POLIDEMOS

SAMUELE MAZZOLINI
(ed.)

LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

Recent Political and Electoral Trends

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EDITED BY
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Contents

Foreword

This volume comprises the revised contributions stemming from a series of international seminars exploring Latin American politics titled "Populism and PostPopulism in Latin America" conducted at the Catholic University Sacred Heart of Milan from November 2022 to April 2023 under the coordination of Samuele Mazzolini. The essays presented within these pages offer a diverse range of perspectives, reflecting somewhat heterodox positions, each distinct in its own right.

It is important to note that some of these contributions were penned before the historic victory of Javier Milei in Argentina and the 2023 Chilean constitutional referendum (with exception of Mazzolini's and Stefanoni's texts). As such, while they provide invaluable insights into Latin American political landscapes, they may not encompass the entire spectrum of recent developments. Nonetheless, the depth and breadth of analysis contained herein serve as a testament to the dynamic and complex nature of the region's political milieu.

State, Democracy, (post-)Populism: Latin America in Flux

SAMUELE MAZZOLINI[1]

Abstract. The paper focuses on the intricate political landscape of contemporary Latin America, beginning with an exploration of historical legacies tied to state formation to contextualise current political dynamics. It then delves into the region's current democratic fragility, examining factors stemming from unfulfilled welfare promises and limitations within party systems. Additionally, it analyses the rise and decline of the populist pink tide, emphasising its origins and eventual decline. Subsequently, the paper evaluates recent political events, including a brief right-wing resurgence, followed by an equally ephemeral return of the left and the current prevailing electoral volatility and political disenchantment. This comprehensive overview aims to shed light on the complexity of Latin America's political dynamics, providing crucial context for the insightful contributions within this volume.
Keywords: Latin America, state building, democracy, populism, pink tide.

Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of global news, Latin America often remains in the shadows, its nuances and complexities relegated to the background. Sporadic attention is paid to Brazil' large economy, Argentina's turbulent politics, and Mexico's

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battles with drug trafficking and violence. Even the United States, whose Monroe Doctrine has historically framed their dominant approach to the region, has gradually lost interest over the past two decades in what used to be defined its 'backyard'. Nevertheless, the general neglect towards Latin America belies the region's significance as a crucible of political forces, where phenomena such as populism, neoliberalism, social protest, armed conflict, state violence, and the transition from dictatorship to democracy have taken on paradigmatic forms, thus making the region a laboratory of great interest for political scientists. To keep up with its fame, the region has been undergoing significant political transformations over the past two decades, displaying sudden shifts and unexpected political outcomes. This introductory chapter seeks to unravel the multifaceted dynamics of Latin American politics, well captured by Rene Zavaleta's famous expression *formación social abigarrada* (motley social formation), navigating through the ebbs and flows of democracy, the rise and fall of populism, economic challenges, and the ever-evolving political cycles. This brief exploration, anchored in the core concepts of democracy and populism, intertwines with discussions on diverse developmental models. As we navigate this intricate terrain, our aim is to illuminate the nuanced tapestry of Latin America's politics, bridging historical legacies with contemporary challenges, and make the interventions of this collection more intelligible.

The essay's first section revisits historical aspects of Latin American state formation and building, elucidating their enduring impact on contemporary political outcomes. Subsequently, the analysis delves into the current democratic malaise, pinpointing prevalent political patterns in the region that have led to citizen detachment from institutions and the political establishment. The third section examines the popu-

list pink tide as a broad political phenomenon, investigating its inception, driving forces, and lasting influences. Lastly, the essay scrutinises recent developments marking a post-populist phase. Since the mid-2010s, a political zigzag in the region has indicated the absence of a clear prevailing principle, highlighting Latin America's lack of a distinct hegemonic direction.

A short historical parenthesis on the Latin American state

Some brief notes on the history of Latin American states' formation and building are needed in order to frame the subsequent discussion on democracy. The current democratic malaise that will be dealt at close in the following section sits indeed on the historical legacy of how institutions came into being in Latin America. The first thing to bear in mind is that the origins of Latin American states stand in contrast to their European counterparts. As argued by Miguel Centeno (2015), while in Europe the outbreak of total wars was central to the consolidation of strong and efficient state apparatuses, limited wars in Latin America impeded the development of efficacious authorities. Within this framework, warfare has a profound impact on all aspects of the state, influencing authority structures, administrative capabilities, legitimacy, levels of inclusion, and the construction of a shared unifying symbolism. It also spurs the development of infrastructures and efforts to overcome logistical problems. While total warfare has been credited with forging states through the motto of 'blood and iron', limited warfare in Latin America has been marked by 'blood and debt' (Centeno, 2015, p. 23). In this sense, the absence of significant wars has led to the establishment of state agencies with significant issues concerning terri-

torial outreach, political legitimacy, legal stability, and efficiency. These institutions remain rigid, lacking the adaptability necessary to respond effectively to critical situations. Bureaucratic frameworks often lack the rootedness required to maintain professional administrations, corporate coherence, and the autonomy necessary for long-term policy orientation (Gómez Talavera, 2022, p. 143).

Contrary to territorial acquisition through warfare, the inclusion of peripheral regions during the state formation process occurred differently in Latin America. Rather than dismantling local patrimonial oligarchies, the integration fortified these strongholds, ultimately converting the state into a large-scale patronage system (Mazzuca, 2021) Furthermore, the timing of state formation in Latin America occurred during an era when Western European superpowers had already solidified, and market capitalism was transitioning to become the prevailing mode of production. This temporal context influenced the state formation process, leading it to be trade-oriented. The impact on state building is significant: as Latin America primarily responded to external demands by providing its resources, minimal emphasis was placed on state development, aside from establishing a generally favourable business environment (Mazzuca, 2021). These circumstances translated into intermittent and biased public policies, shaping a fractured state apparatus that failed to fully address social concerns. The synchrony of commercial interests and low internal consensus in many cases engendered inflexible structures with low adaptability to critical situations.

According to Mazzuca (2021), the quest for political power led all agents to tailor the size and governance structure of territories to gain maximum coalition support. Such decisions, pivotal in including or excluding regions, were primarily driven by a common goal: the survival of political profes-

sionals. This conventionalisation of motives distinguishes Latin America's state formation from the more exceptional dynamics seen in Western Europe. In contrast to Europe, where geopolitical survival took precedence during territorial consolidation, Latin American state-makers strategically selected which peripheries to incorporate. They had the luxury to exclude regions aligning with rival elites while including those that expanded their coalition, despite potential fiscal burdens. However, within this framework, three different agents accounted for the undertaking of different subpaths in the continent: the port, the party and the lord (Mazzuca, 2021, pp. 101-103). In the first case, political entrepreneurs managed to broker deals that made ports the epicentre of export-led growth, obtaining the incorporation of peripheral areas predicated upon the granting of some concessions. Such was the case of countries like Argentina, Brazil and Chile. In instances of party-driven state building, a temporal disconnection emerged between border demarcation and the establishment of effective monopolisation of violence. This gap instigated conflicts between opposing factions, fostering internal alliances among diverse elites to engage in internal warfare. It was only after decades of varying levels of intense hostilities, with significant consequences, that pacification ensued. This was achieved either through a conciliation between the two primary rivals, as seen in Colombia and Uruguay, or by the dominance of one faction over the other, exemplified by the case of Mexico. Ultimately, feudal lords played a role in shaping small to medium-sized countries, their size contingent upon their capacity to form spatial alliances with dependent clients. This contributed to the establishment of a cronyist political culture, evident in countries like Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Guatemala.

Democracy's Tenuous Grip

Having outlined the intricate historical processes of state formation and the complexities entwined with territorial consolidation and political power struggles in Latin America, it is crucial to bear in mind the ramifications of these legacies on the contemporary democratic landscape. These historical underpinnings, characterised by fragmented state institutions, a legacy of minimal emphasis on cohesive national projects, and a prevalent focus on commercial and particularistic interests among elites, have laid the groundwork for the challenges faced by modern governance in the region. These dynamics significantly influence the region's democratic trajectory and the challenges it faces in fostering sustainable and inclusive institutions. These enduring dynamics intertwine with present-day factors, leading to the disheartening findings of the recent Latinobarometro report of 2023, nearly 30 to 40 years after the return to democracy. According to this study, support for democracy plummeted to 48% in 2023, a record low already registered in 2018 (Latinobarometro, 2023, pp. 18-19), with 28% expressing indifference vis-à-vis the type of political system (Latinobarometro, 2023, p. 22). Alarmingly, 54% of respondents indicated that they would not be averse to a non-democratic government taking power if it pledged to resolve the country's issues (Latinobarometro, 2023, p.42). This sentiment does not necessarily reflect an active desire for authoritarianism but rather a pervasive scepticism regarding the democratic model and its unfulfilled promises.

This widespread pessimism towards the democratic system stands in stark contrast with the initial hopes that it generated following the bleak period of military dictatorships across the continent. Such an enthusiasm harboured more than the aspiration for accountable governments committed with a hu-

man rights agenda after the brutal repression endured in the previous years. In October 1983, Raúl Alfonsín, first Argentina's President after the return to democracy, delivered an emotionally charged speech containing a phrase that later became famous: '*con la democracia no sólo se vota, sino que también se come, se educa y se cura*' (with democracy, one not only votes but also eats, educates, and heals.). This sentiment underscored the multifaceted role of democracy beyond mere electoral processes, highlighting its importance in ensuring access to basic necessities such as food, education, and healthcare. First and foremost, the figures presented above reflect the incapacity to fulfil the promises of general welfare that the democratic system brought with itself. It seems far from fortuitous that democracy's approval ratings reached their peak during the so-called *quinquenio virtuoso* (virtuous five-year period), when the economy boomed between 2003 and 2007. While it did not manage to alter the fundamental socio-economic patterns, such a largesse permitted the enlargement of the middle class and a mitigation of the worst social ills. The adoption of anti-cyclical policies in some countries allowed the prolongation of this favourable period. The following years witnessed a reversal of such trends, with a palpable deterioration of virtually all economic indicators. The pandemic further exacerbated social disparities and poverty levels: in 2020, the percentage of individuals earning below US$5 per day increased to 34%, while those earning less than US$3.10 reached 20% (Galindo and Nuguer, 2023, p. 46). Even though poverty numbers returned to pre-COVID trends, current socio-economic figures continue to be appalling, especially owing to stagnating growth rates.

Other factors contribute to make Latin American democracies particularly fragile. If democracies are perceived as malfunctioning, it is often due to the difficulties within the party

system in addressing societal demands and channelling citizens' aspirations. The institutionalisation of the party system is indeed seen as a crucial prerequisite for consolidating democracy, and Latin America seems not to have taken significant steps in this direction. Institutionalisation necessitates stability of parties and competition norms, social rootedness, and autonomy from external actors and internal leaders, yet none of these conditions are fulfilled in Latin America (Welp, 2022, p. 48). Another crucial missing element is forbearance: democracies flourish when a set of informal norms take root across the political spectrum such that adversaries are viewed as legitimate rivals and partisanship is not taken to the extreme. Despite the Montesquieuian separation of powers is fully incorporated in nearly all Latin American constitutions, this does not inherently ensure genuine acceptance of the rules of the political arena or the ability to tame polarisation, containing it within acceptable bounds (Levinsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

When parties fail, their ability to legitimise the system, develop fitting public policies, and implement them is eroded. This failure stems from several factors. Primarily, electoralism dominates political strategies, prioritising acquisition and retention of power with short-term horizons. This often results in the neglect of public affairs management and the pursuit of collective well-being. Political campaigns devolve into races marked by unattainable promises, discrediting representative democracy and fostering opposition without incentives for cooperation (Welp, 2022, p. 45-46). In parallel, the escalating mediatisation of politics compels the electorate to frequently reject candidates based on perceived lack of authenticity rather than their managerial abilities. More in general, political competition is increasingly characterised by ideological indistinctiveness, leading the electorate to perceive the political class as a homogenous block with differences guided solely by

endogamic interests, detached from the concerns of the majority. This ideological blurring is reinforced by the formulation of political proposals that emphasise single issues and rely on physical proximity with the people. Consequently, ideological, class and social cleavages are now more easily transcended than in the past.

Relatedly, a recent study suggested that South American citizens tend to vote against incumbents regardless of their actual performance. Accordingly, electors model their behaviour based on economic fluctuations, which are in turn influenced by the price of relevant commodities and the international interest rate. The bottom-line is that presidential popularity seems to be determined exogenously, irrespective of their skills (Campello and Zucco, 2016). While this perspective might appear overly simplistic and mechanistic, it is clear that the peripheral condition of Latin American economies takes its toll on the political sphere, presenting negative implications for democracy. As highlighted by Malamud (2019, p. 41), good governments might be removed from office due to unfavourable economic circumstances, while bad governments may be credited with outcomes for which they have no merit.

However, it remains to be determined whether this phenomenon causes or results from democratic decline. In reality, this finding could indicate both a pre-existing disconnection of the electorate from politics, here reflected in a lack of attention for nuances, and the poor quality of the public debate, for which the media bear significant responsibility. The concentration of wealth in Latin America is mirrored in an equally imbalanced ownership structure of the media. Such an oligopolistic framework tends to homogenise editorial perspectives and diminish diversity (Becerra, 2014, p. 64). Left-of-centre governments' efforts to counteract this dominance have not always been successful, leading to the creation of

partisan echo chambers that mirror their own positions rather than establishing impartial public non-governmental media outlets.

Finally, parties encounter challenges in their consolidation, exemplified by the decline of long-standing entities. Notable instances include the Peruvian Aprista Party, the Chilean Christian Democratic Party, the Mexican Party of the Democratic Revolution, the Uruguayan Colorado Party, the Bolivian Revolutionary Nationalist Movement, and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party. This trend has led to the emergence of new political actors and/or the proliferation of independent candidates, particularly notable in Chile. Consequently, this phenomenon contributes to increasingly fragmented parliaments, posing challenges for legislative agreements and significantly affecting the formulation, implementation, and oversight of public policies (Gómez Talavera, 2022, p. 147).

Efforts have been made to address the perceived detachment of citizens from institutions through the introduction of referendums, but the outcomes have been limited. The inability to channel citizens' demands is evident due to various factors. The norms in some countries, including Panama, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, do not allow citizens to activate referendums themselves. Controls and exclusions further complicate the utilisation of referendums, making their effective use extremely difficult. The instances of referendums triggered by presidential initiative is also a tricky terrain. Such endeavours are hardly bottom-up as they respond to the need of presidents to maintain or prop up their popularity. Additionally, institutional co-optation, notably observed in guarantee institutions as in Venezuela, exacerbates the issue (Welp, 2022, pp. 52-53).

