Globalizations

The Hemispheric Social Alliance and the Free Trade Area of the Americas Process: The Challenges and Opportunities of Transnational Coalitions against Neo-liberalism

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The paper analyses the formation of a transnational coalition of civil society organizations coordinated by the Hemispheric Social Alliance to oppose the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Representing labour unions, social movements, indigenous, environmental and citizen organizations from throughout the Americas, the HSA has served as the mediator between multiple expressions of resistance to neo-liberalism rooted in local/national processes, and a wider strategy at the hemispheric level to pursue a sustainable and democratic form of development alternative to the FTAA project. Drawing on a political process approach from the sociology of social movements, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities of the HSA to construct political alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda of the FTAA project. The central argument is that while significant progress was achieved by the HSA in defining a hemispheric basis of consensus for an alternative political agenda, there remains the challenge of ensuring that the process of constructing such alternatives is democratic and inclusive of the grassroots sectors. On the one hand, there must be a balance between the need to increase the HSA’s capacity to mobilize critical social forces from the continent in a campaign against the FTAA and, on the other hand, to ensure the cohesion of an expanding coalition increasingly under strain by the alignment of new sectors and actors.

El documento analiza la formación de una coalición transnacional de organizaciones de sociedades civiles coordinadas por la Alianza Social Hemisférica para oponerse al establecimiento de un área de libre comercio entre las Américas. La Alianza Social Hemisférica, representando sindicatos laborales, movimientos sociales, indígenas, organizaciones del medio ambiente y civiles a lo largo de las Américas, ha servido como mediadora entre múltiples expresiones de resistencia a procesos neoliberales con raíces locales/nacionales y una estrategia más amplia a nivel hemisférico, para lograr una forma sostenible...
y democrática de alternativa de desarrollo al proyecto de un Área de Libre Comercio entre las Américas (FTAA, por sus siglas en inglés). El documento explora los retos y oportunidades de la Alianza Social Hemisférica (HSA, por sus siglas en inglés) trazando un método del proceso político de la sociología de movimientos sociales, para construir alternativas políticas al plan del proyecto del FTAA. El argumento central es que mientras se logró un progreso significativo mediante la HSA al definir una base de consenso hemisférico para un plan político alternativo, permanece el reto de asegurar que el proceso de elaborar tales alternativas sea democrático e incluya a la base y a los sectores populares. Por un lado, debe haber un equilibrio entre la necesidad de la capacidad de ampliar la Alianza Social Hemisférica (HSA, por sus siglas en inglés), para movilizar a las fuerzas sociales críticas del continente en una campaña contra el FTAA y, por el otro lado, para asegurar la cohesión de una coalición que se amplía cada vez más bajo la tensión por la alineación de nuevos sectores y actores.

Knowledge, if it does not determine action, is dead to us. (Plotinus, 204–270 AD)

Introduction

At the Miami Summit of the Americas in 1994, 34 countries of the Western Hemisphere (all countries apart from Cuba) announced their commitment to create a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. The FTAA project represents the most ambitious trade integration scheme ever attempted (Salazar-Xirinachs, 2001), but equally one of the most controversial and disputed. Critics have argued that only the most developed economies in the continent could benefit from the FTAA, in particular the most powerful sectors in the United States (Estay and Sánchez, 2005; Sangmeister and Taalouch, 2003). Likewise, since it does not contemplate a compensation mechanism for the sectors that would inevitable lose out to trade liberalization, the FTAA could exacerbate the extreme asymmetries in the levels of development between and across countries of the continent. Furthermore, the FTAA agenda concerns the institutionalization of a new form of hemispheric governance, along the lines of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) model. An infrastructure of rules and disciplines would be introduced to the benefit of corporate capital and at the expense of democratic sovereignty, the rule of law and policy autonomy to promote sustainable forms of development (Anderson and Arruda, 2002; Barenberg and Evans, 2004; Hillebrand, 2003).

