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LAST100: VIDEO 13: “Towards an Uncertain Future”

Last time, we covered the various forms of opposition to military rule, and their long-term legacies. We saw that one consequence of the internecine strife of the 1970s and 1980s was a reconceptualization of what it means to struggle for liberty and equality, against exploitation and oppression. Protest and resistance had to express itself in new ways, and often came from (or helped to produce) new political actors. We looked at the Argentine Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who turned the values that the dictatorship claimed to uphold against it. We also looked at how new technologies (from the photocopier to the Internet) fed into and enabled new forms of dissent, giving palpable form to structuring absences or opening up transnational circuits of solidarity and exchange.

At the same time, we noted the failures and disappointments of pacted transitions to democracy, when such pacts involved a trade-off whereby reconciliation demanded impunity and even amnesia. We are still a long way from a full reckoning with those years of violence. And today when the consensus on silence fractures, some rather dirty little secrets can become public. For instance, the maverick Brazilian politician Jair Bolsonaro is fond of breaking the taboo on discussing his country’s 1964-1985 military regime. In 2008, he commented that “the error of the dictatorship was that it tortured, but did not kill”; in 2016, as congressman, he dedicated his vote in the impeachment of left-wing President Dilma Roussef to an army colonel, Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, who was notorious for his role in the torture of detainees during the 1970s. In 2018, Bolsonaro (who has also spoken disparagingly of women, of gays and lesbians, of indigenous people, and of environmentalism) was elected President of Brazil.

Yet we also considered the changing landscape of power and resistance 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, others to the manufacture and distribution of illegal substances, that deal in sums of capital of which many governments would be envious, and that seem to escape or evade state regulation. We asked then how much the state is truly the enemy today. Or perhaps it would be better to say that sovereignty, defined as the power to rule over an exception that is increasingly the norm, now takes new forms.

Weak States and Cynicism

Indeed, at times it can seem that the major problem that Latin America faces—still faces, even, after all this time—is the weakness of its state institutions. As Alexander Dawson notes, "Latin American states are weak." Perhaps counter-intuitively, the authoritarian regimes of the 1970s and 1980s were the proof, rather than the disproof of this: states resort to violence when they lack other resources or strategies to maintain their position and establish social control. As Dawson puts it: "Weak [states] must buy the loyalty of their allies, and brutalize their enemies, perceived and real" (324). But ultimately, terror, too, failed to generate coherent national projects, as the ongoing violence merely sapped what little legitimacy such regimes had.

The states that emerged from the dark years of dictatorship and civil war were weaker than ever. They had succeeded only in spreading distrust and cynicism, in promoting the notion that (to quote British Prime Minister, and friend of Pinochet, Margaret Thatcher), there is "no such thing as society," only "individual men and women and [. . .] families," and that "people must look after themselves first" in a generalized, low-level war of all against all.

What changed, then, under the neoliberal order that was first pioneered in Latin America and then taken up enthusiastically by politicians such as Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, was that state weakness became ideology.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberals believed the state was constitutively incapable of achieving the goals it had set for itself; they argued therefore that it should not even try, that it should leave things

instead to the "invisible hand" of market mechanisms which, they contended, were always more efficient and reliable.

So during the 1980s and 1990s, around the world states retreated from or even abdicated wholesale roles that they had assumed in previous decades. In a wave of privatizations, public enterprises and utilities from oil companies to airlines, car manufacturers to electricity generators, banks to broadcasters, postal services to telecommunications, were all sold off to private investors, often at discount prices. Governments also renounced other forms of intervention into the economy, by removing tariffs, abolishing subsidies, lowering tax rates, letting currencies float, and streamlining regulations or other bureaucratic obstacles to what they saw as free competition. They came together to create Free Trade Blocs such as Mercosur (founded by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay in 1991) or to negotiate free trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, between Canada, the USA and Mexico, which went into effect in 1994, with the goal of ensuring frictionless commerce across international borders. They also outsourced or reduced investments in social services and welfare, public amenities and benefits, from pensions to prisons, education to healthcare, housing to libraries, waste collection to old people's homes.

Moreover, when Latin American governments were reluctant to implement these changes, they had their arms twisted by international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, which imposed "reforms" and austerity before they would pay out loans to alleviate the debt crisis that rocked the region in the 1980s. But often enough politicians needed little persuading, and enthusiastically applied the "shock doctrine" that was touted as a panacea for all social ills.