The populist pink tide and its wane

Let us now turn our gaze to a more precise examination of the recent political cycles that have characterised the last 25 years in Latin America. The starting point lies within the left-wing pink tide. This wave of left-leaning governance enveloped nearly all South American countries, with notable exceptions in Peru and Colombia. It began with Hugo Chávez's 1998 triumph in Venezuela and continued with the victories of Lula da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner and then Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Tábare Vázquez and then José Mujica in Uruguay, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, alongside the center-left in Chile, personified by Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet. It is crucial not to overlook that a similar trend happened in Central America, with the victories of Mauricio Funes in El Salvador, Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Left-wing leaders in Mexico and Peru also presented formidable electoral opposition, although they achieved victory only a few years later, when the initial momentum of the pink tide had diminished. While there is much disagreement over the exact meaning of what populism is, the pink tide has been much associated with the term. This is right, but with some caveats. Although varying in their approaches, nearly all modern viewpoints on populism align with Margaret Canovan's assertion that populism, in its various forms, entails an appeal to the people and inherently embodies anti-elitist traits (1981, p. 294). Furthermore, populism is commonly perceived as a political practice thriving in times of crisis, marked by polarisation, and reliant on a charismatic leader's relationship with the masses. However, it is essential to note that while these traits represent a prevailing trend, not all cases fit neatly within the populist framework, as

observed in instances like those of Chile and Uruguay. It is also crucial to acknowledge populism as a nuanced and graded characteristic, resulting in variances even among cases that ostensibly fit within this category, offering insights into their diversity.

Central to these political shifts was a degree of political continuity that facilitated sustained periods of reform. Repeated electoral victories in Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina of the same parties and leaders permitted the adoption of fairly coherent policies over time and across space, thus spurring talk of a regional cycle. Moreover, pivotal to the consolidation of this period was the notable surge in price commodities, largely propelled by China's burgeoning demand, resulting in sustained economic growth across the region. As a result of this, governments pursued cash transfer programs aimed at addressing poverty and enhancing social inclusion, resulting in noticeable advancements in these realms. The implementation of social redistribution policies coincided with the incorporation of larger segments of the population into more sustained consumption patterns, contributing to the consolidation of the middle class. These phenomena have been encapsulated as the 'commodities consensus' (Svampa, 2012), shedding light on the materialist causes of the popularity of these governments, and thus downplaying the impact of the left-of-centre rhetoric that they adopted to varying extents. Indeed, these governments primarily relied on the export-oriented models inherited from the past and encountered challenges in effectively diversifying their economies. Moreover, ecological concerns were relegated to the sidelines of their policy agendas, highlighting substantial oversights in their developmental strategies. Consequently, this led to opposition from the ecological left in various countries, notably in Ecuador and to a somewhat lesser extent in Bolivia.

The origins of the pink tide as a general political phenomenon can be explained by reference to a number of factors. The failure of the neoliberal model, heavily influenced by the Washington Consensus and its policies, provided fertile ground for the rise of left-leaning leaders and parties across the region. Although this economic model brought initial stability and attracted foreign investments, it concurrently exacerbated socioeconomic disparities, widened the gulf between rich and poor, and led to widespread discontent among marginalised communities. The experience of severe crises heightened criticism against neoliberalism, diminishing its acceptability as a viable economic model for peripheral countries. The erosion of the State's role as a provider of welfare and economic regulation, a function that was unevenly fulfilled prior to the implementation of adjustment programs yet still offered a degree of safeguarding for the most vulnerable segments, amplified the perception of neoliberalism as an elitist-driven socio-economic agenda. Social restlessness manifested in social protests and political upheavals in countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela, serving as catalysts for reevaluation and reformation of prevailing political and economic frameworks.

However, the pink tide was not merely a response to local conditions but also intricately linked to global geopolitical changes. In fact, one the enabling factors was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union as political adversaries of the USA, eliminating the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War era and diminished apprehensions regarding the global spread of communism (Natanson, 2022, p. 28). In parallel, following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States redirected its focus towards combating terrorism in the Middle East, allowing space for the rise of alternative political ideologies and leadership in Latin America. This led to the election

of left-wing leaders and parties that, 10 or 20 years earlier, would likely have been ostracised by Washington. Following the ascent of Chávez and Lula to power, a cascading effect occurred, fortifying analogous movements in other nations and illustrating to electorates the feasibility of electing leftist leaders who challenged the established order. Chávez's proactive approach, rooted in a strong anti-imperialist ethos embodied by South American independence figure Simón Bolívar, and his assertive utilisation of petro-dollars to drive multifaceted diplomatic initiatives, further solidified the momentum of the leftist wave.

Furthermore, the 'pink tide' marked the transcendence of the traditional dichotomy within Latin American leftism, which was characterised by the tension between reformist and revolutionary factions (Natanson, 2022, pp. 26-28). The dominance of Cuba as a symbol and beacon for leftist movements gradually diminished, signifying a departure from an era defined by dogmatic adherence to revolutionary ideals. Cuba continued to hold a particular allure among leftists across the region, notably evident in its relationship with Venezuela, which fostered a significant political and symbolic alliance between Castro and Chávez. Nevertheless, the path it embodied was no longer perceived as the ideal course of action, leading to a predominant reliance on the electoral option as the sole feasible route for leftist politics.

An important difference between such political experiences emerged over the necessity of comprehensive constitutional reforms and institutional restructuring versus maintaining continuity. This debate, epitomised by the different approaches of Chávez and Lula, revolved around the necessity to change the 'rules of the game' to spur a more decisive process of political change. Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela went on to change their Constitutions through the election of

Constituent Assemblies, while countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay did not undertake this process.

Such a divide mirrored the debates on alternative development strategies, social inclusion policies, geopolitical orientations, but also underscored distinctions in government style and rhetoric. While the pink tide as a whole triggered a reassessment of the role of the state in regulating markets, addressing inequality, and prioritising social welfare over unfettered neoliberal policies, two prominent ideological currents emerged within this broader movement. The initial articulation of this divergence came from former Mexican foreign minister Carlos Castañeda (2004). He lauded one faction of the left for embracing a path of modernisation while criticising the other for its nationalist tendencies and apparent prioritisation of retaining power over effectively exercising it. Such a divide was echoed several times by pundits, scholars or political leaders, as in the case of Teodoro Petkoff (2005), a former Venezuelan Communist leader, who pitted an antiheroic, advanced reformist left vs a Borbonic left, focused on emotions. Similar oppositions included vegetarian vs carnivorous left (Vargas Llosa, 2006) or religious vs realist left (Villalobos, 2005). To put in less biased tones, one faction, characterised by a moderate social-democratic orientation, sought to promote economic growth within a humanistic framework. They aimed to reconcile a capitalist, liberal democratic system with robust social programs, tactfully navigating corporate concerns. The other faction adopted a radical stance, advocating for heightened state intervention in the economy, underpinned by nationalist rhetoric and fervent assertions of sovereignty. This group took a more confrontational stance towards international financial institutions and the United States. However, in practice, such categorisation morphed into a routine exercise utilised by liberal intellectuals, aimed at

discrediting the more radical left and diverting attention from the shortcomings of neoliberalism (French, 2009), ultimately neglecting essential nuances.

Cameron's analysis illustrates that, in this distinction, crucial aspects such as the indigenous question and the diverse legitimating mechanisms employed by populist leaders, rooted in their distinct historical trajectories to power, were disregarded (2009, pp. 334-35). As a result, figures such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, often clumped together into a single category, significantly differed in their origins and contexts. Chávez epitomised a top-down model that excluded organised political intermediation, thereby showcasing a more pronounced autonomy of the political. Conversely, Morales' approach was directly shaped by both indigenous and popular mobilisations. Positioned somewhere in the middle, the case of Ecuador exemplifies a preceding mobilisation of social movements that laid the groundwork for social change, albeit without Correa being a direct embodiment of it. Moreover, additional distinctions defy this dichotomy. Governments perceived as radical, such as those in Ecuador and Bolivia, predominantly emphasised cautious macroeconomic policies focused on ensuring stability. In contrast, Argentina, consistently an outlier in this framework, demonstrated less adherence to orthodox macroeconomic directives. As emphasised by Ramírez (2006), Latin America's political landscape encompassed more than just two distinct lefts. This reality underscored the necessity for a deeper examination of national specificities, focusing precisely on the impact of social movements and the diverse factors that influenced the adoption of specific political trajectories.

Moreover, despite attempts to pit these two alleged currents one against the other by much of the international mainstream press, the relationship was underscored by a col-

laborative ethos emphasising shared spaces and close-knit relationships within regional integration networks. It was in this period when a number of regional integration entities were created, such as UNASUR, ALBA and CELAC, or fortified, as in the case of MERCOSUR. These integrative strategies expanded beyond traditional economic focuses to include political dialogue, social issues, security, with growing emphasis on holistic development, prioritising human rights and addressing historical hierarchies in healthcare, education, employment, and food. While significant achievements were made only in resolving specific political crises, such as the 2008 Andean diplomatic crisis involving Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, and arising from the Colombian bombing of a FARC camp in Ecuadorian territory, and the 2008 Bolivian political crisis spurred by protests seeking greater autonomy for the country's eastern departments under President Evo Morales (see Kersffeld, 2012), these instances underscored the broader trend of peaceful coexistence between divergent left-leaning ideologies. Another aspect illustrating this amicable relationship was Lula's administration response to Morales' nationalisation of Bolivian oil and gas in 2006, impacting the Brazilian company Petrobras. Although widely portrayed by the international press as a collaboration between Morales, Chávez, and Castro aimed against Lula, the latter's administration generally displayed sympathy toward this action (Saint-Upéry, 2008).

Commencing from the mid 2010s, these political experiments exhibited a discernible decline, begging the question as to how this happened. In his prescient analysis a decade earlier, Panizza (2005) foresaw the challenges faced by left-of-centre governments in fulfilling their commitments to enhance democracy and implement an alternative economic model. The decline and eventual fall of left-wing governments in Latin

America can be comprehensively understood through a confluence of multifaceted factors. Primarily, the shift in international economic conditions, particularly the abrupt decline in commodity prices, significantly impacted these governments. The economic slowdown resulting from this downturn exacerbated existing structural weaknesses within their models. While the previous economic paradigm had favoured both lower-income groups and the affluent, the middle segments of society faced acute vulnerabilities due to the faltering economy. The absence of sustained economic expansion strained these sections, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and eroding the governments' popular support.

Moreover, the erosion of their initial appeal stemmed from a cycle of wear and tear associated with an extended period in power, coupled with the inability to effect a comprehensive overhaul of the prevailing common sense, thus hindering the establishment of a new hegemonic order (Mazzolini, 2022a). As these governments transitioned from insurgent outsiders to established incumbents, their ability to represent a radical break or offer transformative renewal waned over time. Their growing self-sufficiency and insulation impeded responsiveness to evolving societal demands, limiting their capacity to enact substantial reforms. Initially, excessive polarisation might have had some articulatory effects, but over time it often led to processes of de-identification, becoming politically detrimental to left-wing leaders. As it began to be perceived as excessive, arbitrary, punitive, or disconnected from prevailing demands, polarisation resulted in adverse outcomes (Mazzolini, 2021). Additionally, a lack of effective measures to address cases of corruption tarnished their governance credibility. Instances of mismanagement, coupled with allegations of graft and misconduct within their ranks, undermined public trust and weakened their legitimacy. These phenomena contributed to fostering a significant

negative partisanship within the electorate. For instance, antipetismo in Brazil, anti-kirchnerismo in Argentina, and anticorreismo in Ecuador have emerged as influential forces. While these sentiments do not necessarily align positively with any other party or leader (Samuels and Zucco, 2018), they have been electorally determining, particularly in the latter case.

The challenge of managing succession in certain countries (notably in Ecuador and Bolivia) further exacerbated internal strife. The extended dependence on individual figures rendered certain experiments overly personalised. Consequently, if the leader fell out of favour with the electorate, the entire process would be jeopardised, highlighting the challenge of constructing robust institutions (see Mazzolini, 2022a). Simultaneously, the rise of right-wing opposition across the region posed a formidable challenge. As conservative factions regrouped and consolidated their support base, they capitalised on public discontent, positioning themselves as alternatives to the status quo, further weakening the left's electoral prospects.

Post-populism?

The transition away from left-wing governance in Latin America unfolded through diverse pathways. In some instances, democratic processes and clean electoral outcomes led to changes in power, notably observed in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. These transitions, while indicative of democratic continuity, also revealed a shift in public sentiment away from leftist ideologies. However, other countries experienced tumultuous changes through coups or dubious procedures, disrupting the political landscape, such as in Brazil, Bolivia, Honduras, and Paraguay. In Ecuador, a more complex shift occurred through a 'Trojan Horse' scenario, where the heir

apparent of Rafael Correa, Lenín Moreno, swiftly departed from original principles while launching a campaign of lawfare against his previous political acolytes (see Mazzolini, 2022b). In countries like Nicaragua and Venezuela, governments clung to power but at the cost of democratic norms. They adopted increasingly authoritarian practices, suppressing dissent and compromising civil liberties to retain authority, sparking internal and international criticism.

An ephemeral phase of right-wing governance surfaced in Latin America, characterised by distinct ideological motifs and a brief yet impactful tenure. The governments of Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Jeanine Áñez in Bolivia, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Lenín Moreno and then Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador, Luis Lacalle Pou in Uruguay are part of this tendency. As pointed out by Gómez Talavera (2022, p. 145), central to this emergence was the fervent opposition to what was perceived as an 'authoritarian' and 'regressive' state structure, often intertwined with an increasing aversion towards populist politics. Emphasising the sanctity of individual liberty as a bulwark against what they deemed as encroachments by populist regimes, these right-wing leaders ardently championed the safeguarding of property rights and the preservation of individual autonomy. They decried perceived government overreach and endeavoured to counteract policies aimed at fostering solidarity, often seen as detrimental to individual creativity and prosperity. A curious convergence within these coalitions manifested, blending ostensibly liberal principles with elements of conservative ideologies. This amalgam juxtaposed the advocacy of liberal economic principles, particularly anti-statist economic liberalism, with conservative ideals steeped in traditionalism. The emphasis on the nuclear family, promotion of a particular form of education, and the endorsement of regionalism, notably seen in cities or regions

like Santa Cruz, Lima, and Buenos Aires, underscored an assertive form of regional identity. This diverged significantly from the technocratic leadership that characterised Latin American liberalism during the 1990s.