In response to the advance of an FTAA neo-liberal agenda, trade union organizations, social movements and NGOs from all over the continent created the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) in 1997. Their aim was to make the FTAA project a means of advancing equitable, democratic and sustainable development in the region rather than strictly trade liberalization. Its broad base of support covers social organizations working on issues of labour and human rights, environment, indigenous rights, gender issues, rural and faith organizations from across the continent. As a pioneering experience of counter-hegemonic resistance to neo-liberal globalization, there are no other networks on globalization in the world comparable to the HSA (Anner and Evans, 2004). The HSA has achieved significant progress in terms of fostering the formation of coalitions of trade unions and NGOs in several countries and defining a hemispheric basis of consensus for an alternative political agenda. Likewise, it was vital in establishing a political climate of distrust and opposition to neo-liberalism throughout the Americas, which contributed significantly to stalling the FTAA process.
Neo-Gramscian critiques of neo-liberal globalization offer powerful analyses of the political implications of such emerging new forms of global counter-hegemonic resistance. These forces are regarded as contributing to more egalitarian and just forms of globalization (Cox, 1999; Cox and Schelter, 2002; Falk, 1995; Gill, 2003; Gills, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Rupert, 2000). Nonetheless, such perspectives are less helpful in exploring the more immediate challenges and opportunities that coalitions like the HSA face in their efforts to establish transnational forms of solidarity. Resistance to neo-liberal globalization accentuates the heterogeneity and diversity of local expressions of resistance, generating tension and contradiction in the global movement (Falk, 2001, p. 55). Focusing on their strategies to secure cohesion, leadership and mobilization capacity across the transnational spaces can thus deepen our understanding of coalitions like the HSA. Similarly, there is not sufficient attention to the extent that new forms of global resistance contribute to bringing about a culture of diversity, tolerance and democracy. Movements that denounce the exclusionary nature of corporate globalization can themselves reproduce unequal hierarchies of power and marginalize other subaltern forces and identities from their involvement in the construction of political alternatives to neo-liberalism (Amoore and Langley, 2004; Eschle, 2005). In order to avoid the ‘danger in seeing all such struggles against dispossession as by definition “progressive”’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 169), more consideration should be given to differentiating between current expressions of counter-hegemonic power (Amoore et al., 2001, p. 24) on the basis of the practices employed for the building of political consensus. As Gills (2001, p. 4) claims, there is a ‘profound need for re-thinking the question of what social practices now constitute viable political strategies in the world economy’.

This article will examine the role of the HSA in constructing political alternatives to the FTAA project with the aim to explore the main challenges and opportunities of this endeavour. The horizon of possibilities of the HSA is demarcated by the need to mobilize an expanding number of social forces from across the continent to oppose the FTAA process and maintain the cohesion of a coalition that is put under increasing strain by the incorporation of new members. The ‘political process’ variant of social movement theory presents a valuable approach to address the HSA internal contradictions. The first section introduces the ‘political process’ approach to social movements, and discusses the analytical relevance of its concept of a political opportunity structure for the study of transnational coalitions like the HSA. The second section analyses the contribution of the HSA to the construction of alternatives to the neo-liberalism in the Americas during the period between its formation in 1997 and the IV Summit of the Americas of Mar del Plata in 2005.

It is argued that there still remains the challenge of ensuring that the process of constructing alternatives to the FTAA process can expand deeper forms of democracy in the region.

A Political Process Approach to Transnational Social Movement Coalitions

A political process approach to the study of social movements provides valuable insights for the analysis of the challenges and opportunities of social movement coalitions like the HSA in their pursuit of counter-hegemonic alternatives to neo-liberalism. The main concern of this approach of the sociology of social movements is to explain why, and especially how, social protest and movements emerge and gain political influence (McAdam, 1982; McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly, 1978). This approach constitutes a variant of the resource mobilization theory that came about in the United States during the 1970s in response to the structuralism that dominated social movement research until that time. By focusing on how social movements organize, accumulate resources, coordinate collective action and make strategic choices, resource
mobilization theorists were able to draw attention to the agency of social movements as political actors. This challenged the predominant view of social movements as irrational expressions of emotional disorder of no relevance to politics—the realm of politics was confined to formal political institutions (Buechler, 2000, p. 37; MacCarthy and Zald, 1973).

