

The Latin American Left and the Challenge of Self-Criticism. Interview with Magdalena López

Magdalena López 

In recent years, the Latin American left has avoided undertaking a critical and reflective reading of its own processes of autocratization, particularly in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. In this interview, Dr. Magdalena López, a Venezuelan researcher affiliated with the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame and the Centro de Estudos Internacionais at Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), whom I thank for her time and willingness to participate, reflects on the testimony of her mother, historian and scholar Margarita López Maya, who lived through the rise of authoritarian chavismo and the reconfiguration of the twenty-first-century Latin American left, including the role played by intellectuals and academic organizations, such as CLACSO and LASA, in legitimizing the chavista project, as well as the left's difficulty in engaging in honest self-criticism in the face of the systematic violation of human rights and the authoritarianism carried out in its name. Finally, she offers a reflection on ideological identity, intellectual responsibility, and the limits that should mark the end of one's backing of a given political project.

Sergio Angel [S.A.] Well, Magdalena, we're doing this interview precisely for the second issue of the magazine Autocratización. You recently published a book, and I'm going to read the exact title of your publication, it is "Thinking about the Latin American Left with Margarita López Maya", I'd like us to talk, not exclusively based on the book, but starting from the book, a little about this reflection on the Latin American left and particularly the Venezuelan left. What motivated you to write this book? I know that for some time you've had a particular interest in the left, but this reflection based on your own mother Margarita López's experiences, how did you arrive at this idea and what motivated you?

Magdalena López [M.L.] Yes, thank you, Sergio. Indeed, for personal reasons, and also because of Venezuela's political experience, there was this concern to document and follow up on what this whole process of the left had been. I had the idea of trying to think from a defined place of enunciation. That is, I increasingly keep in mind that we can talk about lefts, rights, democracies and dictatorships, but that it's very

important to do so from a place of enunciation and not from a broad abstraction that sometimes doesn't give a good account of the experience.

Let me give you an example to bring this to the present. One of the phenomena happening right now in the discussions about what's happening in Venezuela within the United States is that basically the place of enunciation is not Venezuela but the United States. So, when scholars do journalistic and academic zooms, they position themselves from a U.S. place of enunciation in which the epistemic axis is anti-Trumpism. So, once your central axis is anti-Trumpism, you're losing sight of the most important thing, which is the Venezuelan place of enunciation and what people in Venezuela are living and feeling. It seemed important to me to think about the Latin American left from the place of enunciation of the Venezuelan experience, a situated experience with its own historicity.

The most important thing that emerged, as I interviewed my mother, is that the Latin American left, as we know it in the twenty-first century, is largely a consequence of chavismo's rise to power and its hegemony in Venezuela. The book states several times that in the 1990s the left was basically sidelined, real socialism had been defeated, we were supposedly heading toward this end of history, where neoliberal policies had the upper hand. There was a Washington consensus, and the experiences of real socialism had been tremendously traumatic. What actually reignited the left, and was the vanguard of this process of autocratization we're seeing now, begins with chavismo back in 99 and 2000. The left had no project and was paralyzed in its own disenchantment, but thanks to chavismo it becomes active again and gains an appealing imaginary that was basically tied to the illusion the chavista project awakened. All the left we've seen since in power during the twenty-first century in Latin America starts there, in chavismo.

S.A. Tell us a bit about the structure of the book, how it's structured, and above all I'm interested in whether that structure emerged from planning the book or was more a construction that came out of the dialogue with your mother.

M.L. Yes, we had a clear idea of the book's structure. There are five interviews spread over four years. The first has to do with my mother's academic experience and her own studies of

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the Venezuelan left at the end of the twentieth century, what the left was like at that moment, what state it was in. On one hand, it was a left that came defeated from the armed struggle of the 1960s. Remember that the Venezuelan guerrilla was wiped out very quickly, and by the 70s there was practically nothing left. A good part of that left is what would empower itself in the twenty-first century with chavismo. However, on the other hand, my mother was also studying how Venezuela was no longer the showcase of democracy in Latin America. What we were seeing in the 90s was a process of brutal wear on the system, and so she begins tracking the small leftist political parties that were emerging in that context.

Then, in the second interview, we discuss which left ends up in power under chavismo, which left becomes hegemonic under the chavista regime. And it's the one that wasn't capable of doing critical introspection after the defeat of the armed struggle during the social democracy period.

