that in many ways started from a false dialectical position. Its authors too readily assumed that from the basis of exclusion, the desire would be a simple one of inclusion. In other words, what the excluded slum dweller really wants is to be included inside a more humane capitalist logic of desire. It is almost as though they were being conceived as the future sites for McDonalds. But this is not necessarily the case; far from it. Exclusion can likewise negate the desire for inclusion if the inclusion being offered is not qualitatively different.

If we think of slums only as spaces of misery and degradation, only as places where all hope has been abandoned, nothing could be further from the truth. They can also be places of immense internal cohesion, identity and solidarity; places where values are renewed, despite exclusion. Often this cohesion has been shaped and defined by purely defensive mechanisms. After all, attacks against them have invariably been the sole recognition of their existence. Not any more. After years of defensive resistance, the moment has arrived of offensive attack. Not everywhere to be sure, but in some places at least – most notably in South America – this is assuredly the trend. Here at least it is almost as though their own inward gaze has been transformed outwards. The precarious structures now rise above the grey sky and the constant fog that has always enveloped them. They are rising above the storm clouds of despair and one can feel the clouds tremble.

My research took me to three destinations in South America – Brazil, Venezuela and Bolivia – in order to investigate and assess the challenges posed by and to the slums, and the changes that have been set in place in recent years, not so much from above (at the level of the state), but from below, by the inhabitants themselves. And that the changes have primarily come from below is not surprising. After all, if anything truly characterises the nature of slum life it is a condition in which the state is almost entirely absent. Each country's experiences and solutions have been, and remain, very different, although there are also some common points between them.

In Brazil's case, for example, the real politicisation and radicalisation of the poor sectors has not so much taken place inside the *favelas*, so much as at the 'entrance' and 'exit' points. By 'entrance' point, I mean



Figure 2: Searching for water at a new MST land occupation, approximately 100 km from Rio de Janeiro. Photo: Jeremy Lester.

amongst the peasants in the surrounding countryside. After all, it is the peasant migration to the cities that swells the ever-growing slum population. Brazil, however, has seen the rise of one of the strongest, most organised and most radical of left-wing peasant movements in the (post) modern age. Known as the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST), for the last 20 years or more it has been conducting massive land occupations in order to offer a better, more secure form of existence to the peasants precisely in order to *discourage* them from migrating to the cities. And the social consequences of these land occupations are startling to behold. Plots of *unused* land that used to belong to *latifundists* have not only been made fertile and productive but have also seen the rise of brand new communities which are completely self-organised and self-administered (Figure 2).

The really new phenomenon in Brazil, however, is at the 'exit' point of the *favelas* with the recent creation of a new movement in the cities – the Movement of Homeless Workers (MTST). Shortly before my arrival in the country, the MTST had just carried out its most audacious urban land occupation thus far, with 12,000 people occupying a massive unused plot of land on the outskirts of São Paulo (Figure 3). There is an astonishing sense of pride and dignity etched on the faces of these families that are desperately trying to build a new life for themselves in the hardest of all economic, social, political and security conditions (where the threat of forced removal, as well as right-wing paramilitary incursions, is a daily phenomenon).

In Venezuela, the changes taking place in the slums of Caracas and other cities are, if anything, even more remarkable. This is due to the fact that unlike in Brazil, the current government of Hugo Chávez has made the social and economic development of the slums one of the primary objectives of his 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Again, however, it is the initiatives from below that leave the biggest impression. Most of my research in Caracas was conducted in '23 de Enero', a large

sprawling hillside *barrio* very close to the city centre (Figure 4). Rarely have I witnessed such intimacy of political solidarity as here. 'Life is revolution', Antonio Gramsci once remarked. But here the contrary is equally true. Revolution *is* life.

Walking around the labyrinth of paths and alleys, no one can be left in any doubt about the seriousness of the political convictions at work. They are literally on display everywhere. Never have I seen a territorial space so covered in revolutionary murals. And what 'spatial stories' they tell. For here the walls not only embrace the words and pictures lovingly grafted on to them, they speak to you directly. To this day, most of the official maps of Caracas only show grey or white spots where the *barrios* and the *ranchos* are located. Most streets are not detailed and have only ever been informally named, if at all. But this is no problem whatsoever in '23 de Enero'. Everyone simply orientates oneself here with reference to the murals. 'Turn left at the José Martí, carry on down the Che Guevara with cigar...' (Figure 5). 'Chávez did not produce the revolutionary changes now under way in the country, we produced him,' is the naturally proud response of the residents of the neighbourhood.

