

García Linera Á (2023) *La comunidad ilusoria. Una reflexión sobre el Estado, lo público, lo común, la protesta ciudadana y la esperanza en tiempos de incertidumbre mundial*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana

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The intellectual and political trajectory of Álvaro García Linera is strikingly uncommon today, recalling instead figures more characteristic of the twentieth century. Moving fluidly between theoretical reflection and political engagement, his work combines rigorous intellectual elaboration with the practical awareness of someone who served as Bolivia's Vice President for nearly fourteen years, at the helm of a transformative political process which, despite the severe setbacks of recent years, stands as one of the most significant and durable socialist experiments of the contemporary period. This dual position produces what might be called a "realist audacity": a commitment to profound socio-political change that avoids the excessive, sometimes opaque abstraction typical of much contemporary critical theory, grounding itself instead in the concrete needs of popular sectors and the realities of political organisation. In this sense, because García Linera writes from within an ongoing emancipatory project, his production of knowledge remains inseparable from strategy, exhibiting a distinctly Clausewitzian sensibility that sharply contrasts with much of today's left-leaning theoretical enterprise.

The book under scrutiny is a mosaic of three distinct yet interrelated texts, in turn the modified transcription of as many conferences read by the author between 2019 and 2021 in three Argentinian universities. The central themes García Linera develops concern common sense, the commons, and the State. While the arguments occasionally overlap, this repetition ultimately serves to reinforce and clarify his core arguments. His initial question is why rebellion remains so difficult to achieve, even when societies confront increasingly blatant and intolerable forms of domination. Rejecting any mechanistic interpretation, García Linera argues that social stability – "the 99% of the time", as he puts it – predominates because the

principle of conservation generally outweighs the impulse toward transformation. This stability is secured through “common sense”, a notion he explicitly appropriates from Antonio Gramsci (whose influence permeates the book, alongside that of Nicos Poulantzas and, to a lesser extent, Pierre Bourdieu). For García Linera, common sense comprises a dense ensemble of everyday, “automatized” normative knowledges, ethical judgments, moral tolerances, projective capacities, and practical competencies that develop according to a grammatical logic. At any given historical moment, a dominant common sense circumscribes a horizon of potentially infinite human actions, yet always within boundaries compatible with the interests of the ruling bloc.

Crucially, common sense is not static: it constitutes a flexible and evolving platform that continually ratifies or repositions the place of each social group. It is precisely during moments of political crisis that old beliefs can be displaced by new ones, though always with the understanding – García Linera is adamant here – that remnants of prior common senses inevitably persist; the revolutionary fantasy of a *tabula rasa* is, in his view, an illusion. The struggle to shape and eventually monopolize common sense is therefore decisive if diffuse discontent is to be channelled toward an emancipatory horizon, for cultural–political hegemony is both the precondition and the precursor of new political power. All very Gramscian, indeed. The task of revolutionaries, then, is the long, patient labour of cultivating the conditions for a rupture in which popular forces can credibly articulate a new direction grounded in a national–popular culture. In this way, García Linera introduces a point that goes beyond the initial observation that rebellion often appears impossible: domination and rebellion are continually reproduced within changing historical conditions, and hegemonic formations, though slow to shift, do change, revealing their ultimately open-ended character.

In the second essay, García Linera turns to the question of the commons, a theme that has attracted considerable attention among radical theorists in recent years. His position diverges markedly from the emerging “mainstream”, which tends to celebrate non-state, local, and self-managed commons. García Linera’s intervention is welcome precisely because it dispels many of the naïve assumptions that have rendered much contemporary discussion of the commons

abstract and strategically toothless. He underscores – often with considerable polemical force – the vast distance separating thinkers such as Dardot, Laval, and Federici from the lived realities of the popular classes. The commons valorised by these authors, he argues, are not genuinely universal: however admirable they may be, they are so locally bounded and small-scale that they amount to commons of sub-groups, perpetually vulnerable to being reabsorbed into circuits of capitalist profitability. As such, they pose no real threat to political power.

García Linera instead directs attention to commons that are centralised and safeguarded by the State, which he regards as the most consequential. He expands the notion of the commons to encompass social resources, wealth, and rights – often the historical product of collective uprisings – thus including political citizenship, the welfare state, nationalisations, and social security. In his view, any truly universal common necessarily operates within the orbit of the State. Many commons emerge in opposition to the State, but their endurance requires becoming State, insofar as the latter holds the monopoly over their management and can project binding effects across a national territory. The introduction, erosion, or privatization of the commons therefore signals shifts in the balance of social forces. Here, García Linera clearly aligns himself with Poulantzas: State is not simply an instrument of the dominant classes but a terrain of struggle among competing social groups.