Neoliberalism affected everyone, rich and poor. The wealthy, for instance, felt the need to invest in private security (such as guards for increasingly fortified homes in walled or gated communities), to protect themselves and their possessions and to distance themselves from a society with which they had less and less in common. But they at least had the resources to opt out in this way. The poor, especially new arrivals to the ever-expanding metropolises, were often already living precarious existences, sensitive to small modifications in their everyday conditions. Hence sometimes the seemingly

excessive reactions to apparently small changes, such as the transport price hikes that triggered Venezuela's *Caracazo* in 1989 and the widespread protests in Chile as recently as 2019.

The middle class, meanwhile, was split: some benefited from lower taxes and the increased availability of consumer goods, for instance; others, not least public-sector employees thrown out of work, found themselves only tenuously holding on to a standard of living that they had once taken for granted. So new alliances emerged, fragile but powerful, as in the Argentine uprising of late 2001 when middle-class savers, unable to access their now devalued nest eggs, joined forces on the streets with the long-term unemployed known as *piqueteros* to bring down the government with the cry of "*¡Que se vayan todos!*"; "Throw all of them out!"

These protests, and others—in Bolivia, Ecuador, and elsewhere—led, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to a widespread political crisis, but also to innovative new forms of communal self-help on the part of an increasingly mobilized citizenry. In Argentina, for example, a barter economy sprang up as the money supply dwindled, and workers took over and ran factories that had been abandoned by their owners. In Brazil, some municipal councils, run by the left-wing Workers' Party, experimented with forms of participatory budgeting, which enabled ordinary people to have a say in their communities' financial priorities. In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous movements gained prominence and sought a measure of autonomy from the state.

The Left Turns

This crisis of political representation also opened up space for new or previously marginalized political actors to take up the reigns of state power. In short order, in a series of sweeping electoral victories that became known as a "pink tide" or "left turn," left-wing governments were installed in Venezuela (in 1999), Brazil (in 2003), Argentina (also 2003), Bolivia (in 2006), Ecuador (in 2007), Paraguay (in 2008), Uruguay (in 2010), and elsewhere. Their leaders were often figures from outside the ranks of the traditional elite—former steelworker and union leader Lula in Brazil, for instance; indigenous coca

farmer Evo Morales in Bolivia; ex-guerrilla José Mujica in Uruguay—and their charisma and sometimes fiery rhetoric could lead to comparisons with old-style populism.

By far the most controversial of these new Latin American presidents was Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, an army captain who first came to public attention as head of a failed coup attempt back in 1992, but who proved a skilled political campaigner (winning handily at the ballot box and increasing his majority with every re-election). Benefitting from high prices on international markets for the oil that is the mainstay of Venezuela's economy, Chávez poured money into social welfare programs, while denouncing his opponents as "*escuálidos*" (squalid), making him a lightning rod for poor people's hopes and rich people's fears in an ever more divided society, and variously a source of inspiration or consternation to observers elsewhere.

But beyond these policies of redistribution, and this rhetoric of antagonism towards an elite that had, for forty years, conspired to exclude radical politics from power, Chávez (correctly) interpreted this as a constituent moment: a chance to remake Venezuelan society in a new image, and to rewrite the rules of participation and politics. Hence his party was called the "Fifth Republic Movement" (*Movimiento Quinta República*), and one of Chávez's first steps as president was to establish a constituent assembly by popular referendum, charged with rewriting the country's constitution. Ratified by over 70% of voters (albeit on a small turnout), the resulting document renamed Venezuela a "Bolivarian Republic," in homage to the liberator Simón Bolívar, from whom Chávez claimed to take inspiration. The point of this gesture was to suggest a new beginning, a re-set that challenged the country's entire post-independence history.

Similarly radical moves were underway elsewhere. Bolivia, for instance, likewise set up a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. There was some opposition to the process, but it was passed in 2007. Ecuador did the same, though less contentiously: its new constitution won almost 64% of the popular vote in a referendum in 2008. In both cases, the approved texts enshrined key objectives of the social movements that had arisen in the preceding years. The new Bolivian constitution, for instance, reserves particular rights for indigenous peoples as part of what it defines as a "plurinational" state. It declares that the country's natural resources are "the property of the Bolivian

people and shall be managed by the state." The Ecuadoran constitution, meanwhile, was the first in the world to recognize "rights of nature," urging "respect for all the elements that form an ecosystem." The Ecuadorans also include the right to food and recognition of same-sex partnerships among their new core principles.