Whilst similarly interested in the agency of social movements, a political process version of this early approach emphasizes the contingent and interactive character of social movement politics. Political process analysts ‘moved away from their confreres by stressing dynamism, strategic interaction, and response to the political environment’ (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 15–16). This shifted the focus from the treatment of movements as self-contained actors existing in a vacuum to the analysis of their interactions with their changing external political contexts. Initial concerns about how social movements secure and mobilize political resources and overcome internal tensions are thus readdressed through an approach that highlights the relational and contingent nature of their agency.

This relational approach to the study of social movements centres on the power dynamics in society, as driven by the contestation of challenging forces and political elites and institutions associated with the continuity of the status quo. No political actors can be understood in isolation from the power struggles in which they are immersed, since their identities and possibilities are mutually constituted by virtue of their partaking in a process of political confrontation. The analysis of political conflict therefore becomes central to understanding the ways in which social movements emerge and gain influence. Conflict permeates not only the interactions of social movements with ruling elites, but also the relations among the social forces and individuals that take part in social movement politics.

The political process approach developed the notion of political opportunity structure in reference to the configuration of forces in a political environment that can influence the emergence of social movements, and the assertion of their political claims (Brockett, 1991, p. 254; Kriesi, 1995; McAdam, 1982; Smith et al., 1997, p. 66). According to Tarrow’s (1999) classical formulation of political opportunity structures, social movements can emerge and acquire political influence in the presence of favourable conditions defined in terms of: (a) social movements’ access to formal political systems, (b) the degree of cohesion or divisions among the ruling elite, (c) the repression by governments of contentious politics, and (d) the stability of social movements’ alignments with political parties in government or sectors of the electorate (pp. 71–89).

Opportunities for social movement mobilization are created when a change in the arrangement of these factors generates a situation where ‘the power discrepancy between authorities and challengers is reduced and the bargaining position of challengers improves’ (Buechler, 2000, p. 37). This increases the likelihood for social movements to advance their political demands, which translates into more favourable conditions for social movement mobilization (Morris, 2000, p. 446). The relative stability of political opportunity structures from the immediate intervention of social movements endows them with structural characteristics. However, since this approach proposes a relational and procedural conception of power, there cannot be any set of ‘variables’ that can be justified as ontologically primary.

The formation of the HSA can be analysed in terms of the dimensions of political opportunities identified by Tarrow. Firstly, the official FTAA process has been impermeable to the demands of many civil society organizations to engage in a political debate with public officials on the implications of trade liberalization and development issues in the Americas. Instead, the negotiation process was tainted with lack of transparency, providing no real conditions for public accountability and for the involvement of civil society in the definition of the FTAA
agenda (Shamsie, 2003; Wiesebron, 2004). This resulted in a radicalization of civil society sectors throughout the Americas, which enabled the HSA to increase the cohesion of a loose continental coalition by exposing the undemocratic and exclusionary nature of the FTAA process and agenda.

Secondly, divisions among the governmental elites complicated their efforts to obtain support for the FTAA project. Political crises in Bolivia (2000, 2003 and 2005), Ecuador (2000 and 2005) and Argentina (2001) evidenced the eroding legitimacy of neo-liberal thinking and the inability of governments to formulate feasible political projects on the basis of market-driven policy frameworks. These crises renewed the expectations among the HSA that the FTAA could be effectively defeated, as they were interpreted as the breakdown of a neo-liberal consensus in the region. Differences between the negotiating governments over the FTAA agenda became even more difficult to resolve in light of such decreasing support for this hemispheric project.

Thirdly, the strategies employed by governments to repress popular protests could not prevent a rising wave of increasingly confrontational social conflict in Latin America since 2000 (Seoane et al., 2005). Perhaps the only exception to this is the United States, where repression was increased as part of the security measures introduced in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks—non-violent anti-FTAA demonstrations organized by the HSA at a ministerial meeting in Miami in 2003 were brutally repressed by the police forces. Nevertheless, the continental scope of the mobilization against the FTAA was unaffected by such attempts to prevent public demonstrations of opposition. Attempts to repress popular protests instead showed the weakness of governments when confronted with such massive expressions of opposition.

