

Dismantling the fragile Latin American democracy – notes about the second decade of the 21th century

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed a considerable number of countries expanding their democracy, legitimating social sectors historically relegated as protagonists of the decision-making process. In the midst of this process there has been a significant distribution of income, and an increase in access to public policies. Gender, race, and indigenous demands have taken place – with different levels of intensity – in the institutional environment; even though still marginal to the neoliberal offensive. Nonetheless, from the beginning of the second decade of the century, a progressive longings reversal has gained strength in the wake of a noticeable international situation. Under the neoliberal-conservative perspective, institutional access to popular demands has been reduced, and the governments have naturalised the economic inequalities and the legitimisation of violence as a prevailing method of dealing with differences. Although this scenario stands national particularities, usually related to historical and geopolitical aspects and to the correlation of forces in each country, most of the contemporary governments have been supported against republican legal foundations and the colluded media. These institutional apparatus have reinforced the state's repressive arm with the help of a myriad of evangelical churches that corroborate them. With the conservative' notions spreading, the neoliberal individualism enhances the proscription of social solidarity and tolerant perspectives of diversity, which are premises for contemporary democracy. This critic conjuncture demands to re-examine the debates between economic inequalities and political participation, along with the exigency for direct growing democracies.

Keywords: *democracy, international context, Latin America.*

Historical Hints Context

The analysis aims to reflect on the stubborn structural and dynamic heterogeneity of Latin America and the Caribe, and its insertion in the world system, giving a broader view of the heteronomy sought through the analysis of the region as a whole. From the beginning of the construction of the contemporary modern-colonial world system, Latin-American has been related to a great diversity of exploitations and exploration mechanisms that has unveiled its subordinate condition (Quijano, Wallerstein, 1992). A wide understanding of the founding process of Latin American is necessary to remind us about its colonial insertion, which means, in social terms, the enslavement of the natives and, just after, the Africans. The exploitation of the called New World has increased since the last fifteenth century alongside with the territorial exploration, which resulted in a great genocide of the Amerindians and a profitable business for the European development (Dussel, 1994). These elements walk side by side with the foundations of the modernity, and have provided the basis for the conceptions of State and liberal democracy further on.

Colonial relations lengthen for more than three centuries for the Latin-Americans, have been strengthening heteronomous political and economic

1 relationships at every scale of people’s everyday life (Donghi, 1975). In this
 2 more than five centuries – beyond populist rhetoric, short-term mirages, and
 3 dimensions of GDP – there was no vertical mobility for the countries from the
 4 South to the Rio Bravo. As a result of that it has been impossible to deny the
 5 current dynamic of the imperialist insertion.

6 Soon after, we watched a wide process of national independence in Latin
 7 America, which was related to all the transformations that took place in
 8 Europe, subsequently the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution.
 9 During the 19th century, in the wake of the end of slavery led by Europeans, the
 10 majority of the old Spanish colonies became independent in the first half of the
 11 century. Brazil only declares its independence from Portugal at the end of that
 12 period.

13 Throughout the 20th century, a great number of authoritarian regimes were
 14 installed in Latin America (Suárez Salazar, 2003). There were short periods of
 15 restricted democracies, which have been possible for a few short years, indeed,
 16 frequently are possible to verify a prevalence of one party or at most two
 17 parties, with usual prearranged succession. We achieved in the countries within
 18 the region an impressive collection of *coups d’états*, always backed by civil-
 19 military alliances (Rouquié, 1971). It is necessary to point out that recurrently
 20 were plutocratic or oligarchic governments. Needless to say, that the
 21 interference of the USA in the Latin-Americans national interests over this
 22 century were as the same proportion.

24 **Brief notes on modern conceptions of democracy**

26 To better understand the key facts where this debate comes from is
 27 necessary to differentiate the democracies between the centre and the
 28 peripheries of the world system. The idea of democracy is often presented as
 29 universal, capable of being appropriate for every country. In the case of Latin
 30 America, from the 18th century, (shortly after the first independence of its
 31 countries), the representative democracy can merely be considered for the end
 32 of the middle of the 19th century. That period was characterised as a sort of
 33 continuity of the oligarchic governments, where the colonial society’s longing
 34 lasted, at least, three and a half centuries.