In the third part, we focus on academic life and on Venezuelan and international leftist intellectuals. We discuss chavismo's soft power and how so many intellectuals propped up and legitimized what chavismo was doing. So, for example, we discussed how some of them came to chavismo and built certain ideas about twenty-first-century socialism, for instance. The way that, thanks to oil extractive resources, chavismo manages to create an entire Venezuelan intellectual network in Latin America and Europe, one that provides support, backing, and even tries to export it to its own contexts.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with academic professional organizations, that is, with LASA and CLACSO, my mother's experience from the inside there, first in CLACSO and then as president of LASA. That was the last part where we didn't know how it would turn out, because she hadn't yet taken on the presidency, but everything else was already predefined, we already had it in our heads, and in that sense it was relatively easy to build a chronological narrative.

S.A. Was the idea yours, Magdalena? That is, did you come up with the book, or was it more something worked out in dialogue with her?

M.L. Yes, the idea was mine, because, well, every time we saw each other we always had the same concerns, and she would bring up a lot of stories that nobody talked about. There's a kind of complicit silence in academia that I experienced a great deal, especially in the United States. A lot of things were happening. It's interesting, sometimes there's a split between academic praxis within academia and academic research, and we saw that those two things weren't coherent. For example, authoritarian practices went hand in hand with discourses of emancipation or exaltation of chavismo. Suddenly, they were disconnected from each other, supposedly emancipatory

research alongside practices of intolerance and ideological imposition. They forgot that there has to be a certain coherence, that academic research isn't detached from the everyday praxis of power. Within that praxis, it was very important for me to leave testimony of how we got here, that this wasn't a mere accident, that this was a process that had already been underway since the 90s in Venezuela, and that finally brings us to this place.

It also seemed important to me to counter the erasure that has taken place within Latin American and U.S. academic production, which is now discussing right-wing populisms and authoritarianisms without having done the same with the left over the last 25 years. My question was, well, are we going to explain why we got here, and how is it that we now have these Bolsonaros, Mileis, and Bukeles? That is, how do we arrive at these figures? And for that it was important for my mother to leave testimony and memory, not only of her scientific research, but also of what she had lived through in her academic praxis among left-wing colleagues. I proposed the book of interviews to her, and she said yes, we did it spaced out each time we met, we also took advantage of COVID to talk about these topics, and that's how it came together.

S.A. The book contains references to LASA and CLACSO. CLACSO was a very important point of reference during the Southern Cone dictatorships, particularly in Chile, it actually arises in Venezuela as a way of also welcoming those academics who were fleeing those dictatorships, and it ends up basically becoming a propagator of the same left-wing dictatorships in Latin America, that is, essentially Venezuela and Cuba. Tell us a bit about the reflections from there, how does she see it herself, because I'm sure that in one way or another she also lived through the process of CLACSO's destruction, and later leading LASA. How does it look from there?

M.L. Basically her view is that CLACSO has two levels. There's the executive secretariat, which is the CLACSO elite, and then there are these working groups spread across Latin American countries. So she sees a fairly large disconnect there between the groups at the bottom, which receive some resources from CLACSO and have a certain capacity to undertake their own research and exchange projects, and the top-down elite politics that has been captured by the illiberal left. There's a very strong illiberal discourse against representative democracy, which belongs to the left that captures the resources, distributes them, but also dictates, let's say, what the guidelines and policies should be when it comes to supporting or issuing manifestos, publications and declarations, public actions for or against certain governments.

Now, she manages to work very well with her colleagues when she's in these working groups, she gets to coordinate

a group of Andean countries, but as she starts climbing that pyramid she begins to find that there's an entire power structure that is pro-Cuba and pro-Cuban regime, and that in a certain way answers to the interests of the Cuban regime more than to a serious professional academic association. As she rises and wants to run for the presidency of CLACSO, she runs into a glass ceiling that tells her she can't get that far.

With LASA, the conclusion she draws is that it's a much larger, more diverse association, and that it doesn't have this extractivist issue that CLACSO has, which relies on outside aid, LASA instead is sustained by its members' money. So it's much more diverse. The problem is what to do with all that diversity, when some groups within that diversity, especially those tied to identity politics, have very strong agendas in which they want to impose their hegemony, even over the plurality and respect for other currents of thought and other disciplines not centered on identity and activism. Those hegemonic struggles within LASA also reveal sectors that are very pro-Cuban regime. What the intolerance of these groups has caused in recent years has been a significant exodus, and that's what they were trying to reverse, reversing people leaving the Association, especially social scientists and economists who say, "I'm going to my own discipline's congress".