Fourthly, the alignment of transborder coalitions of a broad range of social organizations dispersed throughout the Americas created the possibility of setting out a permanent process for building hemispheric consensus on issues of political agenda, strategies to confront neo-liberal policies, and the most suitable organizational arrangements to coordinate a coalition of such broad and flexible characteristics. While the factors discussed above played an equally important part in the formation for the HSA, the invested stability of such transnational alignments enabled for the first time the unification of a hemispheric movement. Acting as a discourse coalition, the HSA was capable of coalescing local expressions of resistance to the neo-liberal policies around a common mobilizing frame of a critique to the FTAA project. Opposition to the FTAA would not have been so effective, or even possible, had it not been for the centrality attributed to the transnational articulation of national coalitions as part of a continental strategy of collective action. Considering its political importance for the prospects of constructing alternatives to the FTAA, the analysis of the formation and development of the HSA in the following section will concentrate on this last dimension of political opportunities.

Mobilizing Resistance to the FTAA: Building the Hemispheric Social Alliance

This section of the paper analyses the political opportunities opened by the HSA for the construction of alternatives to the FTAA project by building a broad-based continental coalition critical to neo-liberalism. The construction of alternatives demanded finding a balance between the need of the HSA to mobilize diverse social forces, and to maintain the cohesion of the coalition increasingly strained by the incorporation of new members. A major challenge of the HSA is to ensure that this process is democratic and inclusive of the grassroots and popular sectors.
The negotiating phase of the FTAA process was ready to be launched at the Santiago Summit of the Americas of 1998 after four years of preparatory work that began at the Miami Summit of 1994. In response to such developments, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Brazilian United Workers Federation (CUT) embarked on a strategy of hemispheric collaboration with the objective of preventing the advance of a corporate agenda through the FTAA process. This was consistent with the internationalist labour strategy to overcome the divisions it inherited from the Cold War years (Chaloult and Fernández, 2001; Dagenais, 2005, p. 3). Likewise, to make up for the decreased power of trade unions, which resulted from economic liberalization policies since the 1980s, this strategy also looked for alignments with the so-called ‘anti-globalization’ movements and with the increasingly militant indigenous and campesino movements (ICFTU, 2004; Seoane et al., 2005).

Through the Inter-American Regional Labour Organization (ORIT) (the regional branch of the International Confederations of Free Trade Unions, ICFTU), the AFL-CIO and CUT played a key role in the organization of the III Trade Union Summit at the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte in May 1997, in the context of the III FTAA Trade Ministerial Meeting. The main regional NGO networks working on the environment and human rights were invited for the first time to participate in this event to seek common positions and action strategies with the labour movement (Foro Nuestra América, 1997). The basic political alignments between trade unions, NGOs and social movements established at this meeting became the building blocks for the HSA (Brunelle, interview 2004; Martins, interview 2004).

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Table 1. Networks that integrate the original nucleus of the HSA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Networks</th>
<th>Origin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Action Network on Free Trade—RMALC</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance for Responsible Trade—ART</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Frontiers</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Réseau Québécois sur l’Intégration Continentale—RQIC</td>
<td>Québec, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network for the Peoples Integration—REBRIP</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilean Alliance for a Just and Responsible Trade—ACJR</td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-American Regional Labor Organization—ORIT</td>
<td>Hemispheric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American Congress of Rural Organizations—CLOC</td>
<td>Hemispheric</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The political convergence reached at Belo Horizonte drew on earlier experience of transnational collaboration between trade unions, NGOs and social movements. This is the case of national networks such as RMALC (Mexico), ART (United States) and Common Frontiers (Canada) and RQIC (Québec), who created a tri-national alliance in the early 1990s to influence the NAFTA process. Some of their links date back to the 1989 Canadian-US Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) (Foster, 2003). Similarly, there is also the experience of labour solidarity in the framework of the Andean Consultative Labour Council since 1983, and the South Cone Union Labour Council Coordination (CCSCS) since 1986 with an important role in the MERCOSUR process since 1991. These initiatives of transnational collaboration converged in the HSA to unite their forces for the construction of political alternatives to FTAA project.

