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**Dismantling the Fragile Latin American Democracy –  
Notes About the Second Decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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**ABSTRACT**

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

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

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

## **Brief Notes on Modern Conceptions of Democracy**

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

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

Facing the spiralling of neoliberalism in the West we have witnessed a continued weakening of the political representation, indeed in liberal patterns (Macpherson, 1978), preventing possibilities to realise its promises for a better future to the majorities. Even when the theory provides a broad understanding of the concepts of democracy, the scarce of political alternatives for the increasing contemporary authoritarianism that the power arrangements present, are pressuring the formal formulations, in the best of cases. The imbrication between social equality and democracy, classic for the Latin-American critic thought, as well as its coherence and temporal consolidation in the public policies have been systematically disavowed by the hegemonic strategies of western countries. The dismantling process of democracy has been driven with active connivance with the hegemonic mass media overwhelmingly in Latin America. This colluded media has consistently denied the republican legal foundations, with an authoritarian conviction of several segments of the security forces, and, not infrequently, with the oligarchic and elitist willingness of its parliaments. Specific combinations in several Latin American countries have been replaced the ploy of coup d'état as a way of changing political regimes by a driven heteronomy ideological implosion that abducts and distort the democratic process. The autocratic domination, through the ventriloquists of the ruling minority, seeks to criminalise social movements, especially those who support egalitarian perspectives (Miguel, 2018; Serbin, 2018).

Democratic politics, particularly those calling for popular participation, often resent from people's apathy. This situation also can be felt amongst the users of public policies about the supply, scope, and services per se. From the beginning of this century has also been possible to observe - as the majority of people have faced increasing precariousness access to social protection - a passive acceptance of what constitutes a constitutional right, seeking other ways of meeting their needs. Thus, in principle, would be possible to consider one reason for the lack of interest in the "public choice" and the scarcity of collective modalities to meet basic social needs as an immediate corollary of political apathy in contemporaneity. The wide-ranging discussions about the

legitimation of the exercise of power, political participation, and its relationship with social inequalities have been recurrent nowadays in Political Science.

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

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

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

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

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

### **Remarks about the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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

As a social reaction of the consequences of the neoliberal policies occurs the emergence of a wave of progressive governments in Latin America. This could be a trend looking for non-neoliberal ways of societies. This situation could be possibly related to a propitious international environment (Bringel, Falero, 2016). The emergence of China as a growing buyer of commodities, combined with profitable prices, and the beginning of the United States' war against terrorism focused in the Middle East, have given to Latin-Americans a sort of "social summer" (Johnson, Silva, 2019).

In this interim, we have witnessed an increase of political participation. For instance, it is worth mentioning the setting of institutional spaces where demands of public policies could be expressed. They attend, even partially, claims of Amerindians, Afro-Americans, and genders politics. In the midst of this process, there was a significant distribution of income, and an increase in access to public policy services (Twaites Rey, Ouviaña, 2018). Gender, race, and indigenous demands have taken place – with different depth – in the institutional space, even though always marginal to the perennial neoliberal offensive. More or less in the middle of the third lustrum of this century a

reversal to progressive longings begins, and gained strength in the wake of a noteworthy change in the international situation.

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

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

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

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

### **Which Democracy?**

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

Beyond the belligerent of the U.S imperialism and their national partners, the organizational capacity of the social movements and the reconstruction of political parties have a tendency to recover its historical memory of struggle. The social viciousness that the current offensive deploys is still failing to consolidate, for the reason that the possibilities of popular reactions aren't finished. The state of violence with the blockages in power have responded to popular protests, as can be verified in the last two years in Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Bolivia and Colombia, as well as less generally in Brazil and El

Salvador, pursuit impose an order of difficult maintenance. The strengthening of the feminist movement and the traditional communities, since the beginning of the current century, seems to carry on their capacity for struggle and a broad capillarity of their demands. The agglutination of the diverse sectors in struggle is an urgent requirement, whereas all popular organizations are affected by the authoritarian procedures of this conjuncture.

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

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

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

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

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

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