He is, however, fully aware of the dangers that the statization of the commons poses for emancipatory projects, particularly the risk of bureaucratic autonomization that arises from delegation. Yet such risks are, in his view, unavoidable in a mass society where the scale of administration and the need for continuous coordination impose certain structural constraints. The “passivization” of the commons – when they become fixed in legal statute – is exacerbated by the distance between those who originally created them and the bureaucrats tasked with their administration, who often (though not invariably) share closer affinities, in terms of expectations and worldviews, with the propertied classes. As a result, administrative steering of rights may privilege some sectors over others, distorting the meaning of the commons. This “machinality” of the state relation

is thus a persistent risk, one that must be counterbalanced through ongoing mobilization.

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, the third essay engages even more deeply with the complexities of contemporary debates on the State. Drawing on Marx, García Linera describes the State as an “illusory community,” a formulation that also gives the book its title. It is a community because, through fear and uncertainty, it fosters the widely shared belief that it exists to care for all through public resources; it is illusory because, at its core, it is a relation of domination in which particular interests, perspectives, and decisions are presented as universal through a myriad of bureaucratic micropowers that simulate neutrality. The communitarian dimension is thus inverted: the decisionism of a few over the many becomes, in García Linera’s view, a kind of failed communitarianism. At the same time, he underscores the materiality of the State – its capacity to shape social structures and exercise a performative force with binding effects across the social body. Much of the essay revisits the State as a shifting relation of power, with particular attention to the dense legal apparatuses that encode existing economic and cultural hierarchies and interests.

Yet for García Linera the State does not belong to a single class. Its complete democratization may remain utopian – since even under conditions of maximal popular protagonism, authority is necessarily monopolized by a specific sector – but the State, as a social bond, is nonetheless open to transformation. Crucially, such transformation cannot be reduced to administrative voluntarism, thereby challenging approaches that rely solely on electoral politics. Here García Linera explicitly invokes a key Gramscian concept: the “integral State”, the dynamic interplay between political society and civil society. Hegemony must be built within non-state institutions if it is to take root. This perspective also allows him to identify the limits of many progressive processes – especially in South America – that succeeded in winning state power but failed to contend with the enduring influence of conservative forces outside the State, which were able to obstruct and reverse emergent popular blocs.

In the final pages, García Linera turns to the distinction between use-value and exchange-value to sketch two spatial logics that coexist within capitalism: the spatiality of the nation-state and that of the

world market. When the former predominates, protectionist phases emerge; when the latter prevails, free-market regimes take hold. He argues that we are currently living through a transition in which the global free-market order shows clear signs of exhaustion, without a new organizing principle yet in view. This produces a widespread sense of frustration characteristic of liminal periods. Such periods – “politics in its purest form”, as he calls them – are marked by a paralysis of the predictive horizon: events unfold without clear direction. Cognitive perplexity follows, accompanied by apathy and anti-politics; dominant ideologies still saturate public discourse, but they no longer persuade.

This opens new fractures within ruling elites and facilitates the rise of the extreme right, which positions itself as the agent of punishment and vengeance – though García Linera underestimates how effectively these forces have cast themselves as rebels defending a supposedly threatened freedom of speech. The left, by contrast, remains captive to the liberal-cosmopolitan frameworks in which it has long been embedded, and struggles to articulate new futures or offer orientation to a disoriented population. The danger, García Linera warns, is that no society can endure prolonged strategic indeterminacy: eventually it will cling to any available organizing principle. The developments of recent years strongly suggest that the balance may already be tilting toward the extreme right.

The book is a valuable contribution for anyone interested in realist emancipatory politics. Written in accessible prose and with an explicitly didactic intent, it is also suited to a non-specialist audience. Nonetheless, a few critical points merit considerations while reading. Most notably, the international dimension is largely absent from the discussion of the State’s capacities. Although the book effectively dispels certain myths about the declining relevance of the State, it pays insufficient attention to the objective constraints imposed by the international system – especially on smaller states – and by the rise of giant tech corporations that have reintroduced quasi-feudal forms of extraction. Moreover, despite García Linera’s heterodox Marxism, the argument would have benefited from a sharper sociological delineation of the categories he employs. References to “popular classes” and “dominant sectors” remain rather undifferentiated. Which popular classes? By what criteria? What role is played by middle classes?

And are the dominant sectors truly homogeneous, or fractured along specific lines that shape contemporary political struggles? These are questions that could have been addressed more explicitly.

Two further strategic issues of primary importance are also left unexplored. First, the book says little about how a political movement might facilitate the transition from the reflexive (intellectual) to the unreflexive (moral) moment of leadership. If common sense consists of dispositions shaped early in life, how can emancipatory politics cultivate a more deeply rooted hegemony, one that goes beyond the easily reversible, reflexive decision to vote for the left in a given electoral cycle? Second, if bureaucratic autonomization constitutes an objective challenge for socialist politics, and if passivization is structurally built into the political game, how might the left inhabit state institutions in ways that prevent, or at least limit, this drift? These questions are far from simple, and definitive answers are unlikely. Yet they deserve to be placed at the centre of reflection for anyone engaged with neo-Gramscian political thought.

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