35 Regarding the peripherals democracies we have always seen the weakness
 36 types, and on the centre is often said that they can be continually improved. For
 37 instance, we have the dependence theory (Cortés, 2016) or the delegated
 38 democracy (O’Donnell, Iazetta, Quiroga, 2011) to better understand our
 39 situations.

40 Facing the spiralling of neoliberalism in the West we have witnessed a
 41 continued weakening of the political representation, indeed in liberal patterns
 42 (Macpherson, 1978), preventing possibilities to realise its promises for a better
 43 future to the majorities. Even when the theory provides a broad understanding
 44 of the concepts of democracy, the scarce of political alternatives for the
 45 increasing contemporary authoritarianism that the power arrangements present,
 46 are pressuring the formal formulations, in the best of cases. The imbrication

1 between social equality and democracy, classic for the Latin-American critic
2 thought, as well as its coherence and temporal consolidation in the public
3 policies have been systematically disavowed by the hegemonic strategies of
4 western countries. The dismantling process of democracy has been driven with
5 active connivance with the hegemonic mass media overwhelmingly in Latin
6 America. This colluded media has consistently denied the republican legal
7 foundations, with an authoritarian conviction of several segments of the
8 security forces, and, not infrequently, with the oligarchic and elitist willingness
9 of its parliaments. Specific combinations in several Latin American countries
10 have been replaced the ploy of *coup d'état* as a way of changing political
11 regimes by a driven heteronomy ideological implosion that abducts and distort
12 the democratic process. The autocratic domination, through the ventriloquists
13 of the ruling minority, seeks to criminalise social movements, especially those
14 who support egalitarian perspectives (Miguel, 2018; Serbin, 2018).

15 Democratic politics, particularly those calling for popular participation, often
16 resent from people's apathy. This situation also can be felt amongst the users of public
17 policies about the supply, scope, and services *per se*. From the beginning of this
18 century has also been possible to observe - as the majority of people have faced
19 increasing precariousness access to social protection - a passive acceptance of what
20 constitutes a constitutional right, seeking other ways of meeting their needs. Thus, in
21 principle, would be possible to consider one reason for the lack of interest in the
22 "public choice" and the scarcity of collective modalities to meet basic social needs as
23 an immediate corollary of political apathy in contemporaneity. The wide-ranging
24 discussions about the legitimation of the exercise of power, political participation, and
25 its relationship with social inequalities have been recurrent nowadays in Political
26 Science.

27 Far from the idealised conceptions of democracy, originated in central countries,
28 as pointed out by Borón (2012), the last lustrum the Latin-Americans are living a
29 factual democratic involution, compressing historical cycles of openly autocratic
30 governments, mainly in Brazil. This situation has arisen as a result of the capital
31 offensive over the previous stage's conquest. This unfavourable correlation to workers
32 in the field of social class struggles has turned in a seriously negative way of non-
33 historical or essentialist conceptions. Furthermore, within this referred democratic
34 involution we can also verify a growing unaccountability of these political regimes,
35 represented by the increasing power of executives, the proliferation of hidden spaces
36 of the decision-making process, or the behind-closed-doors negotiations which set out
37 to create multi or bilateral agreements of free trade. All these aspects have unveiled
38 the democratic regression can be observed in the progressive decrease of the
39 parliament's power decision to interfere in the political and economic national agenda,
40 in the declining response government levels towards popular demands, and the drastic
41 reduction of political party competition – beyond the existence of a great number of
42 this kind of organisation in every country. The democratic dismantling also resides in
43 the enormous influence of the markets in the national politics, setting up almost a
44 tyranny, where oligopolies, business, and financial, day by day directions
45 governments, while people vote every two or three years. This situation, in turn, has
46 been related to the dominant tendency of politic apathy, leading to individualistic
47 traits. Within the field of mass communications and cultural industry can be verified
48 an oligopolistic concentration that dictates the agenda and the contents conveyed
49 (Moraes, 2010).