Last stop, Bolivia. To be precise, El Alto – the highest city in the world, 'capital of the clouds'. Dirty, degenerate, dust-filled El Alto. Proud,



Figure 3: The MTST occupation at Itapequerica da Serra, on the outskirts of São Paulo. Photo: Jeremy Lester.



Figure 4: A view of 23 de Enero, Caracas. Photo: Jeremy Lester.



Figure 5: Che Guevara mural in 23 de Enero, Caracas. Photo: Jeremy Lester.

Figure 6: Leaders of the main Workers' Federation (the COR) in El Alto. Photo: Jeremy Lester.



dignified, feared El Alto. The opposing adjectives are as inseparable as Siamese twins. To enter El Alto is to enter a different world. It is like leaving your normal perceptions and perspectives behind you at the entrance. Nothing at all can prepare you for this first impact. The only thing one can do is to follow the sound advice of Marc Augé; we need to re-learn completely the ways in which we both see and think the kind of spaces that are around us in this world of *surmodernité*, and that means first and foremost de-centring our gaze.<sup>1</sup>

On the outskirts of the 'city' – how stately, how noble this label sounds, but this is what El Alto has officially been since 1988, with a population now close to one million – are the newest inhabitants from the surrounding plains. You can identify them immediately. Their huts have been constructed out of the only material available to them: light brown adobe bricks. And their peasant origins are unmistakable. It is not only a question of their skin colour or their traditional peasant costumes. When they uprooted from the land, they crossed the 'frontier' with everything in their possession. In the small enclosed courtyards of their huts can be seen their most prized possessions –



Figure 7: Protesters in El Alto during the October 2003 clashes with the military, which left 73 residents dead during 10 days of violence. Photo: Indymedia.

llamas, sheep, goats, donkeys and, above all, pigs – all of them eking out a survival in the dust and rubbish-strewn mud, for this is no city of tarmac or cement. Asphalt here is a prized commodity beyond the reach of most feet.

As the space before one is laid bare, and as one begins to penetrate its depths, the scenery and the surroundings change. The density of the place, and its accompanying humidity, is almost asphyxiating. One is literally sucked, breathless, into a hole that seemingly has no bottom. There are people everywhere, moving bodies, thousands and thousands of them, coming and going in constant perpetual motion. Together, these bodies of human existence generate a cacophony of noise that is barely short of ear splitting. It is the sound of daily human survival.

Why does one come here, to this ancient land of *Alaj-Pacha* (Land in Heaven)? One comes here quite simply to have a different conception of the world. It is not a voyage of nostalgia, but one of memory rehabilitation. In short, it is a voyage of understanding the contemporary hegemonic landscape of struggle, for in the last decade El Alto has become the self-proclaimed, but universally acknowledged, 'headquarters of the most revolutionary city in the Western hemisphere'. Moreover, at least for the residents themselves, nearly all of whom belong to the class of 'precarious workers' in both the formal and, more usually, the 'informal' economy, where the factory of today is the street, it is also 'the proud sentinel of a new kind of democracy in Bolivia' (Figure 6). And they are labels not to be taken lightly. As a result of constant revolutionary uprisings by the largely Aymaran population in the city, two 'neo-liberal' presidents were removed from power in 2003 and 2005 (Figure 7), thus paving the way for the historic victory of Evo Morales in the elections of December 2005 – the first elected indigenous President of any South American country.

While many have made of the poor quarters, the slums, the periphery, an *aneu logou* (a place deprived of sense and meaningful speech), in the places that I visited one comes away more and more convinced that they have made for themselves (or are trying to make for themselves) the beginnings of something completely opposite – a new kind of *polis*.

This new *polis* is very different to be sure from the original ancient Greek version, but it nevertheless does possess some of its essential constituent features. It is a political space that knows only equals. It is one that possesses a similar conception of freedom. It is one that primarily acts as 'a guarantee against the futility of individual life' (to borrow the words of Hannah Arendt). And equally as important, it is a political space founded upon courage.

Let me, therefore, conclude with the words of Bertolt Brecht: '[It] is ... the poorest of all that makes Honour their guest / It's out of the meanest hovel that comes forth / Irresistible greatness.'<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), p. 49.
- 2 Bertolt Brecht, 'Supply and Demand', in John Willett (ed. and trans.), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems and Songs from the Plays* (London: Methuen, 1992), p. 98.

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