However, the tenure of right-wing governance proved to be transitory and ultimately unsuccessful in sustaining its influence. This was primarily due to the lack of a cohesive and comprehensive economic program beyond vague promises aimed at displacing populist regimes. Additionally, the failure to cultivate a stable social base capable of enduring political transitions and sustaining power contributed significantly to their downfall. Furthermore, the right-wing's inability to effectively address social inequality and structural issues exacerbated discontent among diverse societal segments, undermining their legitimacy. The ideological coherence that appeared promising initially faced challenges when translated into governance, as these factions struggled to navigate the complexities of real-world policy implementation.

The ascent of the Left to power in certain countries between 2018 and 2022 prompted discussions among analysts about a potential new pink tide. However, the reality is more nuanced. This resurgence has been characterised by a more cautious approach, demonstrating a restrained inclination toward substantial changes and moving notably away from the populist rhetoric prominent during the pink tide. Volatile commodity prices, depleted state coffers, and the adversities posed by the pandemic have posed significant hurdles. Notably, as we will delve into further, maintaining continuity has emerged as an obstacle in several countries, undercutting the notion of a distinct and enduring trend.

Similar to previous eras, the contemporary leftist political spectrum remains diverse, exhibiting notable distinctions. Natanson (2022) categorises these distinctions as follows. Firstly,

an authoritarian left, evident in the governments of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, tends toward insularity. The Bolivarian discourse, contrary to the past, demonstrates limited expansion capacity, often encountering opposition, even from other leftist governments, as observed in Chile. The primary motivation of these leftist governments is the retention of power, leading their elites to prioritise specific interests that are increasingly disconnected from egalitarian and redistributive principles.

Secondly, the emergence of left-wing governance in countries where leftist parties historically struggled to gain power has been noteworthy. These parties succeeded either in overcoming historical aversion associated with left-wing options among the electorate, as seen in Colombia, or achieved ascendancy over the long term, as in Mexico, or unexpectedly emerged victorious, as in Peru. However, in the latter case, President Pedro Castillo's tenure was short-lived following his attempt to unlawfully dissolve Congress, resulting in his removal from office. In Colombia, President Gustavo Petro, despite riding the momentum from massive waves of social mobilisations during his predecessor's tenure, now faces significant challenges amid declining popularity. Conversely, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has maintained remarkably high approval ratings. His heir apparent, Claudia Sheinbaum, is currently leading in polls for the 2024 presidential elections.

Furthermore, a resurgence of leftist leadership has surfaced in nations previously governed by leftist regimes during the pink tide, although this resurgence manifested with considerable diversity and distinctions among countries. Alberto Fernández, a more moderate Peronist compared to the Kirchners, won in Argentina. In Bolivia, Luis Arce secured victory, although internal party conflicts with Morales have emerged and

lately intensified. Lula staged a remarkable comeback in Brazil, narrowly defeating Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections. Meanwhile, Gabriel Boric, emblematic of a previous cycle of student mobilisation and a more radical brand of leftism, won in Chile, but his efforts to pass a new Constitution encountered a significant setback, undermining his popularity.

Within the leftist realm, noteworthy is the significant momentum gained by certain social movements in recent years, particularly observed in feminist and environmental mobilisations across numerous Latin American nations. Originating in Argentina in 2015, the *Ni una menos* (Not one [woman] less) movement began as a protest against gender-based machismo violence entrenched in a patriarchal culture. Over time, it evolved into a broader struggle encompassing demands from the established feminist movement, advocating for reproductive, sexual, and labour rights, along with the equitable acknowledgment and restructuring of caregiving duties. A pivotal moment demonstrating the tangible influence of this movement on public policy occurred during Argentina's arduous but ultimately successful path to legalising abortion between 2018 and 2020. The nation witnessed impassioned parliamentary debates and streets filled with demonstrators from both sides, signifying a watershed moment in the movement's impact on public policy. Nevertheless, the recent triumph of Javier Milei in Argentina and the increasing prominence of radical right-wing movements across the region, frequently emerging in response to the feminist movement's condemnatory stances, raise uncertainties regarding the movement's actual reach. The movement's primarily urban language and 'vanguardist' tone often clash with the sensibilities of certain segments of the population, demanding a rethinking of certain militant practices.

The recent activism within the environmentalist movement can be understood as a direct response to the prevalent growth model reliant on the extraction and intensive use of natural resources, particularly impacting local territories, notably in the Andean region. This activism often stems from specific ecological conflicts, particularly prevalent in areas inhabited by indigenous communities, giving rise to what scholars term as 'ecologism of the poor' (Martínez-Alier, 2003) or 'ecoindigenism' (Sissons, 2005). Although less visibly widespread than the feminist movement, environmental activism has gained significance, particularly in reaction to the unfulfilled ecologist promises made by governments during the pink tide, such as those in Ecuador and Bolivia, deemed as neo-extractivist. This shift in perspective became evident in recent Ecuadorian elections: two referenda, one on a national scale regarding the preservation of the Yasuní basin in the Amazon jungle from oil extraction (despite earlier commitments by Rafael Correa against oil exploitation), and another locally focused on halting mining activities in the Andean Choco near Quito, yielded decisive victories. Interestingly, while these referenda received overwhelming support, Luisa Gonzalez, Rafael Correa's candidate, faced defeat in the subsequent run-off. This illustrates a significant divide within the left, indicating that left-wing populist leaders often fail to align with the electorate's growing concerns regarding environmental issues.

Returning to the electoral political landscape, recent developments have contradicted the notion of a new left-wing turn. Milei's election, following Bolsonaro's defeat, indicates that radical right-wing forces remain an option for disgruntled voters in the region. Additionally, in Ecuador, *correísmo* has shown its inability, for the second consecutive time, to regain power at a national level. As mentioned earlier, in Co-

lombia and Chile, the new leftist administrations face strong opposition, while the Peruvian experiment has already concluded. The only leftist experiment that seems to display some solid foundation, apart from those who are retaining power through authoritarian manners, is the Mexican one. Overall, Latin American citizens, with heightened demands and increasing scepticism toward the political class and democracy, reflect a more volatile electorate focused on national issues. Such a volatility suggests that the current political landscape is notably fluid and somewhat chaotic, lacking a distinct hegemonic principle governing regional politics.

Conclusion

The paper provides an extensive yet concise overview of contemporary political dynamics in Latin America, serving as foundational context for the insightful contributions in this volume. Beginning with a comparative analysis of state formation in Latin America and Europe, the discussion highlights legacies that persist today, such as weak state structures shaped by limited warfare and trade-focused development, leading to challenges in bureaucratic organisation, territorial governance, and elite-driven institutions.

The examination then turns to the decline in support for democracy, contrasting past aspirations for democratic ideals following military dictatorships. Factors contributing to current democratic fragility encompass dire socio-economic indicators, an immature party system, and deficiencies in political discourse due to media oligarchic system.

Subsequently, the analysis focuses on the recent political cycles in Latin America, particularly the ascendancy and subsequent decline of the pink tide. This era of left-leaning gov-

ernance, lasting approximately 15 years, is explored in terms of its achievements, challenges, and the origins associated with populism, economic fluctuations, geopolitical shifts, and alleged internal divisions. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the reasons behind the decline of the pink tide, attributing it to economic downturns, governance issues, rising opposition, and challenges in succession planning.

Concluding with a discussion on the transition away from left-wing rule, the text examines the brief rise and fall of right-wing governance, highlighting the complexities leading to its swift decline. Additionally, it explores the resurgence of leftist leadership and the role of social movements – such as feminism and environmental activism – in shaping policy. Finally, recent political shifts underscore a volatile and uncertain regional political landscape.

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¿Chile Despertó? Politics and Anti-Politics in Contemporary Chile

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Abstract. In less than three years, from October 2019 to September 2022, Chile progressed from witnessing the most important social uprising of its democratic history – a phase of collective mobilisation triggering the start of a constitution-making process to end with the *pinochetista* Constitution – to the democratic demolition of the constitutional text drafted by the Constituent Assembly. In a similar time-span, from October 2020 to July 2023, Chilean voters have: opted for having a new Constitution (October 2020); elected a Constituent Assembly that was significantly skewed to the left (May 2021); elected the first (leftist) president outside of the two traditional (centre-left and centre-right) coalitions dominating Chilean politics since 1990 (November 2021); and then opposed the promulgation of the Constitution draft (September 2022) and elected a new Constituent Assembly dominated by the radical right (May 2023). How was this possible? This chapter starts by offering a summary of the antecedents and aftermaths of the Chilean *estallido social*. The summary highlights the different political, cultural, organizational legacies of the neoliberal model against which Chileans mobilised in October 2019. The chapter then proposes an interpretation of the constituent process. The interpretation emphasises the structural factors that prevented the process from consolidating its initial progressive di-

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rection. The chapter finally advances some concluding remarks, adopting a comparative perspective as well.
Keywords: Chile; Contentious Social Movements; Party/Society Linkages; Critical Juncture; Neoliberalism.

Some historical background: antecedents and aftermaths of the estallido social

It is perhaps useful to start by offering a brief summary of the essential historical events. Chile's sleepy social and political system was first shaken by two waves of student mobilisations. In 2006, there was the so-called 'Penguin Revolution', named after the popular nickname for high school students, involving a series of demonstrations and occupations that forced then Socialist President Michelle Bachelet into making limited concessions and affecting her popularity in no small measure. The 2006 demonstrations were the prodrome of those that, to an even greater extent, broke out in 2011, this time led by university movements. The 2011 student protests were directed against the first right-wing government since the return of democracy, led by mega-businessman Sebastián Piñera, and took on a broader political significance posing a much more comprehensive challenge to the neoliberal model than the 'Penguin Revolution'. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the 2011 protests facilitated the emergence of a new generation of political figures, who swiftly ascended within the Communist Party, such as Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola, who have been deputies since 2014 (Vallejo presently holds the position of the secretary general of the government). Other figures, affiliated with various groups that later amalgamated into the Frente Amplio (FA), included Giorgio

Jackson and Gabriel Boric, who would later become Chile's president in 2021 (Padoan and Perricone, 2020).

The FA could be read as a coalition of ideologically composite political parties and movements, akin to a 'New Left' characterised by strong ecological and feminist sensibilities. This was the first truly major novelty at the political level since the transition to democracy. It was precisely in relation to the latter that the FA built its own identity, being at the same time a strategy: the overcoming of the neoliberal model as well as the economic and political systems built in the first 25 years of the post-dictatorship era. This entailed opposing the duopoly formed by the right and the centre-left, while ensuring absolute autonomy from 'business power' (Manzano, 2017).

During the period of opposition to the disappointing centre-left government led by Michelle Bachelet, the Frente Amplio solidified its position and, more importantly, emerged as an alternative force in the 2017 elections. Chile seemed to be headed towards a 'Spanish scenario': just as in Spain, after decades of neoliberal democracy, characterised by economic growth, increasing inequality, access to consumption through credit, social apathy and the disintegration of social organisational fabrics (Moulián, 2023), an 'anti-caste' force emerged following a cycle of cross-caste protests. Such protests were hegemonised by progressive youth with ambitious goals to end an era and assert their role as pivotal players in the political landscape. After all, the connections between the Spanish Podemos movement and the Chilean Frente Amplio were apparent in terms of ideological links as well as political and strategic collaborations.

Nevertheless, just as in Spain, the immediate political effects of the Frente Amplio irruption were controversial. Though the coalition, spearheaded by candidate Beatriz Sánchez (a respected journalist), garnered nearly 20 percent

of valid votes and came close to the second round, right-wing leader Sebastián Piñera claimed victory over the weak centrist/centre-left candidate, Alejandro Guillier. Despite the triumph of the right, the Frente Amplio, popular among the younger demographic, faced prolonged internal disagreements and splits. At the same time, the new coalition-party struggled to take on a representative role for the working classes – unlike the Uruguayan party sharing the same name (that of the notorious former president José Mujica) and grappled with distancing itself from the image of being merely a political tool of the student leaders, regrettably gaining the status of a political party in a country where 'politics' is, as this chapter will detail below, highly delegitimised.

However, discontent with the Chilean socioeconomic model persisted, awaiting an opportune moment to emerge. This defining moment arrived on the fateful 18 October 2019 (18-O), known as *estallido social* ('social outburst'). The spark was a modest increase in the Santiago subway fare during peak hours – a decision made on 6 October. What began as high school students inciting *evasión* (jumping the turnstiles to evade fares as a form of protest) quickly escalated as government officials tended to downplay and even ridicule the protest. Within days, *evasión* grew into a widespread movement, resulting in incidents, vandalism, lootings, and fires in both major and minor commercial locations. Some provocations were also attributed to infiltrated carabineros, leading to casualties. Thousands of citizens peacefully occupied *Plaza Italia* (henceforth renamed *Plaza Dignidad*) in the east-central sector of the capital. Protest marches and *cacerolazos* (the typical parades involving the banging of pots and pans in affluent neighbourhoods) were organised. Amid multiple corruption scandals and the inclusion of figures from Pinochet's dictatorship in his government, President Piñera exacerbated the

situation by declaring the country to be 'at war' and imposing a curfew. His words and actions triggered popular outrage, transcending class and ideological lines, as a broad spectrum of people disapproved (an understatement, really) of the actions of the president, the first one to deploy the military in the streets in democratic times. Although Piñera gradually relented, or at least made some concessions, including lifting the curfew, these efforts appeared insufficient in the eyes of the vast majority of Chileans. This led to nationwide protests that culminated in what was termed 'Chile's biggest march'. People demanded more than just lifting curfew, going as far as requesting a Constituent Assembly, to finally replace the current Constitution, the institutional bedrock of the neoliberal socioeconomic system, which was established by the military government in 1980 and put into effect eight years later.