Of course, the fact that a value is enshrined in a nation's constitution does not necessarily mean it is respected in practice. See the "Lago agrio" dispute, in which the oil company Texaco (by this point bought by Chevron) was in 2011 ordered by an Ecuadoran court to pay \$18 Billion to compensate for the environmental impact of decades of its operations in the north-east of the country, an Amazonian region with a high proportion of indigenous inhabitants. But this judgement was then subject to further litigation (in New York) and arbitration (at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, Holland), which overturned the Ecuadoran decision. Here, an entire nation's legal system was effectively itself put on trial (and convicted) in international courts.

Corruption and Volatility

More generally, the law has always been something of a fiction in Latin America, from the colonial period when a popular saying was "*obedezco pero no cumpro*" ("I obey but I do not comply") to the present when scandals such as the Odebrecht affair, and others uncovered by Operation Car Wash in Brazil, Peru, Panama, and elsewhere, reveal the level of corruption infecting both business and politics throughout the region. In Brazil, the Car Wash ("*lava jato*") investigation was intensely politicized and in 2014 led to the impeachment of Lula's successor, the Workers' Party's President Dilma Roussef, in what many have described as a judicial coup d'état.

By this point, left-wing governments were in trouble throughout the region, though their downfall took different shapes: in Chile (in 2009) and Argentina (in 2015), they were voted out of office (though the Argentine left won again in subsequent elections); in Venezuela, Chávez's death (of cancer, in 2013) plus an oil price crash and economic mismanagement has made for protracted crisis and mass migration; a coup brought down the Honduran president, Manuel Zelaya, in 2009; in Bolivia, in 2019, accusations of

electoral fraud plus police defections forced Morales, the last of the original Left Turns leaders, to flee for Mexico, his place usurped by right-wing senator Jeanine Añez.

Today (in 2020), the situation in Latin America is murkier than it has been for some time. The past year or so have seen (in no particular order): massive social protests in Chile and Colombia, continued drug trade violence in Mexico, controversy over Latino representation in the USA, the rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil, wildfires in the Amazon, the return of the left in Argentina, the naming of an opposition politician as shadow (but widely recognized) president in Venezuela, a former president's suicide amid a corruption probe in Peru, a coup in Bolivia, and of course the Coronavirus pandemic, which has hit the region particularly hard and exposed many of its frailties. If you detect a pattern in all that, then good luck to you.

Overall, this volatility may be a sign that, as with climate change (itself an ever more pressing issue for Latin America, as it is for us all), we can speak less of linear narratives than of the way in which the unexpected is increasingly to be expected, "outlier" events are more often the norm. Who or what can rule over such exceptions? It is harder than ever to represent tendencies in the region with the broad brush-strokes with which we have been dealing throughout the semester.

Back to the Beginning Again

And yet the course is now almost over. You may remember that, in my very first video, I pointed out that you arrived already with *some* idea as to what you might be getting yourself into. And I asked you to play a game by writing down three words or phrases that you associate with Latin America. I want you to play the same word association game, twelve weeks later. This is not a test (there are still no right answers). Don't think about it too hard. The point is to flesh out what your idea of Latin America looks like *now*. So I say "Latin America" and you say...

Pause the video and write your answers. I reckon I deserve a beer. But I'll be back.

[. . .]

I wonder what words you wrote down that you associate with Latin America. Before, I suggested you might have included sun and salsa; football or fajitas; maybe narcotraffic and nationalism. You may well still make some of the same connections now. The point of this course was not necessarily to turn *all* your preconceptions upside-down.

But you should have some new associations. Perhaps Evita or Che Guevara. Casta paintings or *caudillos*. Slavery or "The Slaughterhouse." Good Neighbour films or poems "to Roosevelt." Populism or neoliberalism. Liberals or Left Turns. You may even have been struck by ideas such as the crisis of representation or the making of new social subjects, the place of affects or the relationship of words to things. But I hope that you recognize that even these new associations are (inevitably) inadequate, and that you are now inspired you to learn *more* about the region, its history, its peoples, their struggles and achievements, and its possible futures.

I expect, in short, that your idea of the place has changed, at least a little. More importantly, you can now reflect on your ideas, and on the ideas of others (in the region and outside it) that collectively contribute to the construction of this concept we call Latin America. In fact, perhaps you are a little *less* sure about what (or where, or when, or how) Latin America is than you were when you began. For learning is also *unlearning*: it involves recognizing the complexities of what we are studying and the inevitable limits of our knowledge. It is less about finding the right answer than about coming up with the right questions.

I hope that this course has been difficult, where necessary. And fun, where possible. And I hope it has given you a sense of what Latin American Studies could and should be.

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