

Jon Beasley-Murray
University of British Columbia
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca



LAST100: VIDEO 12: “Speaking Truth to Power”

Last time, we looked at the rise of military and authoritarian regimes during the 1970s and 1980s. In itself, dictatorship was nothing new for the region: in some ways the regimes installed by Augusto Pinochet et al were simply a continuation of the *caudillo* tradition of the nineteenth century, which in turn drew on a sadly familiar story of violent and anti-democratic rule inherited from the colonial era. But in other ways, these dictatorships were different.

In the first place, they employed new tactics of terror and intimidation, systematic and unsparing. The practice of forced disappearance became their hallmark, leaving victims’ relatives in the dark as to whether their loved ones were alive or dead. Combined with the use of censorship, secret police, clandestine detention centers, and paramilitary death squads, these states of exception traded in uncertainty and doubt. And as the exception became the norm, doubt led to a climate of impunity and complicity. Neighbors and friends of the detained and disappeared could shrug their shoulders and mutter “*por algo será*”: “There must be a reason”; no smoke without fire. Everyone was under suspicion; nobody was to be trusted.

In the second place, the dictatorships ushered in an unexpected (and perhaps inadvertent) revolution. Rather than simply trying to turn back the clock to some imagined golden age, they ended up fundamentally remodeling Latin American societies, in a process that had global repercussions. The region’s authoritarian regimes provided a testbed for neoliberalism, which transformed economics (by giving markets free reign), politics (by promoting technocracy over debate), and everyday life (by fostering atomized individualism). And from Latin America, this drive to restructure social relations spread, from New Zealand to Canada, from the United Kingdom under Thatcher to Reagan’s America. We are all living with its consequences now.

New Forms of Struggle

The dirty and civil wars of the second half of the twentieth century were partly prompted and certainly exacerbated by Cold War rivalries—West versus East, inspired by or as a response to the perceived threat of the Cuban Revolution. But by the time the last of the dictatorships and proxy wars eventually came to an end (Argentina's military regime ended in 1983, and Brazil's in 1985, but Augusto Pinochet remained in power in Chile until 1990; peace accords were not signed in El Salvador until 1992, in Guatemala until 1996, and in Colombia as recently as 2016), the Soviet bloc was history.

Another consequence, then, of this long period of internecine strife was a reconceptualization of what it means to struggle for liberty and equality, against exploitation and oppression. This was partly a function of the effects of that oppression, and also of the ways in which exploitation itself, and its attendant violence, took on new forms over time. For we should not assume that the celebrated "transitions to democracy" of the 1980s and 1990s in fact ushered in anything like real peace or real freedom for the majority of Latin America's population. Indeed, many parts of the region (Central America and Mexico, for instance) have seen *more* violence since the coming of democracy and/or the end of organized hostilities than they did before.

Authoritarianism was particularly brutal towards traditional left-wing political actors and their forms of association. As well as seeking to eliminate armed groups, the military targeted political parties and labor unions. The state came down hard on student activists, intellectuals, peasants, the organized working class, and even priests or churches that were suspected of spreading "subversive" views such as liberation theology.

Protest and resistance therefore had to express itself in other ways, and often came from (or helped to produce) new political actors. The Argentine Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, for instance, were women who entered the political stage accidentally and reluctantly, compelled to do so in the search for their missing sons, daughters, or husbands. Dressed conservatively, with white headscarves, they fit the image neither of the traditional male militant, nor of the radicalized feminist. Indeed, their premise was the traditional ideals

of maternal love and family integrity that the military regime (allied with right-wing Catholicism) had pledged to uphold. And they turned these values against the dictatorship. Their protest was dignified and often non-confrontational, as befitted the role that they performed, as guardians of propriety. They appropriated the symbolic power of the central square at the heart of the capital city, Buenos Aires, making public their private grief and anger in front of the cathedral and the presidential palace. And they tapped into the capacities of the photograph (and photographic enlargement and reproduction), by carrying black and white images of their missing loved ones, rendering visible the unspeakable void that structured Argentine society under the military regime. In turn, these portraits were repeated in the international press, giving faces to the victims of repression and establishing networks of outrage and solidarity.