Building the HSA was not an easy task, however. There was no obvious ideological consensus between the different sectors that were part of the coalition (De la Cueva in Anner and Evans, 2004, pp.16–17; Martins, interview 2004). Tensions arose between reformist and radical
sectors, divisions in the Latin American Left, different priorities between the agendas of urban and rural organizations, conflicts between the hierarchical organizational culture of trade unions and the more horizontal and participatory approaches of social movements, and the mistrust of some organizations from the South towards NGOs from the North (Berrón, interview 2005; Foster, 2003, p. 137; Hansen-Kuhn, interview 2004; Korzeniewicz and Smith, 2003, p. 69; Shamsie, 2003, p.: 34). Efforts to reconcile some of these differences in a continental vision of development resulted in the first version of the HSA policy document Alternatives for the Americas (HSA, 1998). This document was presented publicly at the I Summit of the Peoples; the HSA’s first hemispheric event organized as a parallel forum to the Santiago Summit of the Americas in 1998 and attended by 1,000 representatives of social organizations from the entire continent. However, in spite of such progress in building consensus, persistent differences of visions and expectations continued to generate tensions in the HSA to the point where the political direction of the coalition began to be questioned (Torres, interview 2004). The II Summit of the Peoples, prior to the Quebec Summit of the Americas of April 2001, presented the HSA with an opportunity to close positions and recapture political momentum.

The massive mobilization of 60,000 protesters that gathered at Quebec to express their opposition to the FTAA process surpassed the expectations of the HSA organizers (Escribano, interview 2004). The HSA realized at that point that it could rely on the support of a public opinion that had become increasingly critical of ‘free trade’ policies in order to take a more radical stand towards the FTAA process. Positions within the HSA that supported a reformist strategy aimed at the incorporation of social clauses in the FTAA agenda—trade unions and some NGOs—had been unable to deliver any significant progress. This undermined the credibility of such a reformist strategy (Marcoux, 2001; Lavender, 2001). Leaning towards its more radical sectors, at Quebec the HSA adopted an oppositional strategy that called for the absolute rejection of the FTAA project (II Summit of the Peoples, 2001). Preventing the establishment of the FTAA became a priority in the construction of political alternatives. This shift of positions represented a turning point in the development of the HSA as tensions between reformists and radicals were largely overcome (Vieira, 2005).

In opposing the FTAA project, the HSA found a common base from which to mobilize a much broader range of social sectors in the Americas. Following the events at Quebec, new national chapters of the HSA were opened in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala under the unified representation of the Central American Popular Bloc, and an HSA Women’s Committee that linked regional networks dedicated to trade and gender. Others would also be created later in Uruguay, Colombia and Argentina. Nevertheless, the most significant development in the aftermath of Quebec was the incorporation of the Cuban government as a key ally of the HSA. The inclusion of an allied government changed the original composition of a coalition that was only integrated civil society organizations.

At a HSA coordination meeting at Florianopolis, Brazil, on 26–28 October 2001, a Cuban delegation proposed the creation of a Cuban HSA chapter, and invited the HSA to participate in an anti-FTAA event scheduled for 13–16 November 2001 at Havana (Jay, 2001). The alignment with Cuba was soon formalized at this event with the joint decision to launch a Continental Campaign against the FTAA with the aim of derailing the FTAA process. It was planned that consultations and/or plebiscites on the FTAA would be coordinated in each country to mobilize a sufficiently strong opposition to the FTAA to pressure governments to withdraw from the negotiations. This event at Havana became the first of a series of annual political encounters.
called the Hemispheric Meetings of Struggle Against the FTAA (hereafter referred to as Hemispheric Meetings).

The alignment with Cuba in the framework of the Continental Campaign opened an opportunity to mobilize a broad spectrum of grassroots popular movements that, distrustful of trade unions and NGOs, had remained distant from the HSA (Aguilar, interview 2004; Brunelle, 2002). Established and active social movement networks such as ‘Jubilee South’, ‘Cry of the Excluded’, ‘Convergence of Movements of the Peoples of the Americas’ and others joined the campaign to oppose the FTAA. Having Cuba as the host of the Hemispheric Meetings in Havana—the most important venue for the political coordination of the campaign—facilitated the sense of common purpose and solidarity among the many social organizations and sectors that partake in the campaign. The fact that Cuba is the only country to be excluded from participating in the FTAA process added powerful symbolism to a campaign that denounces the exclusionary consequences of neo-liberal policies.