In recent years, precisely because of how this identity politics operated, but also because of the pro-Cuban-regime politics, it was prevented, for example, that critical statements be made and that respect for human rights also be demanded in Nicaragua and Venezuela. This has stirred up discontent that has led many people, many LASA academics, to leave. And this is a problem because LASA, unlike CLACSO, does depend on its members' affiliation and the dues its members pay. So my mother describes there the experience of a very conflictive environment where these groups are constantly trying to impose their own agenda on everyone else and to look for an external enemy in order to delegitimize difference. The rest generally don't want to get into that fight, let's say, the rest prefer to abstain when it comes to votes, or else leave. So it's always the loudest ones who end up imposing their own agenda.

Of course, if you're not at the top, you don't realize what's happening. Down below you go to your congress and you don't find out much. So she goes on to describe, well, the efforts she had to make from LASA's leadership, to give you an example, so that the statements wouldn't apply only to right-wing governments. LASA even went so far as to pay for a commission's trip to rule on whether there had been a coup against Dilma in Brazil, but LASA shouldn't be doing and funding that. I mean, who is LASA to go there and conduct an investigation and rule on whether or not there was a coup in Brazil? And well, so there were statements all the time against

anything they felt attacked left-wing governments, but nothing happened on the other side of the political spectrum.

One of the things my mother tried to do, for example, was to avoid making public statements about just anything, keeping in mind that LASA is a professional and academic association. So statements should be tied to the profession when freedom of thought and academic freedom are being violated. And for that, human rights people and jurists were brought in, in order to draw up guidelines with a clear procedure, because there was also no rule for when a statement was issued and when it wasn't, and what standards were used. All that effort was made with several human rights groups, legal experts, and people from LASA's Executive Council, to create a kind of policy for when and how these LASA statements should be issued. However, I understand that nobody is paying attention to that anymore, and they're once again issuing statements whenever they feel they should, even when it has nothing explicitly to do with academic rights and free teaching and thought.

S.A. Magdalena, regarding what you were saying, one of the things you notice, for example, in CLACSO's case, I looked into this myself, and to give you the Colombian case, during Iván Duque's government, every massacre earned a CLACSO press release. During Gustavo Petro's government, massacres increased and CLACSO never again put out any reference to it at all. And that's just to mention one episode of the double standard of these kinds of associations.

M.L. Exactly. And that also exists in LASA, though on a smaller scale. I say smaller scale because efforts have indeed been made to professionalize and to have clearer rules about what should be condemned and what shouldn't, but also because LASA, despite everything, is still more diverse than CLACSO, it seems to me, both disciplinarily and in terms of perspective. Not everyone in LASA has to be decolonial, anti-imperialist, anti-American, in CLACSO you basically have to be. I think what you're saying, that double standard, is a deep problem that also strips these associations of seriousness, because you're basically turning scientific rigor into a proselytizing association aligned with your own agenda more than anything else.

S.A. I don't know if you'll agree with what I'm about to say, but it's also documented, in academia there's a tendency for people to be left-wing, and the social sciences and humanities tend to be even more left-wing. What's interesting is that there's a kind of pantheon of deities, and among those deities is precisely the Cuban regime. You said it earlier, so to speak, when talking about churches and religion. Armando Chaguaceda has a text, which we talked about once and which I find very interesting, called "Voluntary Blindness", and it refers to three phenomena: not wanting to see, not being able to see, and not knowing how to see. Those who definitely

don't want to see, don't want to find out what's there, they might have the resources to do so, but they don't want to see it. Those who can't see, because of censorship and because they definitely have epistemological difficulties accessing that knowledge. And those who don't know how to see because, let's say, they're sold one thing and don't know how to turn it around to understand this. What's going on with the academic lefts, and why do they refuse to see this kind of reality? It surprises me, and it surprises me especially with the Venezuelan and Cuban migratory phenomenon, left-wing people, and we're not even talking about the ordinary citizen, but about academia, when someone comes and tells them their reality, tells them, "In Venezuela I used to earn a dollar". There isn't even an acknowledgment of, "I'm a professor, the other person is a professor, and the other one earned a dollar". There isn't even a putting oneself in the other's place, and that vision remains stubbornly unmoved, a belief and a denial of reality.