1 The neoliberal policies are geared for an eminently financial concern, in the sake
 2 of preserving the “wealth” of the domestic finances, fulfilling the international
 3 creditors’ commitments and encouraging the strengthening of private capital (Harvey,
 4 2017). Two intervention areas of the neoliberal ideology stand out for the guidelines
 5 of the public policies: privatisation and deregulation. From the 1980s the policy of
 6 transferring the State-run enterprises to the private sector has raised as one of the
 7 perceptible axes of several governments’ actions. With the discourse of the
 8 inefficiency of state management and the “fiscal crisis” the metallurgical, energy,
 9 telephony, communications, banking, water, and sanitation sectors, amongst others,
 10 several transnational corporations have been sold and allocated, in small numbers, the
 11 provision of such services worldwide. As a result of this process of prescribed
 12 deregulation, thousands of people have been pushed into informality, casualization,
 13 and unemployment. The removal of the State as a regulator of the relations between
 14 capital and labour falls under this topic, manifested in the flexibility of employment
 15 and unions law leading to the gradual reduction of labour rights, which corresponded
 16 to the intense struggles of the previous period (Jessop, 2015).

17 The contemporary situation, succinctly sketched, squeezing state action in the
 18 cul-de-sac of the state fiscal crisis, leading to a revaluation of demand considering the
 19 need to improve the use of scarce resources for social policy. The government’s
 20 speech propagated by the corporate media, as well as the various spokesmen of the
 21 Latin American governments, strengthens the idea of privatisation of the social goods,
 22 previously regulated or provided by the State. The distributive consequences of these
 23 policies have been already highlighted the unprecedented concentration of wealth
 24 verified in recent years (OXFAM International, 2018).

25 Nowadays, what we have experienced is a collapse of the classical
 26 representation, one of the principles of the liberal form of democracy. Nonetheless, the
 27 same pattern has also seen in other occidental democracies. The numerous
 28 demonstrations of protest in the last gloss, with emphasis on Latin America, denote
 29 serious problems for the representative system that supports liberal democracy, mainly
 30 in relation with the popular interest.

31 Alongside the aforementioned, the inequality of income and wealth has
 32 become an abysm, especially in Latin America. At the same time, a careful
 33 observer can uncover the heteronomy of the main public decisions, as they
 34 have become self-evident. This relation of dependence has deeply impacted
 35 their culture, political system, and economic views heterogeneously.

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38 **Remarks about the 21st Century**

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40 Alongside the debate about the situation of Latin America in the 20th
 41 century is fundamental to point out that for 5 decades we have been living
 42 under neoliberal rules. It means the commodification of life and the
 43 financialization of the economy.

44 As a social reaction of the consequences of the neoliberal policies occurs
 45 the emergence of a wave of progressive governments in Latin America. This
 46 could be a trend looking for non-neoliberal ways of societies. This situation
 47 could be possibly related to a propitious international environment (Bringel,
 48 Falero, 2016). The emergence of China as a growing buyer of commodities,
 49 combined with profitable prices, and the beginning of the United States’ war

1 against terrorism focused in the Middle East, have given to Latin-Americans a
2 sort of “social summer” (Johnson, Silva, 2019).

3 In this interim, we have witnessed an increase of political participation. For
4 instance, is worth mentioning the setting of institutional spaces where demands of
5 public policies could be expressed. They attend, even partially, claims of Amerindians,
6 Afro-Americans, and genders politics. In the midst of this process, there was a
7 significant distribution of income, and an increase in access to public policy services
8 (Twaites Rey, Ouviaña, 2018). Gender, race, and indigenous demands have taken place
9 – with different depth – in the institutional space, even though always marginal to the
10 perennial neoliberal offensive. More or less in the middle of the third lustrum of this
11 century a reversal to progressive longings begins, and gained strength in the wake of a
12 noteworthy change in the international situation.