Similar tactics were adopted by other groups of relatives up and down Latin America. In Chile, women took a traditional folk dance, the *cueca*, normally danced in pairs, and performed it alone, making evident the absence of partners disappeared by the military. Pinochet's regime had promoted the *cueca*, in 1979 declaring it to be the country's national dance, and now his opponents turned it against him. It was also taken up by the British musician Sting, whose 1987 song "They Dance Alone" depicts this form of protest. In October 1990, only a few months after the resumption of civilian rule, Sting played Santiago's National Stadium, once used as a torture center. He brought on stage representatives of the families of the disappeared, who carried placards with photographs and the question "*¿Dónde están?*" ("Where are they?"), as he sang this song, in Spanish. The search for justice continued (and continues) long after the end of authoritarianism. In 1998, while visiting London, Pinochet was arrested and in a landmark case faced extradition to Spain to answer charges of torture and assassination. Though the ex-dictator was eventually allowed to return home (on health grounds), a precedent was set in international law that nobody should be immune to prosecution for such crimes against humanity.

Reconciliation and Impunity

It would be nice to tell a story of just desserts and punishment for those guilty of abuses during the dirty wars. But the very fact that Pinochet had to be arrested in England (rather

than Chile) indicates that the reckoning with the past has been patchy at best in Latin America. Truth commissions were launched in several countries, some official and some unofficial, and they issued reports with titles such as *Nunca más* ("Never Again") in Argentina, *Nunca mais* in Brazil. These investigations collected individual testimonies and also tried broadly to establish what had happened and who had been responsible during the years of civil war and dictatorship. But such reports did not necessarily put an end to violence: in Guatemala, Bishop Juan José Gerardi, who had led the Catholic church's Recovery of Historical Memory project there, was killed just two days after presenting its final report, *Guatemala: Nunca más*, in 1998. More generally, transition to democracy often involved a trade-off whereby reconciliation seemed to demand impunity and even amnesia.

Sometimes such unsatisfactory outcomes were baked into the very protests that helped to oust authoritarianism. Take the Chilean plebiscite to decide the future of the dictatorship in 1988. As Alexander Dawson notes, the coalition of parties opposing Pinochet harnessed the power of television and marketing with "a brilliant campaign that took the regime by surprise" (330). Against expectations, in a country governed by fear, censorship, and intimidation, they won, with over fifty-five per cent of the vote, preparing the way for the return of civilian rule. They did so by presenting a negation—"No"—as an affirmation, with upbeat music and images of rainbows and smiles, musicians and mimes, dancing and joy. In place of a critique of the present or of the past, they offered a positive but vague, and almost entirely contentless, vision of the future. Achieving consensus required a certain complicity with repression, in so far as the trauma of the preceding years had to be denied.

Technologies of Protest

It would also be nice to tell a story of blundering authoritarians facing ever more sophisticated opponents. From this distance at least it may be easy to make fun of heavy-handed military rulers. And no doubt it is true that, as Dawson suggests, "the proliferation of digital technologies" (343), from the Internet to smartphones, puts new resources for resistance and organization in the hands of ordinary people, making it more difficult for centralized states to control the historical and political narrative. Just as

Argentina's Madres used photography and the Chilean coalition for "No" realized the possibilities of commercial television to build alliances and make dissidence visible, so also the Mexican EZLN (Zapatista Army for National Liberation) were a guerrilla force very different to their predecessors. From their emergence, in 1994, their masked spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, sent out regular email communiqués that circulated worldwide via discussion lists and electronic bulletin boards. Other rebels, such as Che Guevara, may also have been writers, but Marcos's texts were playful and knowing, particularly suited to the new medium, while the Zapatistas' military capacity is miniscule—sometimes they have even paraded with wooden guns. Here everything was performance, a nimble play of appearances that repeatedly wrong-footed the Mexican state. But one might ask how much the state is truly the enemy today.