In addition to Cuba, the coming to power of left-of-centre governments in Latin America was regarded as an opportunity to incorporate other allies in the pursuit of political alternatives to neo-liberalism. The victories of the Workers’ Party (PT) candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil (October 2002), and Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador (November 2002) supported by a leftist coalition of indigenous movements that played a key role in toppling President Mahuad in 2000 raised many expectations about the possibility for social transformation in the region. Moreover, the support obtained by the Movement to Socialism (MAS) candidate Evo Morales in the Bolivian presidential elections (2002) showed the vitality of the popular sectors in gaining political representation in systems from which they have been traditionally excluded. The HSA also closely followed the political developments that were taking place in Venezuela following the election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998.

The HSA had to redefine its place within a political context in the Americas unfolding at the national level, with the coming to power of progressive governments, and at the transnational level with the new alignments established in the sphere of the Continental Campaign. It was certain that some form of collaboration between the HSA and new progressive governments in the region seemed vital in order to build political alternatives to the FTAA. Equally, some in the HSA also understood that the alignments with potentially allied governments should never compromise the autonomy and critical distance of a coalition predominantly comprised of civil society organizations. Reaching a consensus on the terms of engagement with allied progressive governments therefore became a central concern within the HSA. In spite of this recognition, however, the HSA suddenly found itself involved with the Venezuelan government before such a consensus could be effectively reached.

In late 2003, a leading HSA activist from the Mexican RMALC started to participate in a series of meetings with Venezuelan government officials. The purpose of these meetings was to formulate a political agenda for the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA)—a Venezuelan proposal for a South American integration project based on a model of endogenous development and participatory democracy, in competition with the market-based model of the FTAA project (Portal ALBA). Without prior consultation or acquiescence of other HSA members, the HSA Alternatives for the Americas (HSA, 2002) documents were made available to be used as the policy framework for ALBA and as the agenda for the Venezuelan position in the FTAA negotiations (República de Venezuela, 2003; Position of Venezuela, 2003). Until that point, ALBA had been only a statement of intent without any concrete basis. Many in the HSA felt that the unilateral decision to support the Chávez government without previous discussion in the coalition...
had breached the trust that had taken so much effort and time to build, causing considerable unease and tensions (Berro´n, interview 2005; Hellinger, interview 2005; Petricovsky, interview 2005). This early contact with Venezuela became the gateway for a closer alignment with the HSA in the context of the campaign.

The Venezuelan government became involved for the first time in the campaign at the III Hemispheric Meeting on 26–29 January 2004. As the only two governments participating in the campaign, Cuba and Venezuela have been fostering close relations with the continental social movements as part of their policy to advance an ALBA agenda in the region. Notwithstanding the attempts of the Venezuelan delegation to secure firm political support for ALBA in the event’s Final Declaration, direct allusions to this project were carefully avoided due to a lack of consensus within the HSA (2004; Escribano, interview 2004). However, the influence of Venezuela in the campaign would be altered significantly in a short period of time.

The greater support obtained by Chávez at the IV Hemispheric Meeting of 27–30 April 2005 (2005a, b) evidenced the improvement of his political standing in the Campaign. A series of victories for Chávez confirmed the long-contested legitimacy of his government as the expression of a ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ (he overcame an ‘oil strike’ orchestrated by his opposition, ratified the continuity of his government in a presidential recall referendum, and obtained an overwhelming triumph in the 2004 regional elections). Just as the poorer and more excluded sectors of society made up of unemployed and informal workers form Chávez’s political base in Venezuela (Lucena, 2005, p. 70), the more popular sectors in the campaign were also the most receptive to support ALBA and Chávez’s government. In particular, indigenous movements and peasant organizations pressing for land reform policies, food sovereignty policies, and the eradication of genetically modified crops (‘Parlamentarios y líderes indígenas’, 2005; VC, 2003, 2004; ‘Via Campesina logra acuerdo’, 2005). Venezuela’s ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ came to be regarded as the seed of a deep social transformation to be extended in the region through the ALBA proposal. As an HSA activist commented, ALBA had become the continental ‘symbol of counter-hegemony’ in a struggle against neo-liberalism (Berro´n, interview 2005).