The most significant political-institutional consequence of the *estallido social* was the 'Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution' (ASPNC), signed on 15 November 2019, in a tense atmosphere between the Piñera government and some opposition forces. Notably, the Communist Party and various parties from the Broad Front, including the party represented in Parliament by Gabriel Boric, who voted in favour against party instructions, did not sign the agreement. Chile's centre-left parties instead supported it. The ASPNC established a roadmap for the constitution-making process. In October 2020, several months late due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a double referendum, the *plebiscito de entrada*, was held. Chileans had to decide whether or not to initiate the constituent process (the concrete options being *Apruebo* [Approve] or *Rechazo* [Reject]), and, in the event of an *Apruebo* victory, whether to assign the task of drafting the new Charter to an *ex novo* elected Constituent Assembly (*Convención Constitucional* option) or to a *Convención Mixta*, composed of half elected

members and half from the current Parliament, where conservatives held a majority. The *Apruebo* and *Convención Constitucional* options won decisively (with 79 percent of the vote), albeit with a rather disappointing turnout of just over 50 percent of eligible voters, with abstentionism reaching a notable peak among popular sectors (Meléndez et al., 2021).

Even more behind schedule, the 'mega-elections' in May 2021 not only elected members for the 155-seat Constituent Assembly but also municipal and regional officials, mayors, and (for the first time) regional governors. These elections marked the first time independent electoral lists (i.e. not registered as political parties) were permitted and perfect gender parity among elected members, along with 17 seats reserved for indigenous representatives, was guaranteed. The left celebrated a victory at the expense of the centre-left and right-wing coalitions that dominated Chilean politics for 30 years, with the right securing only 20 percent of the vote, thus falling short of a third of the seats which would have guaranteed veto power in the Assembly. As for the centre-left, it stopped at 15 percent of the vote. The *Apruebo Dignidad* coalition (Frente Amplio and Communist Party) achieved 19 percent of the vote, securing 28 seats, to which had to be added the 26 seats obtained by the *Lista del Pueblo* – a coalition of independent leftist candidates, often linked to local social conflicts. An additional 11 seats were won by social movement leaders, along with the 17 seats reserved for indigenous peoples.

The *Convención Constitucional* began work in July 2021 amid uncertainty and several scandals involving some elected members, in particular of the *Lista del Pueblo*. Simultaneously, campaigning began for the general elections in November. The *Apruebo Dignidad* coalition nominated Gabriel Boric, who emerged as the winner in the internal primaries, triumphing over the Communist Party leader, and popular mayor of the

lower-class municipality of Recoleta (Santiago), Daniel Jadue. The centre-left pinned its hopes on Christian Democrat Yasna Provoste. Meanwhile, the centre-right saw itself weakened due to its association with Sebastián Piñera, who was able to complete his term despite two failed impeachment attempts – one in 2019, at the height of the social *estallido* and the second in 2021, following a conflict-of-interest scandal that emerged thanks to the Pandora Papers (Martínez and Olivares, 2022). The centre-right candidate, Sebastián Sichel, was further weakened by competition with Franco Parisi, leader of the newly formed populist party *Partido de la Gente* (Padoan, 2023), and José Antonio Kast, often likened to a 'Chilean Bolsonaro' and leader of the Republican Party. Initially perceived as the frontrunner, Boric was surprisingly overtaken by Kast in the first round (28 vs. 26 percent of the votes). Parisi, campaigning from a distance, cautiously located in the United States partly due to private legal disputes, put forth a programmatic platform centred on fighting corruption within the Chilean political class, coupled with typical centrist-liberal economic proposals (Padoan, 2023), securing a surprising third place with 13 percent. He narrowly outpaced Sichel and Provoste by one to two percentage points, the candidates of the coalitions who had dominated Chilean political life for thirty years. In the second round, Boric garnered Provoste's support and Kast that of Sichel, while Parisi maintained an ambiguous silence. Above all, Boric succeeded in mobilising those citizens who had abstained in the first round, resulting in an eight-point increase in turnout (from 47 to 55 percent). Boric emerged victorious, defeating Kast by a margin of almost a million votes.

Boric's presidency was immediately identified, by both Chileans and the president himself, with the constitution-making process: the success of his presidency was linked to the results

of the constitutional reform, not least because only a new constitution would equip Boric with the means to implement his progressive agenda and break away with the 30-year neoliberal democratic period. The reverse was also true: the evaluation of Boric's tenure would inevitably influence the public perception of the constituent work. The draft of the new Constitution, mostly debated by the *Convención Constitucional* between January and April 2022 (while Boric from March took office), incorporated 'several innovative measures that garnered broad support from the political forces and public opinion [such as] the securing of socio-economic rights in areas such as housing, social security, health, work, and food security [...] These institutional changes envisioned by the Convention aimed to strengthen the state's capacity to promote greater levels of equality and social recognition for all Chileans, in contrast to the self-sufficient view outlined in the 1980 constitution' (Sazo, 2023, p. 4). However, the draft also included highly divisive points. As summarised by Larraín et al. (2023, p. 239), the most distinguishable among them were 'the constitutionalisation of the right to abortion, the creation of a plurinational state with vaguely different judicial and legal systems for indigenous peoples and other Chileans, potentially weaker property rights protection in case of expropriation, or the right of unions to strike for any reason they see fit'. According to survey data, Chileans viewed the constitutional text's innovations in environmental protection and socioeconomic rights very positively. However, the poorly defined indigenous justice system and Chile's proclamation as a Plurinational State – akin to neighbouring Bolivia, a country with an extremely different ethnic and identity makeup – were increasingly contested by the majority of citizens. These issues became powerful arguments in the hands of the right-wingers in the run-up to the referendum approving the new Constitution, held on 4 September 2022,

which included, for the first time, mandatory voting for all eligible Chileans adults.

In the meantime, the first year of Boric's administration was marked by a long series of incidents, mistakes, reversals, internal disagreements among the supporting factions, and continuous oscillations between 'pragmatic' (especially in the socioeconomic sphere) and 'maximalist' decisions (especially on symbolic issues, such as the release of prisoners captured during the *estallido* social). Dealing with the Mapuche conflict in Araucania proved to be particularly thorny, causing damage to Interior Minister Izkia Siches, a sort of rising star within Chile's radical left, and President Boric himself, who decided to reintroduce a military presence in the region after advocating its withdrawal for years (Sazo, 2023). The so-called *plebiscito de salida* unexpectedly resulted in a sharp victory for the *Rechazo* with almost sixty percent of the valid votes cast by 86 percent of the eligible voters.

The September 2022 result represented a huge defeat for the Chilean process of change, as it encountered delegitimisation from those sectors – primarily popular ones – that had not participated in the previous electoral rounds and had instead been compelled to participate by the introduction of compulsory voting. The hiatus between *Convención Constitucional* debate and the unfulfilled expectations and fatigue among the popular sectors emerged unequivocally. Above all, the context marked by distrust of the constituent process and the very low approval ratings of the Boric presidency increasingly bolstered the Chilean right-wingers, particularly Kast's Republican Party. After months of negotiations among the parties represented in Parliament – with the self-exclusion of Kast's and Parisi's parties – the 'Agreement for Chile' was signed on 12 December 2022), reinitiating the constitution-making process. A Commission of Experts was formed, com-

prising 24 deputies and senators tasked with drafting a Constitutional pre-draft, to be then debated by a *Consejo Constitucional*, consisting of 50 elected members (plus one seat reserved for the Mapuche people) and mandatory voting. Elections for the *Consejo Constitucional* were restricted to parties or coalitions of parties, thus excluding unregistered electoral lists – although it was possible to run as independents within coalitions. The elections outcome on 7 May 2023, was a triumph for the right, who secured 34 (exactly two-thirds) of the seats: 23 for the Republican Party and 11 for the centre-right coalition. 16 seats, on the other hand, were reserved for the Unidad para Chile coalition, essentially the combination of *Aprueblo Dignidad* and the Socialist Party. As of the writing of this chapter, the *Consejo Constitucional*'s work is still ongoing and scheduled to conclude in November 2023.

The Shaky Basis of the Chilean Process: Structure over Agency?

The Chilean *estallido social* clearly fits into the definition of a 'critical event' provided by García-Montoya and Mahoney (2023): 'a contingent event that is causally important for an outcome in a specific case', while 'an event is contingent when it is not expected to occur but it does occur'. The concepts of 'contingency' and 'contingent events' have been interpreted diversely by major scholars focusing on non-linear causation processes in social science: events characterised by their 'randomness' (e.g. North, 1990); events where the subjective discretion of the agents opting for a decision instead of another is decisive (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007); events as 'exogenous shocks' (Gourevitch, 1986); 'unsettled times', e.g. moments of transition in which the 'weakening of structural constraints allow microevents and individual and group deci-

sions to carry unusual weight in shaping outcomes' (García-Montoya and Mahoney, 2023; see also O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Contingency in the *estallido social* can be observed according to this latter understanding of the concept.

But what is the *outcome* of the *estallido social*? In all evidence, it is the *setting in motion* of the constituent process. The dismission of the *pinochetista* Constitution has been a key demand of the Chilean left since the democratic transition, and calls for a Constituent Assembly have been recurrent during the past two decades. Only after the 18-O, and the ASPNC – arguably, one of the many 'critical subevent' following the *estallido* – could the constituent process start.

And what can be said about the substantial *failure* of this constituent process in light of the current political hegemony of the Chilean radical right and contrary to the initial demands and expectations that Chilean demonstrators had in late 2019? The reading of the Chilean events proposed here is that the failure of the *proceso de cambio* was prompted by the triumph of structural factors (at the social, political, even cultural levels), re-establishing their causal predominance in a very few years. Some of such structural factors were even *reinforced* by the *estallido social* and its aftermath, thus converting expectations into disillusionment. One of these factors is the crisis of political representation, with strong organisational foundations.

Delving deeper, Chile had long been diagnosed with a major crisis of representation, primarily blamed on political parties. In 2012, Juan Pablo Luna and Fernando Rosenblatt wrote an essay on the state of Chile's political parties, provocatively titled 'Notes for an Autopsy?' Using the categories proposed by Luna et al. (2021), Chilean parties, especially on the left (Luna, 2014), were characterised by weak 'horizontal coordination' (HC) and very weak 'vertical interest aggrega-

tion' (VIA). HC encompasses several sub-functions: i. monopoly of candidate choice and electoral strategy; ii. use of a single brand at the national level; iii. coordination in representative institutions and among local governments. VIA refers to the ability to mobilise collective interests electorally, and channel and mediate social demands. In general, with few exceptions (on the one hand the Communist Party, on the other the UDI – the main centre-right party and political heir to the Yes front in the 1988 plebiscite), Chilean parties appeared as empty shells. In terms of HC, only function ii. (favoured after all by legislative rules on party registration) and iii. when party discipline in Congress is concerned (Toro, 2007; Campos-Parra and Navia, 2017). In fact, the choice of candidates by party secretariats often competes with the presence of political figures with a personal clientelist-territorial following. Chilean parties then are even less capable of fulfilling the second function (VIA), unable and unwilling to represent specific territorial or class demands, or include figures representing specific constituencies and conflicts within their ranks – except, of course, the country's economic and financial elites. In order to expand their support among popular sectors, the two traditional coalitions relied on programmatic, identitarian, and clientelistic linkages. However, concerning programmatic proposals, the centre-left coalition consistently shifted to the right along the state-market dimension (Altman et al, 2009). Meanwhile, party identification, persisting on the democracy/authoritarianism axis inherited from the period of democratic transition, was declining and remained extremely low even in a comparative perspective. Clientelistic linkages, on the other hand, were primarily (though not exclusively) exploited by the Right.

The Frente Amplio itself has never really been able to structure itself on the ground and consolidate popular social

bases. At least two factors hindered these aspirations. First, the very 'social subject' that the Frente Amplio has aimed to represent – specifically, the indebted middle class capable of guaranteeing their children receive higher and university education yet unable to secure less precarious existences – remains quite distant from the most marginalised sectors of the Chilean population. In a context of low electoral participation, representing this subject brought immediate electoral gains, but these turned into defeats in electoral rounds (such as the *plebiscito de salida* and the election of the *Consejo Constitucional*) in which compulsory voting was mandated. Secondly, 'genetic' (Panebianco, 1988) characteristics of the party made more effective structuring difficult. According to the analysis of Nogué and Barozet (2023), the FA is a party incapable of equipping itself with formal mechanisms for managing internal conflict, which has 'cultural' roots related to the student origins of many internal currents – often having a personalistic nature. This results in poor horizontal coordination – made visible by numerous splits – and a scarce capacity to attract new militancy and foster voter party identification. The distance between the party in public office (as per the analytical scheme of Katz and Mair, 1995), i.e. the elected representatives, and the party on the ground (which has weak territorial structures), accentuated the 'parliamentarisation' of the party and the immediate identification of the FA as 'traditional politics'. This phenomenon was such that the FA was utterly unable to capitalise on, let alone influence, the emergence and development of the *estallido*, even finding itself amongst the targets of the protests. Ironically, it was precisely the distance between leaders and rank-and-files, or rather the absolute autonomy of the former (and in particular Boric) vis-à-vis the latter, that enabled the signing of the ASPNC and allowed the institutionalisation of the constitu-

tion-making process. This was a choice that bore initial and seemingly promising fruits, only to end up tying the fate of the Boric presidency to the process' successful outcome.

In Chile, public trust in political parties has long been among the lowest in South America. Some of the reasons have been exposed above. But there are other causes, as well as consequences, of this general disaffection that deserve to be analysed. Depoliticisation of society and public debate, a byproduct of the Chilean (neoliberal) model and a strong technocratic vision supporting it, contributes significantly to this mistrust. According to Luna (2021), there is a general rejection of politics as a method of negotiating interests, contrasting it with a discourse based on administrative expertise ('politics as administration', in the words of Canovan, 1999). Recurrent corruption scandals only certified, in the eyes of many citizens, the inability of parties to select a political class capable of making public affairs work. The past decade has witnessed a progressive awareness – stimulated by student mobilisations – of the enormous contradictions caused by the neoliberal model per se (thus confirming that support based on policy performance is inherently fragile [Rhodes-Purdy, 2017]). But the normative view according to which the management of the state and the economy is primarily a matter of good governance rather than mediation of divergent interests, has always remained widespread, significantly impacting the constitution-making process. In October 2020, that is, at the beginning of the *Convención Constitucional*, an IPSOS survey revealed that 63 percent of Chileans preferred the *Convención* to consist of 'experts and academics' rather than 'ordinary people'. Two months before the *plebiscito de salida*, partly as a result of the inadequate image left by many novice constituents, this percentage rose to 80 percent.