M.L. Look, I was recently talking about identity logics, and whenever identity logics are mentioned, people talk about gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity, even religion, but ideological identity is never thought of as also a form and a dynamic that is extremely powerful. Ideology is also a form of identity. Ideology structures our world, and we act according to what that structure, which ideology already gives us, tells us. And questioning that structure is very hard because it shakes the ground you comfortably shelter in. When I interviewed Edgardo Lander for a dossier I put together on the lefts, it became quite clear to me that there's an entire generation in Latin America that built its life on that project, on that structure of thought which today is obsolete, and which has to do, as we discuss in the book, with a lack of even self-critical reflection on the instrumentalization of violence, violence to achieve political change, and with the difficulty that left has had in accepting pluralism, accepting that there are others who think differently.

Going back to the point about identity, what I remember from that interview with Edgardo Lander is that you built your entire life on an intellectual project, let's even say on intellectual activists like these figures, Edgardo Lander and Atilio Borón for example, in which we're no longer just talking about your academic project but your whole existential scaffolding, everything went into that. You can't, at 70 or 80 years old, admit that all of that was wrong, because you basically collapse. There's an existential issue there that becomes, in that sense, a matter of survival. I'd say that ideological identity is what allows us to learn, understand, and act in the world. And if you spent 50 years within those parameters, not just intellectually but also as a life's meaning, it's very hard to turn back from that. It's basically a tragedy. I think it has to do with the need for those blinders as a way of maintaining your own personal narrative and your supposed intellectual integrity, it's a way

of not leaving that comfortable place where you already have everything digested and explained.

The other thing, and this has more to do with the humanities, I say that because I come from the humanities, is that there has been a deep contempt for empirical work. Empirical work was always seen as a positivist matter, and liberals were the positivists, not the humanist left. They didn't teach that positivism and liberalism created our unequal, racist, and classist societies. A reasonably objective empirical approach to reality couldn't be legitimized, since that belonged to the "bad guys", and we already know that objectivity doesn't exist, it's a colonial invention. And when it was done, it was always in a biased way, using only the slice of reality that confirmed one's own preconceptions, none that contradicted them. In the humanities, then, we were left with a certain abstraction, with grand ideals, with totalizing, dichotomous narratives, and with spaces where the good and the bad were clearly kept apart. I notice that after the thesis, fieldwork is very rarely done, so you can perfectly well build a career staying with your books, academic articles, and your ideological premises, always talking to the same people.

And well, you said something key that I always try to say whenever I'm asked these things: you have to put yourself in the other's place. The problem with identity politics, ideological politics included, is that it always seeks sameness. The relationship that gets built is always with someone who is like me in terms of gender, race, religion, and ideology. And that's a problem, because if you surround yourself with people who all think the same as you, you basically don't know what's happening outside. Identity starts from a principle that struggles a great deal with diversity, because what it's about is always returning to the same thing. What you said, putting yourself in the other's place, the other as the different one, not the other who is the same as me.

That is the litmus test, and that's why democracy is so hard to sustain. It's not that you appeal to democracy when the people in power are the ones you like or who think like you, it's that you must believe in it even when those at the top are entirely alien to you. That's very clear, for example, in the way Venezuela gets tied to the anti-Trump issue I mentioned to you. Most academics in the United States detest Trump for very good reasons. But then, when talking about Venezuela, they render María Corina Machado invisible or dismiss her entirely, among other things because she awarded her Nobel Prize to the U.S. president. They completely overlook that she is the only one, along with Edmundo González, who holds political legitimacy in Venezuela, because the majority voted for her. That's as far as democracy goes for these academics, since this Venezuelan leader doesn't align with their own anti-Trump or left-wing identity. Whereas the democratic question is, well,

accepting that someone can hold political legitimacy even when the majority disagrees with you.

S.A. You know Paulo Ravecca. Paulo writes his doctoral thesis precisely on the Southern Cone dictatorships, particularly Chile and Uruguay, and gives a very eloquent description of that model of right-wing dictatorships. And he continues, let's say, and extends to this day a very left-leaning stance from his personal position, but he doesn't manage to connect that also to the lived experience of what a left-wing authoritarian regime can produce. That's precisely the phenomenon you're describing as sameness, how can we counter it? That is, from that review you're doing of the Latin American and particularly Venezuelan left, how can we work on this? And let me add something that seems striking to me, I think there's an eagerness among intellectuals to find fulfillment for their life projects. You see it with a jurist like Carl Schmitt, who ends up getting involved, to different degrees depending on how you read it, with German National Socialism, and who also goes through the Nuremberg trials, but you also see it with someone like Enrique Dussel, that a figure like Enrique Dussel ended up sitting at the table in Miraflores Palace with Nicolás Maduro to create an apparent center for decoloniality, it seems to me the ultimate expression of how the intellectual, in trying to ground his academic project in reality, ends up performing a kind of abandonment of his own principles.