The increased visibility and mobilization force of the Campaign that followed the involvement of the Cuban and Venezuelan governments came at the expense of a growing perception among some members of the HSA that there was a risk of being co-opted by these governments. The dynamics of a campaign that pursued the derailing the FTAA process invariably demanded a rapid and effective response from the continental social forces. This meant showing at the Hemispheric Meetings complete support for the revolutionary process taking place in Venezuela, making Chávez the embodiment of a regional alternative. Not everyone was happy with this. The decision to invest in a political alignment with Cuba had also generated some reservations among sectors of the HSA who questioned the implications of working with a political regime that, despite its remarkable achievements in the areas of social development, had not moved along a democratic path. However, considering the historical and symbolic importance of the Cuban Revolution to the Latin American Left, the alignment with this country was justified for the sake of unity in the struggle against the FTAA (Petricovsky, interview 2005). The case of Venezuela was somewhat different. Chávez’s authoritarian tendencies, his inexperience with civilian democracy and his militaristic vision of politics (Gallardo, 2005) were causes of special concern among trade unions and regional NGOs in the HSA (mainly from the Southern Cone countries). These sectors are generally reluctant towards the centralization of state power as a result of their experience of struggle against repressive military dictatorships in the 1970s (Foweraker, 1995, pp. 28–29). The accusation that the Chávez government had
violated the independence of the Venezuelan Trade Union Confederation (CTV), and his conflictive relation with civil society in general (Ellner, 2005; Lucena, 2005; Weyland, 2001), raised many concerns and much controversy within the international labour movement in the context of ORIT and the International Labour Organization (ILO) (CIOSL/ORIT, 2005).

The fear of being overpowered by the authoritarian tendencies of the Cuban and Venezuelan governments seemed to be confirmed at the IV Hemispheric Meeting of 2005. During this meeting, the hosting Cuban government held a simultaneous one-day event at a local Havana theatre where all the delegates of social organizations from the continent that had travelled to participate in the Hemispheric Meeting were invited to attend. At this event, Presidents Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro launched the ALBA project invoking the solidarity of the peoples of the Americas for the construction of a ‘New Socialism of the XXI Century’. The event received coverage from the international media. Despite its political importance, or rather precisely because of it, the HSA had not been notified of the plans to hold this event. Many felt that they were being used to support an ALBA that was being driven as an inter-governmental initiative (Venezuela and Cuba) without the involvement of civil society.

The organization of the III Summit of the Peoples by the HSA prior to the Mar del Plata Summit of the Americas, Argentina, in November 2005 was similarly indicative of the increasingly problematic standing of the HSA within the Continental Campaign. On this occasion, Venezuelan government representatives disregarded previous agreements with the HSA organizers of the counter-summit concerning both the terms of the involvement of President Chávez in this event, and the composition of the head of a massive rally to repudiate the presence of US President George Bush in Argentina. It was not expected that Chávez would give a speech at the Summit of the Peoples, although he insisted in having a central role in this event. Lengthy last-minute negotiations were conducted with high profile governmental officials such as Freddy Balzán, the Venezuelan Ambassador to Argentina, and Ricardo Alarcon, the president of the Cuban National Assembly. This created great anxiety within the HSA (Daza, interview 2005; Petricovsky, interview 2005; Rodriguez, interview 2005). There was a sense that there was nothing the HSA could do to compensate for the influence of Chávez in the Campaign. He simply had a much stronger correlation of forces (Reyes, interview 2005; Rodriguez, interview 2005). An HSA activist confessed that she felt that they had helped to create a ‘monster’ that had now taken absolute control. Even representatives of the Cuban chapter of the HSA expressed their worries about the consequences that this could have on the future of the HSA (Berroñ, interview 2005). Despite these bitter incidents there were reasons to celebrate. The Mar del Plata Summit had virtually ‘buried’ the FTAA project due to a lack of consensus between the governments to move forward with this project, and the impressive demonstration of opposition at the Summit of the Peoples.