In summary, the Chileans' judgment of political parties and the political class spanned from 'useless' to 'harmful'. The combination of technocratic approaches to state management and anti-political impulses, fuelled by the same approaches, generated a political-cultural context in which the foundational fracture of populist moments, i.e. 'people' vs. 'elite', was already firmly entrenched well before the *estallido*, which of course helped to reinforce it. It was a sufficiently ambiguous divide to allow the identification of the vast majority of Chileans with the 'people' category, as well as the inclusion of several enemies within the 'elite' category – although the political class represented the main and unanimously recognised target. According to Ostiguy (2022),

> if there is a world phenomenon that fits Ernesto Laclau's model of equivalential logic (and the empty signifier) like a glove, it was, respectively, the Chilean social outburst and the slogan of 'dignity'. There, any claim not attended to by 'the 30 years' and the right-wing 'neoliberal model' are equivalently added. The more, the better: more (in terms of claims and people) is greater strength. The people 'woke up' and are 'united' in their demands in the streets. The coherence between different demands (from feminism to protests against highway tolls) does not matter too much; rather, it is 'oppression', 'lack of attention' and popular clamour that do. Unifying this equivalential logic is the all-encompassing demand for 'dignity'. On the other side, the power bloc remains, during Piñera's government, very visible.

However, as Ostiguy added, 'Laclau's equivalential logic faded away very soon'. Why did this happen? According to the reading proposed here, this was due to the citizenry's radical rejection of politics as a means of mediating interests; a rejection not unfounded, given Chilean parties' inability to represent and mediate those interests. In its initial stages, the *estallido social* exemplified a 'populist social movement' as de-

fined by Aslanidis (2016): 'non-institutional collective mobilization expressing a catch-all political platform of grievances that divides society between an overwhelming majority of pure people and a corrupt elite, and that claims to speak on behalf of the people in demanding the restoration of political authority into their hands as rightful sovereigns' (in the case of the *estallido,* through a new Constitution). However, post the initial phase of marches and protests, the *estallido social* then crystallised through territorial assemblies and issue-oriented movements, including local ones – such as LULUs ('Locally Unwanted Land Use') type of environmental movements or indigenous peoples' movements. All this was outside the realm of party politics, resulting in the surprising success of the *Lista del Pueblo* in the elections for the *Convención Constitucional*. During the physiological phase of protest cycle demobilisation exacerbated by the outbreak of the pandemic, social movements engaged in an internal dialectic (and between the militant bases and their representatives at the *Convención*) unable to address the external environment, while remaining extremely faithful to the individual demands that each of them primarily represented. This led to an over-representation of symbolic demands within the *Convención Constitucional*, often poorly supported when not strongly opposed by the silent, at least until the *plebiscito de salida*, majority of Chileans, such as the transformation of Chile into a Plurinational State. The elaboration of an extremely lengthy constitutional text was then not only the reason behind the defeat of the *Apruebo* option in the *plebiscito de salida*, but also the consequence of a representative body made up of issue-oriented groups unwilling to work for synthesis and mediation – which would have been considered as a 'betrayal' by their bases.

Understanding the *Rechazo*'s victory in the *plebiscito de salida* requires considering other factors. The explosive situation of the conflict in Araucania in the South and the immigration issue in the North empowered Kast's extreme nationalist right and partly fuelled Parisi's endeavour. A sociological analysis of the *Rechazo* vote (Ostiguy, 2022) suggests an increased importance of urban-rural cleavage and, more generally, the GAL-TAN dimension. In a context of high turnout, the high salience of symbolic issues clearly disadvantaged Chilean leftists, especially in non-urban and culturally conservative contexts. In sum, class voting has been very visible but, especially in lower class municipalities, it has been driven by both materialist and identitarian reasoning – thus allowing the Chilean right to achieve unprecedented results. By way of example, the fiery debate over the pension system reform, where the predominantly private system established significant vested interests across the population, involved both the aspiration for a fairer system and concerns about potential state expropriation of personal savings. It was no coincidence that, according to the polls, the inexorable trend towards the *Rechazo* victory began precisely when, within the *Convención*, the reform of the pension system began to be discussed. Finally, scandals affecting some members of the *Lista del Pueblo* also took their toll. Emblematic cases include Rodrigo Rojas-Vade, a symbol of the demands for the health care system reform, who admitted to falsely claiming he was sick with cancer; and Diego Ancalao, an initial candidate in the 2021 presidential elections, who was later excluded due to irregularities in the collection of required signatures. These scandals, welded with a difficult social and economic situation caused by the pandemic, led to a resurgence of technocratic attitudes, motivated by the demand for seriousness, competence, and stability. Such claims were adeptly echoed by the *Rechazo* campaign, particularly articulat-

ed by José Antonio Kast in the aftermath of the *plebiscito de salida* in his critique of 'the two lost years: two years of suffering, insecurity, and uncertainty for all Chileans'.

These technocratic attitudes, prevalent in Chile and certainly a legacy of the 30-year neoliberal democratic period, exist concurrently with the dominant anti-political sentiment, that encompasses delegitimisation of the entire political class, particularly those in power. It is worth recalling here the literature that emphasises the growing importance of negative partisanship (e.g., Meléndez and Rovira, 2017) as a determinant of voting choices. In Chile and beyond, people vote (and march) against something or someone, and it is much easier to mobilise this 'negative vote' when that 'someone' is in government. The constant delegitimisation of the ruling political elite – *whoever* is ruling in a specific moment – is both a necessary condition for electoral success and a very unpromising condition for governing in the following phase. The *estallido social* itself has strongly fed this anti-political sentiment – in the not-so-long-term, this has proven highly detrimental to the successful institutionalisation of the process. The rejection of politics as a means of representation and mediation of interests is such a pervasive cultural phenomenon in Chile that it can be considered as a structural element, following the approach imported from the literature on social movements emphasising the importance of the existing 'cultural opportunity structure' (e.g. Wahlstrom and Peterson, 2006). In light of these reasons, this chapter advocates an interpretation of the recent convulsive events in Chile in terms of the triumph of structure over agency.

Conclusion

Contemporary Chile seems to be living in an eternal Laclausian 'populist moment', characterised by the dominance of (always

changing) negative identities opposed to any ruling political elite. This situation exists within a context devoid of entrenched and legitimised structures of political articulation. In the aftermath of the *estallido social*, unsatisfied demands rooted in progressive aspirations and voiced through calls for 'Dignity' and against the neoliberal model, were primarily expressed through vanguard organisations that dominated the mobilisation phase and the early phase of institutionalisation (i.e. until the election of the *Convención Constitucional*). At the same time, other unsatisfied demands, more conservative in nature, focusing on 'stability' and technocratic political management, also targeted the 'political class', but failed to crystallise into specific organisations. However, they were still capable, along with Chilean creole nationalism, of mobilising latent participation *against* the direction taken by the constituent process.

Verdugo and Prieto (2021) proposed a comparison between the constituent processes in Chile, Venezuela (1999) and Bolivia (2006-2009): the latter two defined by Verdugo and Prieto as 'Bolivarian Constituent Processes' (BCPs). Both BCPs, triggered by long and massive protest cycles, led to the establishment of a Constituent Assembly. They were marked by strong participation and the involvement of social movements in the draft-making phase. Both BCPs concluded successfully, in contrast to the Chilean process. In the Venezuelan case, *chavistas* opted for a rapid crystallisation of existing power relations (which were far from being solid in 1999: e.g., Padoan, 2020) in a new constitutional text, which avoided clarifying the ideological foundations taken by the *chavista* project in a later phase. Instead, the Venezuelan Constituent Assembly opted for strengthening the executive in order to allow Chávez broader room of manoeuvre. According to Verdugo and Prieto, pursuing a similar acceleration was unfeasible in the Chilean context due to existing institutions'

strength and inertia, and the need to defend the process' legitimacy against the right's allegations of 'transforming Chile into Chilezuela'. The entire legitimacy of the process was defended by repeated and explicit reassurances about the 'anti-Bolivarian political culture' inspiring the Chilean constituents. In the Bolivian case, the constituent process was much longer and more contentious: it delivered, as in Chile, a more radical Constitution. However, in Bolivia, there was an incomparably greater organisational entrenchment of popular movements supporting the process, thus shielding the Constitutional approval from any public opinion's backlash.

In comparative perspective, and *a posteriori*, the forces of change in Chile could have acted differently in order to successfully conclude the constituent process. Postponing contentious discussions and showing more consideration towards the Chilean right might have led to a minimally but more legitimately accepted outcome. A depoliticised debate might have also aligned with the political-cultural moderate and somewhat 'technocratic' attitudes prevalent among Chileans. However, was it possible to act this way? Could the 'radical', symbolic and specific demands have been subdued to deliver a more consensual Constitutional text? This might have been a more plausible outcome if the structures of representation and mediation, such as political parties, had enjoyed more legitimacy (see Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt, 2021). But Chilean parties lack social rootedness, horizontal coordination and vertical integration. The newcomers in the *Convención Constitucional*, i.e. the *Lista del Pueblo*, were supported by a small number of local activists, with no power or willingness to blend their specific demands into a more coherent and all-encompassing Constitution. To conclude, while it might be easy to pinpoint specific mistakes by political actors leading the Chilean constituent process, it could also, to a certain extent, be misleading when seeking to understand the main factors leading to its failure.

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Political Reversals in Brazil: The Redemption of Lula and the Decline of Bolsonaro

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Abstract. This paper examines the profound political shifts in Brazil between 2018 and 2023, focusing on the contrasting trajectories of Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. In 2018, Bolsonaro rose to power in the wake of a weakened left, while Lula faced imprisonment. Fast forward to 2023, Lula has reclaimed the presidency, whereas Bolsonaro confronts a series of legal inquiries. The paper unfolds in two parts: the first segment traces Lula's journey, examining the achievements of his initial terms marked by emancipatory populist politics, economic growth, and poverty reduction, and the subsequent contentious charges of corruption resulting in his imprisonment and eventual release. The latter part scrutinizes Bolsonaro's rise amid crises and his subsequent decline, outlining his reactionary populism characterised by transgressive communication and assaults on democratic institutions, which culminated in the scenes of chaos in Brasília on 8 January 2023, following his electoral defeat. The paper concludes by claiming that these seismic shifts signal a complex political landscape. It underscores both the strengths and constraints of Lula's conciliatory populism, as well as the enduring influence of Bolsonarism, emphasising the need for addressing historical authoritarian tendencies in Brazil's political culture.
Keywords: Brazilian Politics; Brazilian History, Lula, Bolsonaro; populism.

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The year 2023 in Brazil is ending curiously: the current political scenario seems to be almost the exact opposite of what it was in 2018 when Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected president. In 2018, Bolsonaro came to power in a context in which the left was very weak. The Workers' Party (PT), by far the largest left-wing political group in the country, remained an important political force, but had suffered successive defeats and had seen its main leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, behind bars. Five years on, the extraordinary is before our eyes: Lula has left prison to return to the presidency, and Bolsonaro, once president, retains political relevance but finds himself increasingly embroiled in accusations of corruption and other crimes, facing a not insignificant risk of arrest.

How did one get from one situation to another in such a short space of time? To explain such major transformations – and think about what they indicate about the future – this brief paper will be divided into two parts. Firstly, I will deal with the decline and redemption of the Workers' Party and Lula as an emancipatory populist leader. Next, I will explore the rise and fall of Bolsonaro as a reactionary populist phenomenon. I will conclude with a very brief discussion of the future of Bolsonaro and the limits of Lula's conciliatory strategies.

Lula's redemption

On 1 January 2003, Lula came to power for the first time. It was an important victory for the left in Latin America, in what later became known as the 'pink tide'. Brazil, after all, is the largest country in the region, in terms of both population and economy. Indeed, being a former Portuguese colony and a country of continental dimensions, Brazil's historical trajectory differs from that of its neighbours, and the country often sees itself as an island, de-

tached from the world and, above all, from the rest of the continent. However, it is erroneous to overlook Brazil's central role in the process of regional integration. Especially under Lula, Brazilian diplomacy has sought to adopt a leadership role in Latin America and has sponsored various projects to bring the region closer together politically and economically.

Lula's stance on international relations mirrors his domestic stance. Undoubtedly a conciliatory leader, Lula was trained in the new trade unionism and his hallmark lies in the search for compromises and negotiated solutions – to the point of being called a '*pelego*' [accommodationist, toady, scab][2] by many on the left (see also Weffort, 2008, p. 7).

There is much debate about whether Lula could be classified as a 'populist' – an expression used to describe several of his counterparts in neighbouring countries. The very conceptualisation of populism is widely discussed, and my perspective, informed by the history of Latin America, interprets populism as an aesthetic transgression (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, pp. 114-15). Not only does the populist leader – when populism has leaders – deviate from the normal way of behaving in politics, but above all, by discursively opposing the 'people' to the 'elites', populism transforms the coordinates of what can and cannot appear in politics. This transformation incorporates subaltern sectors into the public sphere that previously had no voice.[3]

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[2] The word '*pelego*' literally refers to the numnah placed between the horse's saddle and the animal's back to reduce friction while riding.

[3] The idea of populism as aesthetic transgression was inspired by Ernesto Laclau (2005, 155-56), Jacques Rancière (1995, p. 142; 2000, p. 12) and Georges Bataille (Bataille [1939] 1970, p. 228; [1933] 1989, p. 142). It was developed together with Miguel Lago, and later deepened in a rich partnership with Théo Aiolfi (see also 2022, p. 6) which should be published soon.

While it is true that Lula, due to his popular origins, broke with the well-behaved way of doing politics in Brazil, the Workers' Party staunchly rejected populism from its inception. Founded from a coalition of new social movements, socialist intellectuals, left-wing clergypersons and trade unions that was unprecedented in the world, the PT saw populist politics as outdated and undemocratic. In the Brazilian intellectual tradition, populism – associated, for example, with Getúlio Vargas – had always been cartoonishly seen as a process of class conciliation, in which subaltern sectors entered politics under tutelage (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 62-63, 70-73)[4]. In favour of an autonomous workers' organisation, the PT actively opposed these practices.

Upon assuming power, however, Lula underwent a reconciliation with the populist legacy (Ab'Sáber, 2005, p. A6). Particularly from 2005 onward, the convergence of his social programs' success in integrating marginalised sectors and the escalating animosity from the elite in response to specific corruption scandals prompted Lula to embrace appeals to the 'people' against the 'elites' and even align himself with Vargas' legacy. Nevertheless, while he can be considered a 'populist', he does not fit into the reading that sees populism as inherently conflict-driven. Lula's brand of populism, more aligned with the Brazilian populist tradition, is based precisely on reconciling interests (Singer, 2010, p. J3; 2012, pp. 33, 42). At the end of his second term, while celebrating the height-

[4] Among others, the seminal works of Hélio Jaguaribe, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Francisco Weffort stand out in the Brazilian strand of populism studies (Jaguaribe, 1954; Cardoso, 1962; 1964; Weffort, 2003a). Despite its undeniable merits, this viewpoint tends to oversimplify Latin America's populist experiences, neglecting the substantial social progress achieved during that period (for a curious exception, see Weffort, 1976, pp. 79-82).

ened role of workers, blacks, women and the poor in politics, Lula proudly asserted that his presidency witnessed the most substantial gains for banks and businesspersons (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, p. 113).