M.L. Remember that this academic project is, as I said before, a life project. What you're gambling there isn't just your reputation, it's your life project. That issue of the handouts, for example, how much chavismo paid the ones who came to receive awards, the jury members, and how much it paid Juan Pablo Monedero, is an issue that goes beyond just money. Of course money matters enormously, and I have no doubt that Monedero, for example, was after that, but it's also that need to shore up your own life project and your own existence.

I remember, now that we mention the cases of Dussel and Monedero, that when I arrived in Lisbon, I spoke with a Portuguese woman who was writing her doctoral thesis on Cuban veterans in Angola. She would go every summer to interview veterans across the island and come back. The last year, she told me, very distressed, that while she was in the Cuban interior, the police summoned her and she had a very rough time in an interrogation. The men doing the interrogation told her, "Well, we know who you interviewed yesterday, where you were the day before, who you're staying with, what it is you're doing". And she told them, "No, but this isn't politics, this is a project about the memory of the combatants". And the police themselves told her, "Of course it's political". "We're watching every step you take, and if you keep interrogating people we're going to arrest you". And well, she had to take a plane and go back to old Europe. I told her, "But you've

been doing interviews for three years, how does this surprise you, where is your intellectual work and your own sense of reality, how is it possible that you spent three years interviewing and watching people, people who sometimes speak in fear, surrounded by that reality, and you didn't think that could happen, and that it happens to a lot of Cubans every day who can't go back to a home in Europe?" No, because, as in Dussel's case, her personal-intellectual project was completely disconnected from ordinary people, she hadn't put herself in the other's place until it happened to her. Remember that Monedero himself went and gave a human rights speech in front of the Helicoide, a torture center in Caracas. He gave it to police officials who took part in the repression. There's something a bit schizophrenic about that, but I think it has to do with sustaining the meaning of your life, if you see the mistake, the whole scaffolding collapses on you, and you collapse too, not just professionally, I actually think you could end up suicidal, it's like, "Well, everything I've been doing is one big lie". I think we shouldn't set aside the existential dimension all of this has, not just the money and the handouts, which also inflate the ego a great deal, beyond personal enrichment.

S.A. In the book, in that conversation you have with your mother, is there some kind of "*mea culpa*" review? That is, does she go through some moment, in terms of that effervescence, even when chavismo arrives and then the disenchantment, how does she experience that emotional moment, and is it portrayed in the book?

M.L. Sergio, that's a tremendous question, you know I can't answer it definitively? She ends up saying something like, "Before I was more romantic and optimistic, and now I have my feet on the ground". A more explicit "*mea culpa*", no, because she didn't get that high up in the chavista project, she never held public office, was never a propagandist for the regime, and didn't go that far. She supported it until the signs told her the thing no longer made sense. And this is another big discussion, Sergio, one that will also have to happen not only in Venezuela but also in Cuba, at what point does it stop being legitimate to believe? That is, at what point do you have to say, this is as far as I go? And how do you set that limit?

My mother places it at the moment Chávez decides he's going to push forward twenty-first-century socialism and changes the project, in 2005. She sets that limit there, it's the moment when she says, "Well, now it's being imposed that we're moving to twenty-first-century socialism, and it doesn't matter that Chávez lost the referendum, he decided to do it anyway", that's where the enchantment ends, let's say. So, well, the question for me is, from what point on do you have to do the "*mea culpa*"? I actually think the limit might lie in human rights violations, and place the breaking point there, but in reality we shouldn't wait until we get that far, should we?

I remember, for example, still in 2014, academics like Luis Duno and Ciccariello-Maher issuing an open anti-imperialist statement that completely ignored the students who were being detained and tortured in places like La Tumba by the Maduro regime. A disgrace.