13 However, despite the enlargement of the institutional spaces set for
14 political participation we still have a lot of unmet social demands repressed by
15 these progressive governments. The majority are related to territorial claims
16 (by Amerindians, peasants, cimarrons, and a variety of forest population),
17 because of the economic dependence of the extractives’, mainly mining and
18 agribusiness. Moreover, there is a continuous pursuit for governance at expense
19 of the popular requirements (Svampa, 2015).

20 From the 3rd lustrum of this century, a slowly weaken of the progressive
21 governments in the region can be observed. The international context turned hostile to
22 the income distribution policies, and supportive of the mass consumption. The
23 American financial crisis in 2008 affected the prices and volumes of Latin-Americans
24 commodities, allied to this hegemonic country seeks to resume his power,
25 presupposing threatened by the Chinese partnerships (Öniş; Kutlay, 2020).

26 One of the consequences of this geopolitical context is a wave of changing
27 political regimes in several Latin-American countries, closer to the needs of the
28 America's hegemony. This succinctly depicted scenario stands national particularities,
29 often related to history, geopolitics, and the relation of social forces in each country.
30 Several contemporary governments support themselves in their condescending judicial
31 systems, collude media, reinforcement the state's repressive face and a myriad of
32 evangelical churches. The outcome is a strong constraint for political participation and
33 closing spaces for public dissents, smothering the terse democratic Latin American
34 society.

35 Between local and heteronomous reasons we live under an authoritarian
36 model, which has associated neoliberal economic policies with conservatives’
37 cultural values. This scenario seems an offensive of recolonization.

38 39 40 **Which Democracy?**

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42 Considering the aforementioned, to Latin-Americans’ the democracy
43 symbolizes a chimera. From the beginning of the Latin-American insertion in
44 the world system the subaltern situation has been their fate, although some
45 variations can be distinguished for periods, intensities, and countries. In spite
46 of the few years of the liberal-democratic experiences in the region the
47 autocratic spectra returns, seeking violently for erasing a common way of life.

1 Beyond the belligerent of the U.S imperialism and their national partners,
 2 the organizational capacity of the social movements and the reconstruction of
 3 political parties have a tendency to recover its historical memory of struggle.
 4 The social viciousness that the current offensive deploys is still failing to
 5 consolidate, for the reason that the possibilities of popular reactions aren't
 6 finished. The state of violence with the blockages in power have responded to
 7 popular protests, as can be verified in the last two years in Chile, Ecuador,
 8 Haiti, Bolivia and Colombia, as well as less generally in Brazil and El
 9 Salvador, pursuit impose an order of difficult maintenance. The strengthening
 10 of the feminist movement and the traditional communities, since the beginning
 11 of the current century, seems to carry on their capacity for struggle and a broad
 12 capillarity of their demands. The agglutination of the diverse sectors in struggle
 13 is an urgent requirement, whereas all popular organizations are affected by the
 14 authoritarian procedures of this conjuncture.

15 The democratic ways that could be built as strategy to tackle the
 16 implementation of a neoliberal and conservative hegemony it is not possible to
 17 anticipate. However, taking into account the social sectors that have been
 18 struggling in the last two decades, the social transformation trends to happen
 19 against massive poverty, the territorial and cultural claims of indigenous and
 20 Cimarron's, along with the feminist cause.

21 Since the heteronomous importance to configure the present situation is
 22 strong, the international geopolitics dynamic can influence the outcome with
 23 the same intensity. The growing tensions in the capital financialization show
 24 collapse signs, even before the pandemic. Experiences with the social
 25 consequences of the health management of SARS-COV-2 also tend to interfere
 26 over the role of the State, the focal point of neoliberal guidelines.

27 On this path, must be reconsidered which democracy could be desired or
 28 possible to be built.

29 This critic conjunction demands to re-examine the debates between
 30 economic inequalities and political participation, along with the constraints for
 31 direct growing democracies.

32 In this regard, it is worth proposing for a democracy that appreciates the
 33 self-organization, the social solidarity, and intense political participation. It
 34 must respect social diversity, which means antiracism, contesting patriarchy
 35 and its effects, as well as trends for economic equality and the deepest
 36 reconsideration about extractives.

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