I have two questions, then, about the changing landscape of power and resistance, in Latin America and around the world, over the past twenty-five years. For this has been a period that has seen the rise of commercial operations, many linked to hi-tech (Apple, Google, Facebook), others to the manufacture and distribution of illegal substances (the Mexican cartels), that, if they have nothing else in common, similarly deal in sums of capital and cash that would be the envy of many governments, and similarly seem to escape or evade state regulation. Does the main threat to freedom (and, in Latin America, personal security) really come from the state, or from private enterprises? Second, then, can we still be as sanguine about the potential of technology to empower us, rather than to exploit us in ever new ways? Pause the video here, and write down some answers. The nights are drawing in, so I will have a hot chocolate. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

During the 1970s and 1980s, the fundamental opposition in Latin America was sometimes cast in terms of (civil) society against the (dictatorial) state. Since then, both with the rise of neoliberalism, whereby the state abdicates key elements of what were once thought to be its social role, and with the increasing prevalence and strength of non-state or para-state actors from corporations to gangs, power can seem to be more dispersed and conflict more complex. I suspect that most people in the region would no longer believe the state to be the main threat to their liberties. In fact, in the early 2000s, with the so-called "Left

Turns" that saw the election of (more or less) left-wing governments from Argentina to Venezuela, Ecuador to Brazil, many people were calling for the (re)establishment of a social contract with the state at its center. We will examine this phenomenon next week.

¡Que Se Vayan Todos!

These left-wing governments were also a response to or effect of the emergence of new forms of social protest, some of which drew on new technologies, but most of which did not. The first of these was perhaps the *Caracazo*, a large and mostly spontaneous uprising in the Venezuelan capital in February, 1989, in the wake of the introduction of a packet of neoliberal policies by President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Pérez was recently reinstated after a previous mandate, back in the 1970s, when he had governed as a populist, flush with the profits of a thriving oil industry. In 1989, however, he preached austerity. When that translated into something as apparently trivial as increased bus fares, it lit a powder keg of discontent. Riots and looting shook Caracas (and other major cities) for days, until ham-fistedly suppressed by the security forces at the cost of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dead and injured.

Then at the turn of the millennium, in Bolivia, protests erupted over other aspects of the neoliberal agenda. In the city of Cochabamba, in 2000, a wave of demonstrations reversed the privatization of the municipal water supply. In 2003, further unrest around the country centered on the exploitation of natural gas reserves, and strikes and road blockages led to the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada; when two years later his successor, Carlos Mesa, refused to approve a new hydrocarbons law, he too was forced to stand down.

Most dramatic perhaps were the events in Argentina of late 2001. Here, in the context of economic crisis (with foreign debt, devaluation, capital flight, and a run on the banks), widespread urban protest, some of it violent, resulted in a succession of resignations and unprecedented instability as the President had to be helicoptered out of the presidential palace, and his successor lasted barely a week before he, too, fell on his sword. In all, including interims and caretakers, Argentina went through five presidents in less than a

fortnight. The slogan of the multitude on the streets, tired of the failures of an entire political class, was "*¡Que se vayan todos!*"; "Throw them all out!"

We see a similar exasperation in Javier Sicilia's Open Letter to Mexico's Politicians and Criminals: "We have had it up to here with you, politicians" (351). Or in the editorial published by the *Diario de Juárez*, which likewise rails against "the incompetence of authorities who have failed to do their job" (351), but which questions whether the politicians are even in charge any more, turning instead to the *narcotraficantes* to ask "what is it you want from us" (347). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, distrust and doubt were rampant throughout Latin America (and also elsewhere), and the stage was set for a last gasp of something like populism, but also the invention of more radical alternatives. And that, perhaps, is where we still find ourselves now.

2020

CC-BY-NC

works cited

Dawson, Alexander. "Speaking Truth to Power." *Latin America Since Independence: A History with Primary Sources*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. 323-354.

The *Diario de Juárez* Open Letter to the Drug Cartels. Dawson 346-351.

Sicilia, Javier. Javier Sicilia's Open Letter to Mexico's Politicians and Criminals. Dawson 351-353.