**Conclusion**

The efforts of the HSA to construct alternative approaches to the prevailing neo-liberal paradigm of development in the Americas have just begun to reveal the full extent of its political challenges. It was argued that during an early period of development of the HSA, political differences associated with the broad representation of social sectors in the coalition prevented a greater unity and clarity of direction. In spite of this, concrete results were nonetheless obtained. The production of the *Alternative for the Americas* documents revealed that it was possible to gradually engage with different social sectors across the continent in the construction of an alternative agenda to the FTAA. Yet, the effort of creating this consensus did not adequately
reach the more popular and marginalized sectors of society—despite some valuable initiatives of the HSA to produce and disseminate popular education material and workshops. The weak connection between the trade unions and NGOs of the HSA and the grassroots popular bases became a hindrance to the construction of alternatives to the FTAA.

The legitimacy and continuity of a political project is always dependent on the possibility that the social forces can identify with the values and priorities it represents and embodies. This can only be attained by ensuring that all social forces partake in its imagination and construction. Unless this condition is met, political projects will always remain unstable due to a tendency towards fragmentation of their political forces. There is no doubt that the HSA and the Continental Campaign were successful in contributing to the stalling of the FTAA process by raising a militant opposition to this agreement. However, less certain is the extent to which a greater opposition to the FTAA will also be reflected in a greater proposition of alternatives. The stagnation of the FTAA process has moved the hemispheric agenda of trade integration to the negotiation of Bilateral Free Trade Agreements between the United States and Latin American countries. More than ever, the HSA needs to guarantee the unity of the continental social forces, not only to mobilize an opposition to these potential agreements, but moreover to ensure that building political alternatives to neo-liberalism remains the ultimate priority. International gatherings such as the Summit of the Peoples, Social Forums and others are surely valuable means to promoting an inclusive dialogue on political alternatives. Yet most of the work remains at the local level where ordinary people live and experience the realities of neo-liberalism at first hand.

The strong leaderships of the Venezuelan and Cuban governments in the Continental Campaign are determinant in the mobilization of a broad range of popular sectors throughout the continent. However, the lesser power of the HSA compared to these governments meant that the HSA could not guarantee that the terms of engagement with these governments would not undercut their autonomy and independence. The prospect of co-optation by these governments could potentially undermine the hemispheric alignments that the HAS has so painstakingly built since its origins in 1997.

The stalling of the FTAA at the Mar del Plata Summit is indeed something to celebrate. However, this political victory can be too easily and dangerously overstated if not accompanied by a reflection on the future role of the social forces mobilized in the Continental Campaign in the pending construction of political alternatives to the FTAA. The popularity of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas should not overlook the fact that this initiative has so far consisted only of a series of inter-governmental cooperation agreements (in energy, technology transfer, telecommunications, education and health sectors) in which civil society organizations have played no role.

Since in politics means and ends can never be separated, the challenge of the HSA remains to make the construction of alternatives to neo-liberalism an inclusive and democratic process. This is not necessarily easy, as it is not obvious what constitutes a ‘democratic process’ when it involves a loosely connected coalition that combines such disparate social forces with distinct political expectations, rooted in different national and sectoral realities. Democracy is itself a contested notion, subject to disagreements and tensions within coalitions. To ensure that the HSA can continue to play a role in the creation of alternatives, it needs to reinvent its basis of consensus by addressing the need to define its relationship to potential allied governments (and the grassroots sectors). Since right to dissent is a constitutive practice of democratic values, it needs to be accordingly exercised to ensure that the engagement of the HSA with such governments is conducive to, and expansive of, democracy in the region. The unity of
the HSA could be strengthened with a hemispheric consensus on the set of reference guidelines on which to make their support of allied governments conditional.

The challenges faced by the HSA express the reality of many progressive sectors of the Latin American Left struggling to reinvent a much-needed political view in order to bring forward a truly revolutionary democracy, an alternative to neo-liberalism.

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Interviews

III Summit of the Peoples, Mar del Plata, 3 November.

Notes

1 Earlier indications of solidarity between the North American and Latin American trade unions took place at the I and II Labour Forums of June 1995 and March 1996 respectively, and by the decision of the AFL-CIO and ORIT to send delegates to the celebration of the ‘international day of struggle for the MERCOSUR worker’s rights’ held in the context of the Presidential Summit of the MERCOSUR countries at Fortaleza, Brazil, in December 1996.

2 The Dominican Republic—Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States (DR-CAFTA); the Andean Free Trade Agreements between the US and Peru, Colombia and Ecuador; and the Puebla-Panama Plan, PPP.

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