Many analysts on the left saw the conciliatory nature of Lula as a factor limiting the country's emancipatory struggles (Safatle, 2012, pp. 13-14; 2015, pp. 119-120; 2017, p. 44; Ab'Sáber 2011, §5). While there is some truth in this interpretation, it does not negate the fact that his first two governments are considered a great success. The period was marked by economic growth, poverty reduction, and the implementation of a series of public policies that improved the lives of subaltern sectors. By the end of 2010, Lula enjoyed approval ratings unrivalled by any other leader in liberal democracies at that time. He was '*the most popular politician on Earth*', as Obama once referred to him.

If Lula departed from power amidst celebration, managing to elect his successor, Dilma Rousseff, the years that followed were marked by a constant political weakening. Particularly since June 2013, when a series of unprecedented street demonstrations brought down the approval ratings of almost every politician in the country, the PT found itself cornered (Santos, 2022, pp. 15-23; 2018, pp. 128-129). In 2014, the so-called Car Wash operation began, spearheaded by the controversial first-instance judge Sérgio Moro. With repercussions throughout Latin America – notably but not only in Peru, Ecuador, Panama and El Salvador – this highly publicised anti-corruption operation, inspired by Italy's *Mani pulite* (Singer, 2018, p. 234; Moro, 2004, p. 61), destabilised the Brazilian political system, and had the Workers' Party and Lula as priority targets.

Dilma Rousseff was re-elected at the end of 2014 but soon had to deal with an economic crisis – partly of her own making – and a political upheaval. Several factors converged with-

in the political landscape. Firstly, the right-wing opposition, having suffered defeat for the fourth time in the presidential elections, became enamoured with the idea of seizing power through non-electoral means – specifically, by impeaching the re-elected president. This strategy would propel her vice-president, the conservative Michel Temer, into office. Secondly, the entire Congress found itself besieged and vulnerable in the face of a legal and media consortium led by Moro. Recent revelations demonstrate Moro's orchestration of prosecutorial actions and control over information leaks to the press. In essence, the political establishment aimed to facilitate the removal of an increasingly unpopular president through a contentious impeachment process, ultimately handing power to the right and quelling the widespread crisis, as articulated by a prominent senator advocating for '*stopping the bleeding*' (Singer, 2018, pp. 272-273).

Paradoxically, if there was a bloodletting that was reduced with the fall of Dilma Rousseff, it was that of the PT itself. After being ousted from office in 2016, the party continued to struggle but managed to distance itself from the ongoing economic and political crisis, leaving right-wing politicians to grapple with these issues. Strikingly, the removal of Dilma Rousseff led to a consistent increase in the approval ratings of the PT. Against this backdrop, Lula reemerged as the unquestioned leader in opinion polls leading up to the presidential elections in October 2018.The right-wing was certainly displeased with the possibility of the PT, especially Lula, making a return to the presidency just two years after Dilma Rousseff's ousting. The rapid trial, conviction, and imprisonment of Lula in early 2018, an unprecedented episode in Brazil's typically slow legal system, prompted many to view it as a case of lawfare designed to eliminate him from the presidential race. Notably, this procedure was officially sanctioned by

the Supreme Court at the time, in a highly contentious ruling, and openly endorsed by the summit of the Armed Forces.

It is impossible to determine the outcome of the 2018 elections had Lula been a candidate. Many factors played in favour of Jair Bolsonaro, a politician from the bottom ranks of Congress, a former army captain expelled for indiscipline, notorious for his defence of the military dictatorship, advocacy for torture, propagation of racist, sexist and homophobic statements, and connections to paramilitary, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups (Gherman, 2022, pp. 107-108, 155-156). Years of economic and political crisis fostered a deep anti-system and notably anti-left sentiment, which led elite and conservative sectors to support any candidate against the PT. Furthermore, driven by opportunism or miscalculation, many in the traditional right saw Bolsonaro as a useful tool: a buffoon they could employ to finally win the elections, to control him later.

Some of the major mass media outlets were undoubtedly complicit in the process of mainstreaming what undoubtedly stood as the most reactionary elected politician in the country. The very word 'populism' served this purpose very well: by calling both Lula and Bolsonaro 'populists', some newspapers created false symmetries (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 11-18). On the one hand, this equivalence served to demonise the PT, which was presented as being as extremist as Bolsonaro. On the other hand, it served as a euphemism and contributed to the normalisation of Bolsonaro, portraying him as a politician comparable to past leaders who governed the country without major disturbances.

In addition to the implicit support of traditional mass media, Bolsonaro's campaign was able to organise an unprecedented and efficient virtual campaign – albeit financed by obscure sources. Finally, Bolsonaro's image benefited from a tragic stabbing incident that positioned the typically aggres-

sive and assertive politician as a victim. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Bolsonaro's electoral success was also influenced by the absence of Lula, who despite his woes remained the frontrunner in all the polls.

Bolsonaro took office on 1 January 2019, appointing Moro, the controversial judge responsible for imprisoning Lula, as Minister of Justice. This move, whose significance cannot be underestimated, showed how Bolsonarism combined and converted anti-corruption moralism, previously fuelled by the media, into a conspiratorial and resentful moral panic against all sorts of minorities (Gherman, 2022, p. 109). The process of mainstreaming the far-right continued to progress well, marking a departure from a political climate where openly embracing right-wing affiliations was uncommon (Pierucci, 1987, p. 36). Notably, Bolsonaro proudly embraced right-wing labels and echoed numerous 'dog whistle' slogans with clear Nazi-inspired undertones – such as 'Work sets you free' and 'Brazil above all', to name but two (Gherman, 2022, p. 92).

The left secured a good result in the second round, but its main leader was in jail. For many, Lula had become a liability for the left and was in danger of dying in jail with a tainted reputation. There were ongoing debates on how to organise the opposition against Bolsonaro outside the Workers' Party, and even suggestions that the PT should change its name or be re-founded, as the rejection of the party was consolidated.

The fortunes of the PT and Lula began to shift in June 2019, following the leak of a series of private messages revealing the collusion between the then-judge Moro, prosecutors, and the media. In November of that same year, the Supreme Court altered its stance, permitting Lula's release. At first still ineligible, the PT leader was once again a free man after 580 days in prison.

Bolsonaro's damnation

Bolsonaro's victory brought a coalition of reactionary forces into power. His appeal to the 'people' against the 'elites' brought together the military, traditionalists, eccentric monarchists, ultra-liberal economists, and religious evangelicals in an ensemble that was not necessarily coherent, but was openly fascist in nature (Gherman, 2021, 46:00-48:30). One might characterise the militant core of his base as what Hannah Arendt would call a 'mob' (Arendt, [1951] 1967, p. 107). As Arendt explains, the mob is not the poor. Mobs exist across social strata (Arendt, [1951] 1967, p. 107; Canovan, 1978, pp. 9-10)[5]. These are silenced sectors whose entry into the public sphere does not emancipate anyone (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 17-18). They are far-right groups, who reproduced themselves on the margins and in the shadows of society, found it difficult to express their opinions, and were catapulted to the centre of politics by the reactionary populist leader.

Bolsonaro's appeal and his ability to mobilise this mob are rooted in various fantasies. In a world of growing precarity, precariousness, and constant transformation (Arendt, [1954] 1994, p. 357; Canovan, 2002, pp. 407-408; Butler, 2009, p. 33; 2019, p. 26), Bolsonaro presents himself as the figure capable of re-establishing order. Perhaps his main ideological guru, the late Olavo de Carvalho, was a traditionalist astrologer, conspiracy theorist and self-proclaimed 'populist' (Carvalho, 2017a; 2017b), who saw modernity as a tragedy (Gherman, 2022, pp. 118-119, 122-124, 154). According to him, the original sin of

[5] This understanding has surprising affinities with Weffort's early reflections, in which he claims that populism can be supported by the lumpenproletariat, but also by what he calls the lumpenbourgeoisie (Weffort, 2003b, pp. 33, 38).

modernity stemmed from the separation of states from the Church, opening the door to relativism and, ultimately, to the destruction of the family and the damnation of humanity (Carvalho, 1998, pp. 271-275). In his peculiar and conspiracy-driven worldview, the intellectual and administrative elites, guided by foolish deconstructivist ideas, were the main actors accelerating this modern hecatomb (Carvalho, 2002, p. 7).

Fantasies of re-establishing order do not solely account for Bolsonaro's appeal. In apparent contradiction, a significant appeal to transgression accompanies his authoritarian insistence on reaffirming the law (see also Safatle, 2015, p. 117). Bolsonaro is not only aesthetically transgressive by bringing previously marginalised, invisible groups to the forefront of politics. He is transgressive in his performances (see also Moffitt, 2023, p. 2; Aiolfi, 2022, p. 1; Ostiguy, 2017, p. 73). Presenting himself as just one more in the crowd – the *uomo qualunque* – he swears, dresses in an outlandish manner, and makes low-brow jokes. This way of behaving – also adopted by Olavo de Carvalho, another fan of swearing – resonates with another fantasy mobilised by Bolsonaro: the fantasy of 'freedom'. Bolsonaro often portrays himself as a 'freedom fighter', a 'taboo-breaker' in the name of 'free speech'. However, this is a particular notion of freedom: the freedom of the triumph of the will of the virile white man, who does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, despite everyone else (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, p. 124).

Bolsonaro's transgressive communication strategy, compatible with the new digital social media environment (Bucci, 2018, p. 29; 2021, p. 143; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 745; 2022, p. 120), relentlessly flooded the public sphere – or what was left of it – with absurd statements and disinformation. By saturating the public debate with crises, and using the populist maxim inspired by Donald Trump that 'the best way to weather

the storm is to be the storm' (Zicman de Barros, 2020, p. 18; see also Moffitt, 2016, pp. 113-132), Bolsonaro mostly kept the opposition in a purely reactive mode.

As Bolsonaro had said in his campaign, his main objective was not to build anything but to dismantle a series of public policies and institutions established over thirty years of democracy. Various regulatory agencies have been taken over by government allies and subsequently rendered dysfunctional. To cite just a few examples, organisations such as the foundation for fighting racism were seized by a militant who denied that racism was a problem in the country, even arguing that the legacy of centuries of slavery was positive. Evangelical leaders were appointed to oversee the foundation responsible for indigenous policies. The Ministry of the Environment – which Bolsonaro originally promised to incorporate into the Agriculture portfolio – was occupied by a politician linked to deforestation companies. Finally, the Attorney General's Office, entrusted with overseeing the president's actions, was handed over to a bland character whose main task was to shelve any investigations against Bolsonaro and his close circle.

Early in his tenure, Bolsonaro expressed a strong hostility towards the other branches of the republic. According to him and his supporters, the legislature and judiciary would be obstacles for the president to push through his agenda. Within the first six months of his term, his supporters organised marches against the Supreme Court and Congress, demanding that they be closed down.

The coronavirus pandemic only aggravated the tension between Bolsonaro and the other branches of government (Zicman de Barros, 2020, pp. 18-20). In a country renowned for the wide popular support for vaccination campaigns, the president espoused denialist theses. He questioned the seriousness of the disease – referring to it as only a 'little cold' –, expressed reluctance to take the vaccine, cast doubts on its

effectiveness, and opposed social distancing measures, mask-wearing, and any form of lockdown. All this, once again, was justified in the name of so-called 'freedom' and to save jobs. Many former allies distanced themselves from him. Moro, for example, quit the government, accusing Bolsonaro of being a 'populist' (Moro, 2020, p. 3). With an anti-vax president leading the country, it was up to Congress and, notably, the Supreme Court to take charge of the pandemic. Faced with Bolsonaro's inaction, the Supreme Court opted to empower state governors to implement essential measures in handling the crisis, aiming to avert further deaths and the potential breakdown of the healthcare system. Despite their efforts, Brazil ranked among the world leaders in deaths from the disease, surpassing 700,000 casualties. Displeased, and fearing the effects of the pandemic on his popularity, Bolsonaro reinforced the mobilisation of his bases with threats of a *coup d'état* against the parliament and the judiciary.

Eventually, Bolsonaro's tensions with Congress were addressed. A striking feature of Brazilian politics is the fragmentation of its parliament. With around thirty parties represented in Congress, forming parliamentary majorities poses a challenge for any president. Without such a majority, the president runs the risk of impeachment – a procedure used twice since re-democratisation and made common with the controversial fall of Dilma Rousseff.

While he attacked Congress, Bolsonaro simultaneously negotiated the support of traditional catch-all crony parties. His strategy to remain in office was to relinquish much of the power to determine the budget to the legislative branch. By doing so, Bolsonaro armoured himself against impeachment calls, albeit at the cost of entrusting the management of crucial sectors in the federal administration to traditional politicians – the very individuals he had pledged to distance him-

self from during the campaign. Furthermore, this alliance did not enhance his ability to influence Congress. On the contrary, Bolsonaro was the president since re-democratisation who approved the fewest executive-initiated bills. Parliament's priorities were set by the legislature itself, in an informal semi-presidential system. Growingly incapable of steering the legislative agenda, Bolsonaro acted mainly through infralegal measures – for example, with decrees that regulate existing laws, which are the prerogative of the executive branch and do not need to go through Congress.

Bolsonaro secured a deal with Congress at a considerable price, sacrificing both political initiative and large chunks of the budget, yet it granted him some respite on one front. However, this serenity did not extend to his relationship with the judiciary. Feeling directly attacked by the president, the Supreme Court did not stand idly by and watch in astonishment at the threats to democracy. In March 2019, in what some class as an exercise of 'militant democracy' (Loewenstein, 1937a, p. 417; 1937b, p. 638), the court set up the so-called 'fake news inquiry' *ex officio*. Based on flexible interpretations of regulatory loopholes, the court acted on its own volition to investigate the president's close circle, including some of his children. The investigation targeted coordinated online attacks against republican institutions – starting with the Supreme Court justices themselves – during and after the elections. The fake news inquiry was joined by the so-called 'anti-democratic acts inquiry' in June 2020. Both under the direction of Justice Alexandre de Moraes, these inquiries loomed over the president. While tension between Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court intensified – culminating in the Independence Day celebrations on 7 September 2021, where Bolsonaro, encouraged by a crowd of supporters, said 'Get out Alexandre de Moraes! Stop being a scoundrel!' – the in-

vestigations served as a deterrent against presidential *coup* temptations.

