

Editors' Introduction: Latin America Revisited

Editors

OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES, WE HAVE PUBLISHED WORK BY SOME OF THE LEADING thinkers of the Latin American Left and Latin Americanist scholars from around the world. They have helped us and our readers understand the region's world-changing political and intellectual developments, such as: the Cuban Revolution and the contradictions of socialist construction; U.S.-supported military dictatorships in the Southern Cone and the revival of the Left; revolution, counter-revolution, peace processes, and the postwar era in Central America; the impact of neoliberalism and "free trade" agreements; the rise of gang and drug-related social violence; the emergence of new social movements of feminists, indigenous communities, cross-border activists, and Latino immigrant communities; and debates over the nature and limits of socialism, revolution, democracy, economic development, and national autonomy.

With the following articles by veteran observers and activists as well as up-and-coming scholars, we again revisit Latin America, now two decades into the uneven transitions to democracy following an era of dictatorships and armed revolutionary conflicts. The issue's first section, coordinated by Jaime Osorio, contains four articles that analyze the historical and ongoing limitations of democracy and development in the context of neoliberal capitalism. Osorio is a leading Chilean sociologist who has lived in Mexico since his family was forced into exile by the 1973 military coup against President Salvador Allende. He leads off with an essay that interrogates the permanence of revolutionary impulses in the region, from Haiti's slave-organized revolt in the 1790s through the most recent 21st-century radical movements of landless workers in Brazil, students in Chile, and indigenous communities in Mexico. Osorio revisits pivotal historical moments and strategic debates about their interpretation, and then makes a powerful case that the analysis of dependent capitalism developed by Brazilian scholar/activist Ruy Mauro Marini in the 1970s remains the most relevant framework for understanding the major issues facing Latin America today. Osorio reasserts that development and democracy are not possible within the framework of Latin America's system of dependent capitalism and that the need for revolutionary change therefore remains on the agenda of significant social forces throughout the region. As a result, Osorio argues, Latin American reality negates the presumed universal discourse of capitalist modernity. His overview is followed by three country-specific case studies (Chile, Argentina,

and Mexico) that illustrate the ongoing challenges of building more democratic and egalitarian societies in Latin America.

Chilean social anthropologists Pablo Cuevas Valdés and Teresa Rojas Martini examine Chile 40 years after the coup that ushered in the Pinochet dictatorship and nearly 25 years since the return to civilian rule. Their analysis emphasizes the ways in which a formally democratic political system served in effect to legitimize and normalize the neoliberal economic model first imposed during the dictatorship. They offer extensive empirical data to demonstrate the exclusionary nature of the Chilean economy and political system. Nonetheless, pointing to the highly organized student movement and other grassroots mobilizations in the past few years, they conclude that, “for many, the democratic illusion is becoming increasingly less credible.”

Juan Fal, a researcher at the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento in Argentina, examines twenty years of what he calls “ruptures and continuities” in the model of accumulation in Argentina, a country that appears to have transitioned from dictatorship to a somewhat more robust democracy than that in Chile. Fal begins his analysis by noting that, “Argentine political movements are engaged in a profound debate about the nature of the country’s economic model. Some claim that recent government policies have finally put an end to decades of neoliberalism, while others point to persistently high levels of poverty and inequality.” He presents a sober analysis of “the major changes in Argentina’s model of accumulation, economic policies, and the bloc in power,” with an emphasis on the years since Néstor Kirchner was elected president in 2003. The continuities he identifies during that period include economic “growth, concentration, and foreign penetration of capitalist factions,” without sufficient increases in employment and wages. Among the most notable ruptures are what he describes as “changes in the hegemonic fractions in the bloc in power,” which have made possible more interventionist economic policies. However, he concludes that “if a more equitable distribution of wealth is to be achieved, it will be necessary to intervene further in the productive process.”

Job Hernández Rodríguez, a doctoral student in Latin American Studies at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, takes a fresh look at Mexico, once famously described by Mario Vargas Llosa as “the perfect dictatorship.” Despite the once very strong and promising mass movements for democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s, the end of the long-ruling PRI’s monopoly on state power, and the emergence of a multiparty electoral system, Hernández Rodríguez presents a historical analysis that concludes, “the *sui generis* road of Mexico throughout the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is a partial modernization involving the incessant transformation of its economy but with the persistence of an authoritarian state apparatus.” He argues that the establishment of a free market economy in Mexico actually “reinforced the authoritarian political regime.”

In the next section, two experts on the Venezuelan political system offer contrasting views of developments under the rule of Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro. Leading Venezuelan scholar Margarita López Maya presents a

detailed analysis of recent political developments in Venezuela and argues that “for the moment, the government is taking a ‘Cuban style’ political direction, under the guidance of a ‘Political-Military Directorate,’ and is attempting, via an Enabling Act, to turn the legislative branch into an empty shell to consolidate a communal state that is increasingly distorted and converted into a militaristic and authoritarian regime controlled by the upper echelons of power with limited participation.”

In contrast, veteran Venezuela specialist Trudie Coker suggests that “the debate over whether Venezuela is democratic depends on the definition of democracy that is used.” After presenting survey data about public perceptions of democracy in Venezuela and assessing the Chávez regime with regard to six conceptions of democracy, Coker concludes that Venezuela is:

more inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian than it has ever been. Research shows consistently that most people believe Venezuela is very democratic, that masses of previously excluded and marginalized sectors are now participating in the polity, and that poverty reduction and redistribution of resources have improved everyday lives for many. Having said that, work needs to be done to build a more concrete institutional realm of checks and balances.

Next, legal scholars Karen Musalo and Blaine Bookey turn our attention to Guatemala and the horrors of femicide. The authors are, respectively, director and associate director of the renowned Center for Gender and Refugee Studies at University of California’s Hastings College of the Law. The Center won the landmark case of Guatemalan Rody Alvarado, which establishing a right to asylum for women fleeing domestic violence. Guatemala’s 1996 Peace Accords brought an end to the 36-year armed conflict between revolutionary guerrilla insurgents and U.S.-backed counterinsurgency forces in Guatemala and provided for numerous institutional reforms. However, these reforms did not bring an end to violence in Guatemala, where many victims of postwar violence are women. According to Musalo and Bookey, “Guatemala has one of the highest rates of femicide, or gender-motivated killing of women, in the world. It is estimated that more than 6,500 women were the victims of violent killings between 2000 and 2012, and thousands more were raped and battered.” The authors provide an overview of the prevalence and patterns of violence against women in Guatemala and examine barriers to effective implementation of the laws on gender-based violence.

Feminist poet, author, photographer, and activist Margaret Randall literally revisits Cuba, which, she says, “against every neocolonialist and neoliberal obstacle, chose freedom in 1959.” Randall lived in Cuba throughout the 1970s, and she returned in 2011, when she was invited to serve as one of the judges for the annual Casa de las Américas literary prize, one of the most prestigious in Latin America. Encounters with familiar as well as new sites and faces sparked Randall’s reflections on Cuba’s past, present, and future. She asked herself tough

questions. Did the revolution fail? Why did she and others once commonly use “that ugly epithet,” *gusano*, to refer to those who left the island? She asked others throughout her visit, “What do you think makes some Cubans leave their country and others remain, faithful beyond expediency?” She listens to many answers and offers, “I suspect it has to do with a deep love of country and culture, an identity that depends on place for full expression.”

We conclude this issue with tributes by Susanne Jonas and June Nash to the late Helen Safa, a pioneering feminist and scholar of Latin America—indeed, a Renaissance woman.