For me, an ethical matter, every time I have to speak about these topics publicly, is to acknowledge that I was chavista at least until 2004-2005, because that's an issue tied to one's own responsibility, not disowning what I've done or thought. There are those who prefer not to acknowledge that. Everything I've done and written about chavismo and the left since then has precisely to do with that, with a need to work through a kind of intellectual, political reparation.

And there's also the other extreme, which is equally regrettable, that of the arrogance of moral superiority for never having been wrong: "we told you so, I was right in 98 and I'm still right in 26, because I'm never wrong". People who are never wrong also scare me. In my case, Sergio, I always devoted myself to the insular Caribbean until I felt I had an obligation to Venezuela. First, because nothing was being said in North American academia about what was really happening in Venezuela, it was all an apology, and later because it seemed to me a way of intellectual reparation, to start writing and doing things about the country. I think that more than "*mea culpas*", maybe what matters is thinking about forms of reparation when one has accompanied or been part of a project that failed, taking on the responsibility one owes for the catastrophe.

S.A. What you say about time, I think it's a very important issue to think about because, for example, Gustavo Petro's project in Colombia has a clear authoritarian bent, his discourse, his practices, and his execution. However you look at it, it has authoritarian tones, and you can see it in other models too, Andrés Manuel López Obrador's, he completed his term, and in principle Gustavo Petro is going to complete his term, but at what point do you have to break away when there are already threats to institutions, when you have racist and misogynistic rhetoric? The question is, how far are you going to tolerate it?

M.L. It's extremely complicated to set that limit, look, I'm working it out as I talk to you. Maybe "guilt" isn't the exact word, but the idea of reparation is. At what point does repairing imply taking on responsibility? So, a taking-on of responsibility more than a *mea culpa*, but while I'm clear about when something becomes unacceptable, I'm not so clear about the precise moment when it stops being acceptable.

S.A. Even reflecting, the mere act of thinking. Let me put it metaphorically in my own case, I'm a graduate of a public university in Colombia, and being a graduate of the public university, practically by definition, makes you ideologically left-wing, because all your professors are left-wing, you have

an entire construction of symbols associated with the left, all the commemorative dates have to do with the left, and ultimately the university is built that way, especially in the social sciences. You start discovering a different reality once you leave the university and stop constantly consuming what you had there. There's a process of reflection, self-criticism, and self-questioning there that not everyone produces, because that ends up being the reality for many people. And that doesn't mean they lack critical thinking, and it doesn't mean they don't read, it's simply that they stayed with that reality that's already built. Yes, you're right, there has to be a process of taking on responsibility.

M.L. And being willing to change. I mean, that, yes, I do think that's important. People who are never wrong scare me a lot. I think it's important for one to accept that one can be wrong, if you start not so much from identities but from a certain level of uncertainty toward the world, I think that also leaves us more sensitive and more open to understanding the complexity of what's happening, because another thing these kinds of ideologies have is that they are extremely simple, totally dichotomous, binary, black and white. They don't let you appreciate all the complexity we're seeing in the world today. You just gave two examples that are totally schizophrenic, a decolonial figure like Dussel sitting down with the other one, Maduro, who is destroying the environment, exploiting the mining arc, yet has a decolonial discourse. I'm not saying we should do without ideologies, because human beings need certainties, I mean, we need them, because otherwise we'd live in an uncertainty, unhappiness, and anxiety in which we couldn't move forward if everything were doubt after doubt after doubt; but yes, knowing there's that margin of error and leaving that door open to learn. We're always learning, and that learning happens, as you said, through putting yourself in the other's place, and putting yourself in the other's place already means moving from your spot and being willing to commit a kind of parricide against the ideas that have structured us and that we've inherited without any flexibility at all.

S.A. Look, to get to that last question, and as I talk to you I'm thinking about it, I believe we also have to connect this to who we surround ourselves with, if all our colleagues think a certain way, if our partner thinks that same way, and if ultimately our whole comfort environment thinks that way, it's very hard for you to leave that bubble. In fact, it's not even a matter of deciding, it's, at the end of the day, your comfort zone.

M.L. And our societies, as you rightly said about the public university, are also designed so that we stay in those little boxes, all separated. Those two worlds very rarely intertwine. So something very exceptional has to happen in your life for you to put yourself in the place of an other who is completely

opposite. That's why I like the sense of hospitality Derrida talks about: if you invite someone you know, someone close to you or similar to you, that isn't hospitality, that's narcissism. That's like being yourself in your own house.