The Bolsonaro government faced successive crises, coupled with a steep rise in poverty and food insecurity, leading to a precarious position as the election year approached. Bolsonaro had been able to keep his militant base loyal and energised, but had alienated a significant portion of the electorate. When Lula regained his political rights in April 2021, many predicted that Bolsonaro's days were numbered. Quickly, the PT leader began to appear well ahead of the former captain in all opinion polls (Singer, 2023, pp. 8-9). In a successful move to unify the opposition around him, dispelling the discourses of false equivalence prevalent in 2018, Lula strategically invited Geraldo Alckmin, a traditional right-wing politician now pardoned for his past 'sins', to be his vice-presidential running mate (Singer, 2023, p. 7; see also Ab'Sáber, 2011, §9). Foreseeing his disadvantage, Bolsonaro reinforced his old discourse that the Brazilian electoral system was susceptible to fraud, all the more so because by a calendar coincidence the same Justice Alexandre de Moraes presided over the electoral authority.

The 2022 election campaign proved to be much more heated than some had predicted. The two great political forces that had been unable to compete in 2018 finally clashed. While Lula had managed to become the candidate of a broad front, leveraging the memory of his highly approved governments and an enormous capacity to connect with the most subaltern sectors of the population, Bolsonaro held the advantage of being the incumbent president. The amount of resources distributed by the government – notably a generous emergency aid package instituted by Congress, of which Bolsonaro soon claimed paternity – and the use of the public machinery to entice voters showed one of the reasons why never before in Brazil's history had a sitting president lost re-

election. On 30 October 2022, Lula won, but with the narrowest result in the country's history.

Defeated, Bolsonaro refused to accept the result and retreated to his official residence, opting for silence. After two days of intense pressure from the political class, his first press statement was very short and extremely vague, dealing only with what he said had been an 'injustice' and insinuating electoral fraud. In his absence, it fell upon his chief of staff to announce the establishment of a government transition commission. Upset by his defeat and maintaining his silence, Bolsonaro left the country two days before the end of his term, settling in Florida for four months. He refused to take part in Lula's inauguration ceremony on 1 January 2023, when the former trade unionist triumphantly walked up the ramp of the presidential palace accompanied by representatives of workers, women, black and indigenous people.

While Bolsonaro chose silence, the same cannot be said of his supporters. Immediately after the elections, with the clear connivance of the Armed Forces, Bolsonarist groups camped out in front of the Army headquarters, calling for the military to stage a *coup* and prevent Lula's inauguration. These individuals were responsible for incidents of vandalism in Brasília upon the official confirmation of the elections results. They attempted to detonate a bomb at the capital's airport on Christmas Eve and, finally, partook in the regrettable acts of 8 January 2023.

Conclusion

On Sunday 8 January 2023, the absurd happened. The Bolsonaro mob, in their thousands, marched towards Brasília's main square and, with the complicit omission of the police, stormed and plundered the buildings of the three branches of govern-

ment. It was the Brazilian equivalent of the attacks carried out by Trump supporters on the Capitol in Washington two years and two days earlier. The demonstrators aimed to force Lula into declaring a form of state of siege, believing it would leave the president hostage to the Armed Forces. That is not what happened, however. Lula initiated a one-off federal intervention in the Brasília police, which eventually regained control of the capital. Many demonstrators, including relatives of high-ranking military personnel, managed to flee with the protection of the Armed Forces, but the following day around 1,400 people were arrested for taking part in the attacks.

The failed attacks on 8 January 2023 have further complicated Bolsonaro's situation. Throughout the presidential campaign, he harboured the expectation that securing reelection would alter the dynamics of negotiations with Congress, providing him the opportunity to nominate additional justices to the Supreme Court and shape a court aligned with his preferences. His defeat, a scenario many claim he astonishingly did not anticipate, had already left him vulnerable to the institutions he vehemently criticised. However, the scenes of havoc wrought by his supporters provided the compelling momentum needed to bring Bolsonarism to the dock.

There are countless investigations against the former president, in both electoral and ordinary courts. Bolsonaro lost his political rights in June 2023 for eight years due to exploiting the presidency's structure to call the Brazilian electoral system into question. At the end of October 2023, a new conviction for electoral offences reinforced his ineligibility.

The possibility of Bolsonaro being arrested should not be ruled out. On the contrary, this is a scenario that many consider increasingly plausible. He, his closest allies, and family members face various documented corruption allegations. Even if he does not end up behind bars, his image will be badly

tarnished, sparking a rush in right-wing and far-right circles to seize the political spoils of Bolsonaro's political influence.

Just as it was a mistake to say that the PT and Lula were politically dead in 2018, though, it would be premature to declare the end of Bolsonarism. Bolsonaro does not have a party structure like the PT, but he has awakened a legion of followers who, however weakened, remain very loyal to their leader. His voters are disciplined and have elected a not insignificant number of deputies and senators in the legislative elections. At the very least, Bolsonaro remains a very important electoral force that should not be neglected.

Furthermore, while Bolsonaro's performative transgressions explain part of his appeal, they also constitute limits to his action. Because he was too vulgar, too rude, the former president limited his mainstreaming capacity. A Bolsonarism without Bolsonaro, or one where Bolsonaro takes a less prominent role, potentially led by a figure who exhibits a greater level of decorum, may pose a heightened threat as it could prove to be more effective.

It is crucial to underscore that Bolsonaro's ascent in Brazilian politics is not a mere happenstance. He has successfully revitalised a historical authoritarian streak in Brazil, a facet the country has grappled with. Brazil's legacy of centuries of slavery and subsequent decades of military dictatorships have not been adequately confronted, often overshadowed by broad amnesties. As emphasised earlier, Brazil's political culture is marked by a proclivity for conciliation, where moments of transition are frequently portrayed as sweeping agreements that, paradoxically, uphold the existing state of affairs. While there have been instances of revolt, protest, and violence, they have consistently been quelled by state force and relegated to the sidelines of Brazil's official history. Contemporary Brazilian society faces pronounced violence, albeit in a

depoliticised urban context. Concurrently, institutional politics tends to suppress overt conflict. The two – social conflagration and political conciliation – certainly go hand in hand, and will only be resolved together (Safatle, 2008, p. D6; Ab'Sáber, 2010, pp. 192-193).

In this sense, Lula's conciliatory aspect, which is so Brazilian, may also show its limits. Conciliation has its merits, but only if it is done in conjunction with the symbolisation of trauma. A possible arrest of Bolsonaro that does not attack the historical roots of Bolsonarism, which sacrifices him to preserve those around him, could lead us to repeat history as farce once again.

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If it is not Everything, it is not Nothing. Hegemonic Draw and Political Impotence in Argentina (2010-2023)[1]

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Abstract. The situation in Argentina has been characterised since 2010 by the political impotence of its two main forces: the liberal-conservative Juntos por el Cambio, led by former president Macri, and the national-popular Unión por la Patria, led by former president Cristina Kirchner. Both alliances possess more capability to veto the other than to construct something new. This places the country in a situation of 'hegemonic stalemate'. However, the issue does not solely lie in the stalemate or the ensuing conflict; it is rooted in how both factions believe they can resolve it – by ousting their opponent from the arena. This situation has become even more complex with the emergence of the radical neoliberal Javier Milei, characterised by considering those who hold different opinions as enemies and openly disparaging them. This inability to recognise the legitimacy of the other, or even to compete with him, appears closely tied to a socially and economically threadbare society, lacking the ability to care for its members.
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Introduction: problem and perspective

In order to comprehend the current Argentine situation thoroughly, it is necessary to evade the prevailing hyper-conjuncturalism and assess it from a historical perspective. What characterises the current Argentine situation, and what cannot be resolved through a presidential election, are what some authors like Portantiero, Di Tella, O'Donnell, or Diamand have respectively referred to as the 'hegemonic or catastrophic draw', the 'stalemate', or the 'Argentinian pendulum'.

Reflecting on the trajectory of Argentine politics, especially from the overthrow of Peronism in 1955, these concepts aimed to account for a scenario of recurring stagnation and deadlock resulting from mutual obstruction among the primary political actors, leading to a crisis of hegemony.

In his article on the subject, Torcuato Di Tella begins by affirming that 'Argentina, one of the more highly developed Latin American countries, has been stagnating for the last thirty years or so as a result of political stalemate. The various contenders for power [...] simply can't liquidate each other [...] [But] (e)ach group has just sufficient power to veto the projects originated by the others' (1968, p. 250 – translated by the author). Similarly, Juan Carlos Portantiero argued at the beginning of his paper that 'a common sense image presides over this work: the generalised conviction about the lack, for some time now, of a true Political Order in Argentina' (1977, p. 531 – translated by the author). Another of the theorists of the 'catastrophic draw', Guillermo O'Donnell, likewise said: 'in the last decades, attempts to establish any kind of political domination (or, what is the same, any kind of State) in Argentina have failed time and again' (1977, p. 523 – translated by the author). Finally, in another classic article, Marcelo Diamand did not speak of a 'standoff' but of a 'pendulum', as the

problem for this author was not the political support an actor could achieve, but the 'intrinsic viability' of the economic policies implemented. For Diamand, the competing actors in Argentina were 'doomed to failure for purely economic reasons', since the two main economic projects are unviable due to intellectual models inadequate to the reality of the country and the world (1983, p. 3 – translated by the author). In our interpretation, what Diamand describes is similar in terms of outcome to that of the draw outlined by the other authors.

While recognising their conceptual differences, periodisation, and approaches, these texts offer insightful perspectives. They enable us to contemplate a prolonged scenario of mutual political stasis between relatively balanced forces, particularly regarding their capacity to veto each other. Consequently, this inhibits the realisation of a relatively stabilised political order – beyond its constitutive contingency – and hinders the fulfilment of demands, values, objectives, and political programs. Another relevant consequence of this draw – perhaps the most 'catastrophic', and the one that interests us most here – is that it prompts attempts to break this deadlock – as was the case with Ongania' dictatorship (1966-1969) for O'Donnell. Such efforts – based on a profound ignorance of the concerned actor's capability and, perhaps even more crucially, the requirements posed by the political for any project to overcome the deadlock – are doomed to fail in the long term as they lack an understanding of the logic of hegemony. Rather than attracting the opposition – either out of incapacity or unwillingness –, they attempt to eliminate it as if it were a physical obstacle, inevitably leading to damage to the community and democratic coexistence.

From our perspective, the articles by Di Tella, Portantiero, O'Donnell and Diamand tend to explain this deadlock primarily in economic terms, i.e. based on the struggle between

two power blocs (Portantiero, Di Tella, O'Donnell) or between two models of accumulation, sustained in turn by classes and/or some of their fractions (Diamand). Beyond these different emphases, none of these accounts falls into a mechanical economicism. Instead, they acknowledge this struggle between relatively popular and conservative forces. However, we lean towards considering this problem in terms of political wills that are shaped through the struggle, not predetermined by the economic sphere. This tension is seen as a conflict between a more popular-progressive, egalitarian will, which understands the common as a precondition for the individual and is inclined towards state intervention in the economic-social sphere, and a conservative-liberal approach, which understands the common as the result of individual-private ends in the name of 'differences of merit' and favours the market. These inclinations are not reducible to political parties, although they predominantly align with particular political traditions such as Peronism and Radicalism (Unión Cívica Radical) on one side, and liberal-republican orientations on the other.

We believe that this way of understanding the political in terms of contingent and not preconstituted wills contributes to show the whole complexity of the draw and the difficulties of its possible overcoming, since there are no longer external elements (typically, the economy) that operate as facilitators or obstacles to the dynamics of the political struggle. The draw does not derive from anything prior to its constitution; it is the very way in which the political is shaped, its actors, the way in which they perceive themselves and the relations between them.

The 'hegemonic draw', which these discussions referenced, primarily involved Peronists and anti-Peronists in the years following 1955. This is not exactly the current issue, as since 1983 there has been a shared order – that of democracy

– which has contributed to and resulted from the wane of the once-prevailing antagonistic conflict between Peronists and anti-Peronists. Nonetheless, the concept of the hegemonic draw today still bears some relation to its original meaning. This is so as recent years have seen the erosion of mutual recognition between the main political forces – Macrism and Kirchnerism – as legitimate democratic adversaries, a critical condition of the struggle for hegemony. It could be said that anti-Kirchnerism or anti-populism has taken the place once occupied by anti-Peronism, although without embracing it. As for orthodox Kirchnerism, it persists in perceiving Macrism as representing the forces of the oligarchy, imperialism and, now, dictatorship and neoliberalism. Additionally, especially since his victory in the PASO (the primary elections, which are mandatory for all political parties and are held simultaneously), Milei's discourse has entered the scene. This discourse denies legitimacy to these two forces by categorising them as part of the political 'caste'. They are deemed guilty of all the country's ills for being 'socialists', a term Milei's party applies to any inclination favouring even a minimum participation of the State in the economic-social sphere.

At some point, possibly since Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's second term in office (2011-2015), establishing a common ground for political disputes leading to hegemony has become challenging. This involves a continual effort to persuade while attempting to universalise without imposing one's perspective, even if it requires to transform it. On the contrary, there has been a swing between two self-perceived projects: Kirchnerism – which understands democracy as the voice of a people engaged in a struggle against the oligarchy and economically focuses on the internal market, redistribution and pro-Latin American policy; and Macrism – which sees democracy in terms of division of powers and limited government

(termed as 'Republic'), emphasising market liberalisation, economic spill-over and a pro-American foreign policy.

Both sides have demonstrated greater ability to veto the other than to attract them in constructing a lasting project for the country. Neither has displayed, above all, the capacity to break the draw, despite both having been socially successful and, therefore, being in power for over a decade. This was evident in Kirchnerism's case, prompting its self-identification as a 'post-neoliberal government'. In fact, it did not manage to dismantle the neoliberal logic from the '90s, although it did alleviate some aspects through redistribution and social inclusion policies. Similarly, the macrista government failed to establish its own ground to the extent that it did not secure re-election in 2019.