True hospitality is bringing the other into your home. I tell my students, "Imagine bringing a Ku Klux Klan member into your house". That's what Derrida is thinking of. Bringing someone into your house that you don't know what they'll do there, I mean, that could certainly end badly. And in fact I imagine that if I brought someone from the KKK into my house, that would be a disaster, I might end up dead. But that's the risk you have to be willing to take, according to him.

To be honest with you, I don't know if I'm capable of such a huge risk, but I do try to play with different positionalities. You know that in Afro and Afro-Caribbean mythologies, the beautiful thing about the divinities or entities is that they have a thousand facets. In Christianity, values tend to be fixed and monolithic. But Afro religions, like the cult of María Lionza that my paternal grandmother practiced, are much more plural, the same god can be a charming figure today and a villain tomorrow. Human beings can be wrong about certain things and right about others, and you have to be open to that diversity. The left really struggles with diversity, in that sense it's very Christian, almost evangelical, as if there's one line and you always have to follow that line, there are people who, even today, haven't moved from their chavismo, even when they try to hide it.

S.A. Magdalena, I wanted to ask you a final question, when one looks at the ideological spectrum, especially from the left, one always finds that there's the left and the far right. The ideological scheme is like, the left, the lukewarm ones stuck there in the middle who don't take a stance, and the far right. There are two particular phenomena, a penalty for those who are simply in the center, and on the other side there's no right, just far right, but on the left there's no far left. You see it in the press, but you also see it in academia and, generally speaking, in different spaces. They tell you "the far-right candidate" and "the left-wing candidate". I think language, the way we name things, names realities. I think that's also a mental barrier to generating a dialogue with otherness.

M.L. Absolutely, remember too that for the left, extremism, radicalism, is also something positive, revolutionary. The further left you are, the better, because the left's idea is always eternal rebellion, revolution, the revolt, as the Chileans say to avoid saying revolution, but they mean the same thing. The idea is always a 180-degree turn. All of that leftist discourse validates itself through the destruction of the status quo. Everything against the status quo isn't radical, it's desirable, and moderation is a despicable bourgeois matter. The premise

is to always live in an exceptional, epic order and temporality. You're always resisting, you're always making the revolution. Being radical is always good, but that's precisely why, no matter how radical you are, you're never really radical, you're just left-wing. Because being radical in a bad sense is always attributed only to the right.

S.A. What you just said describes it perfectly, because in Colombia, for example, you talk with students who identify as left-wing and it doesn't strike them as all that radical, for instance, to defend the guerrilla or that resources like kidnapping were used.

M.L. Because questioning that redemptive violence is for accommodating bourgeois types, and the idea is to break the system. The idea is that peaceful reformism is the worst thing that can happen. Being a reformist, working on what already exists, is perpetuating the system. You're never radical enough, and therefore you're never really radical, because that's what's desirable. In psychoanalytic terms, it's living eternally as an adolescent, because you're always starting again from zero, zero, zero. There's no memory, because all the effort goes into a perpetual present of resistance and into a promised future, there's no will to rebuild or build, only to blow up the system. And this is something the right is now copying very well. It's interesting how these right-wing populist leaders are using that same logic, but for themselves. It's unsettling how the left opened that door for them, the door where anything goes as long as it's for the cause I uphold.

S.A. Listening to you, I think for example of the film *The Educators*. There's a film about that which uses that kind of tactics and romanticizes them, I believe it's a German film, they kidnap a businessman, and it involves completely twisted practices because there's a kind of guilt in being bourgeois.

M.L. It's guilt, very Christian, original guilt. Think of Che as Christ. The Christian foundation of the left is very strong, it's the secular religion, let's say, very modern in its anti-modernity, in its romanticism that idealizes something as complicated as that abstraction we call "the people". All these things are also seen in fascism. There, the ideological opposites meet, fascism and Stalinism actually have a great deal of convergence in their visceral anti-liberalism. That's why that left keeps quoting Carl Schmitt all the time.

S.A. Magdalena, well, thank you very much. I think the book looks tremendously interesting. And I believe it's very necessary for thinking, especially about the current situation and what's coming.

M.L. Yes. I hope so. Yes, especially so we don't keep repeating the same prejudices, and so we can also be more flexible with our own ideological principles. There will always

be people who lean more to the right, putting freedom before equity, and others who favor equity over freedom, but we have to reach a balance there that we haven't yet managed to resolve. It can't always be that one gets crushed in the name of the other, and that is what we've seen so far.