The issue does not lie in the hegemonic draw in itself or the conflict, but rather in how the conflicting actors envisage its resolution: either by disregarding the existence of the opposing side or by awaiting its complete and definitive defeat. This lack of recognition of the other as a legitimate democratic actor and in the belief that it poses an insurmountable obstacle not just for to the project itself but for democracy as a whole – where, for orthodox Kirchnerism, Macrism represents dictatorship while for the latter Kirchnerism epitomises populist dissolution – contributes to the inability to resolve the stalemate. This prevents expanding one's own support base, thereby impeding the hegemonisation of the political field.

The Argentine hegemonic draw has highlighted a familiar theme in contemporary democratic struggles: the conflict between democracy understood as a purely electoral system and democracy conceived as a social regime. This presents democracy as either a political marketplace of inter-party competition where citizens functions as consumers or as a communal commitment to ensuring a basic level of dignity in the lives of its members. How-

ever, the gravest concern for Argentine democracy arises from the way actors experience this draw and strive to overcome it, as it negates the political ethics of the struggle, which presupposes the recognition of the adversary and their political nature, without which democracy itself deteriorates.

Internal and external hegemonic draw

The hegemonic draw has been unfolding on two levels: externally, within the national political arena, where the political wills are the protagonists, and internally, within each of the main political forces, as a struggle between moderate and hard-line factions.

The clearest expression of this internal and external draw lies in the situation of the main national political figure, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. She holds a pivotal role not only for having served as president for two terms and currently as vice president, but also because she is the most popular among her constituency and all national politics has been revolving around her for the past fifteen years. It is often stated that, electorally, 'it is impossible to win without her, but having her is not enough to win'.

If this is the case of the main political figure, one can easily imagine the situation for others. Former President Macri, the founder and leading figure of his political group, has not officially entered the 2023 elections due to his slim chances of winning, as a result of the memory of his government's past electoral outcomes.

If politics is hegemony, that is persuasion, attempting to erase the other from the stage is its negation. It is a striking symptom of political impotence. The greatest trait of Macrism's political impotence is the judicialisation of politics and

the replacement of persuasion with the systematic media war against Cristina Fernandez and what she represents. To believe that Kirchnerism – or any other political will – can be 'ended' by imprisoning or proscribing its leaders reflects a return to the anti-Peronism of 1955, that is to the idea that 'if the dog is dead, the rabies is over'. It shows a remarkable ignorance of the country, its history and the logic of politics.

Basically, it corresponds the idea that the other sector is Argentina's problem, as if it were not part of the political community. It amounts to treating 30% of the country as an exteriority, an anomaly, a virus, a contamination. It recalls the illusions of the anti-Peronists who speculated about 'what this country would be like without Peronism', or of classic Peronism dismissing the opposition as 'anti-patriotic'. Reducing support for Kirchnerism to mere tolerance or acceptance of corruption fails to grasp the identification of at least a third of the country with its demands. The same is true when Macrism is associated with the dictatorship and neoliberalism, as if neoliberalism, precisely because it is hegemonic, does not also address demands that, at least from the perspective of its followers, do not solely represent indifferent classism. The issue lies in comprehending these demands, not necessarily endorsing them in their current form, in order to grasp their underlying expressions that could be reconfigured into a different discourse. Hegemony is an exercise of political imagination and sensitivity.

Another feature of Macrism's political impotence has been his reliance on the country's foreign indebtedness to condition future policies. It is a sort of confession of the inability to build support for these policies through democratic political channels.

Cristina Fernandez appeared to acknowledge the impossibility of overcoming the draw by removing the adversary when she nominated Sergio Massa as presidential candidate. As in

previous elections, when she nominated the now President Alberto Fernandez in 2019 and even Scioli in 2015, she is again leaning towards a 'moderate' candidate to secure an electoral victory 'through the center'. This seems to indicate a move away from the opposition's polarising strategy, embodied by Macri's support for the tougher candidate, Patricia Bullrich, whose campaign slogans are 'If it's not everything, it's nothing' and 'End Kirchnerism forever'.

Cristina Fernández's candidate selection acknowledges that 'it is not possible without her, but having her is not enough'. This implies the realistic acceptance that the more transformative policy she represents lacks majority support, at least presently. However, this idea, which opens the way to a recognition of the legitimacy of the other, was not consistently followed. In the past four years, Cristina Fernandez herself expressly and publicly undermined President Alberto Fernandez's authority. Her argument, while never fully explicit, suggested his failure to respect the electoral program. But even if this were so, her public criticism and political directives to ministers and high-ranking officials to resign or not support certain presidential decisions, has not only harmed Alberto Fernandez, but also diminished the prospects of her own political force. Opting for a moderate presidential candidate and assuming the role of vice president as a recognition that the circumstances prevented a more transforming government, while expecting him to execute actions she herself knew were impractical, lacks consistency. Further to this, the current presidential candidate, Sergio Massa, cannot promise a more audacious policy either, but only to lower inflation and pay the foreign debt without harming the popular sectors too much. This stance contrasts with the opposition's orthodox pro-market agenda. Massa might have benefited from a scenario with a less worn-out government, particularly

as he was appointed Economy Minister under the indication of Cristina Fernández

In summary, this entire situation is emblematic of political impotence, prioritising the preservation of ideological flags over action. It is testament to the internal veto *capacity*, characteristic of dealing with the discussed hegemonic draw.

Another aspect of Kirchnerism's political impotence lies in attempting to replicate a proscription scenario similar to the Peronism era (1955-1972) based on the conviction of Cristina Fernández in the 'Vialidad case'[3]. This discourse, however, fails to resonate beyond the staunch supporters. Despite serious indications of lawfare undertaken against Cristina Fernández, as in the 'Cuadernos' case[4], it is also true that the former President has acknowledged the existence of corrupt people in her government – the case of José Francisco López, Public Works Secretary between 2003 and 2015 in the governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández, being the most notorious – while failing to assume political responsibility for them. She had dodged responsibility by reducing politics to the legal, that is de-politicising political accountability. Accountability is not necessarily tied to the crime and, therefore, to the presumption of innocence, but to taking responsibility for actions taken and those *not taken* in safeguarding the public interests entrusted by popular sovereignty at the polls. This understanding of political accountability, ex-

[3] It is an Argentine judicial process initiated in 2016 that saw Cristina Fernández involved for overpricing in some infrastructure works and illicit enrichment.

[4] The scandal took place in 2018 after an official state driver divulged the notes he had taken in personal notebooks, revealing that he regularly transported bags containing US dollars to various places in order to make bribe payments on behalf of various government officials.

tending beyond the confines of the judicial, is more demanding in terms of protection of the common and, as a result, it aligns more coherently with an egalitarian political force.

Finally, Cristina Fernández's approach to this issue created an opportunity for the insidious tactic upon which Lawfare is constructed – a coordinated operation between the media, judges and political opposition to fabricate a case that is knowingly false from the outset, but could appear plausible to a significant portion of the citizenry. That is why the parallel efforts of media dissemination and institutional claims of the opposition is key. Hence, the legal dissolution of the 'case' is not a setback, often accompanied by evidence obtained by state institutions themselves – such as the handwriting expertise of the notebooks by the National Police – because the objective of discrediting the case has already been achieved.

The political impotence of the leaders of the two main political spaces, until the PASO of 2023, instigated internal conflicts within their respective parties for the presidential candidacy. In both cases, the internal struggle was between two factions: a sector more inclined to 'agreement' and another more aligned with 'orthodoxy', aiming to break the draw.

Within Juntos por el Cambio, this dispute emerged between Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, a more moderate figure, and Patricia Bullrich, more radicalised. Although Larreta is considered the 'centrist', he stated that if he were to become president 'he would engage in dialogue with everyone except with Cristina Fernández'. In the Kirchnerism camp, the moderate figure would be the current presidential candidate, Massa, who is nevertheless accused of being a Kirchnerist by the opposition, even though, until Milei's victory at the PASO, he did not convince a large part of Kirchnerism, which sought Cristina Fernández herself to be the candidate. She declared that she would not be the candidate to avoid 'playing into the

hands' of political and media opposition, anticipating potential disqualification due to a judicial conviction. Initially, Cristina Fernández leaned towards choosing Wado de Pedro – a *Cristinista* minister of President Alberto Fernandez – but eventually succumbed to pressure from Peronist governors to make Massa the candidate. This time around, she did not appear to be the one who chose the candidate, unlike her involvement in Alberto Fernandez's candidacy. This defensive manoeuvre seemed more geared towards preserving political-ideological prestige within the political space rather than seeking an external benefit for the whole.

The ultimate expression of this climate of democratic disregard for the legitimacy of the other was the assassination attempt against Cristina Fernández on 1 September 2022. If anything, the reaction of some top leaders – such as Patricia Bullrich herself – deepened the gravity of the situation, as they declined to condemn the assassination attempt, the consequences of which are still difficult to fully comprehend. The treatment of the attack by the mainstream media is also a symptom of the degradation of democratic public ethics in Argentina. Initially sowing doubts about the authorship by suggesting it was a self-attack, the media then proceeded to impose a news blackout, never criticising the slow progress of the justice system, which hinders the clarification of the event. This entrenchment of the political and media opposition becomes more conspicuous as it has made republicanism – understood as the rule of law and separation of powers – its main argument against Kirchnerism.

This way of dealing with the hegemonic draw makes both Kirchnerism and Macrism to ultimately disavow the novel features they once embodied. Kirchnerism represented the ideological renewal of a battered and disoriented Peronism after the Menemist experience of the 1990s, recognised as the most

explicitly neoliberal period in Argentine history. Kirchnerism gave rise to a phase of wealth redistribution comparable only to Yrigoyenism and the initial Peronism, relying pragmatically on soybean income and debt payment to the IMF to achieve political independence. It knew how to understand and mobilise new social sectors, some of which even posed a threat to the classic hegemony of Peronism in the labour realm, such as the *piqueteros* and the new social movements. Howeber, Kirchnerism did not view these sectors defensively, but with a hegemonic spirit of expansion, aiming to transform itself. It notably repoliticised the youth and society at large, following the privatisation experiences of the '90s. Furthermore, it incorporated into its agenda issues that were not traditionally part of classic Peronism or that of the '70s, such as human and LGTBI+ rights, among others.

Macrism formally organised a right-wing party, unreservedly contending for what is popular from its own perspective, a sign of its drive to persuade new actors. It did not rely on the appeal to the urban middle classes. This is why it is an anti-Kirchnerist and anti-populist party before being anti-Peronista. It even counts justicialists within its ranks, such as Miguel Ángel Pichetto, the former head of the Kirchnerism parliamentary bench and Macri's vice-presidential candidate in 2019. Another merit of this political space was its resilience after the 2019 defeat, demonstrating its commitment to sustain a long-term political project. However, its primary shortfall lay in its inability to evolve into a post-dictatorship right-wing party. Instead of allowing the judicial process to proceed, it cast doubt on the number of disappeared people, denigrated the *Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* by dismissing their efforts as a 'human rights scam' and promoted the reduction of sentences for those responsible for state terrorism.

Hegemonic draw and political conflict

As previously discussed, the draw is not the main problem, but how it is interpreted. Instead of looking at it through a hegemonic lens and recognising realistically that the impasse requires a new articulation, there is a tendency to retreat in the respective positions, attributing the stalemate entirely to the presence of the Other, deemed culpable for not being as one would like. Instead of moving beyond the hegemonic draw by endeavouring to innovate, there is a belief that circumventing it can be achieved by preserving the purity of one's own identity, which includes the moralisation of politics by attributing all Evil to the Other.

From our perspective, it is not a question of promoting a consensual democracy or criticising the so-called polarisation, but rather that the absence of a hegemonic approach, the failure to seek out the other, prevents the creation of a minimum common ground on which to *contend* the very meaning of democracy. The issue is not the lack of ground for agreement providing 'governability', as per contemporary democracy's quality standards. Rather, the problem lies in *the absence of an arena for dispute* – a neutralised ground, with shared rules, where difference can be processed and something new can be constructed. The draw is not overcome by negating or including the other *in toto*, for both cases entail that everything remains as it is. It is rather a matter of building something new. It is the difference between vying for hegemony and seeking hegemonism (Aboy Carlés, 2005, p. 136); between universalising a part and pretending to represent the Whole at the cost of suppressing the Other. In reality, not even 'universalising a part' accurately represents the hegemonic process, because that part is no longer the same when it reaches universality, as it requires a transformation of the initial identity as a condition of its hegemony. This

contrasts with Bullrich's motto: it is not a matter of all or nothing, as there is no all and no nothing, but veins, fibres, fabrics with which political imagination and persuasion must build renewed wills, whose vital force lies precisely in their incompleteness. Incompleteness is not a flaw. In this sense, the draw is not a draw because it does not affect all of society in the same way. Argentina has suffered a remarkable erosion of equality. In the 1970s, the gap between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% was 6 times, while today it is more than 15 times. Paradoxically, at that time, though Argentina's democracy was not consolidated, social cohesion and 'passion for equality' stemmed from a democratising will, overcoming the suppression of the majority and historical forces that had given it impetus (Radicalism and Peronism). However, this social cohesion is now over, and the social contract is broken. Understanding this is crucial to comprehending the current situation.

Following this paradox, after the restoration of democracy in 1983, Argentina was able to *partially* undo the hegemonic draw, since it was able to build what was previously impossible due to the Peronism-anti-Peronism antagonism. Alfonsinism and the Peronist renovation endevoured to broaden their bases, unafraid of the transformations that this entailed. This enabled the construction of a shared political space, *experienced as such* by its actors, a democracy based on the ethical-political pillar of human rights. In this sense, different hegemonies might be discerned. Over the past forty years, there has been a relatively more solid, albeit now threatened, hegemony in terms of political values – in the narrow sense of the term – than in economic-social terms, where Diamand's pendulum appears to persist. The result is the pending task of building a social democracy in the country.

Milei's irruption

If one of the problems of the hegemonic draw was that it encouraged its dismantlement through a frontal clash and the denial of the conflicting political wills, the emergence of the figure of Javier Milei seems to condense this feature and take it to its extreme.

His triumph in the PASO implies both novelties and familiar themes. On the one hand, it is the first time that an openly neoliberal economic discourse prevails in Argentina. Even Macri, despite being pro-market, was not as explicit, stating in 2015: 'we will keep what [Kirchnerism] got right and change what is wrong'. In 1989 Menem won his first election using a classic Peronist discourse, based on wage increases and reactivation of the national industry. Then, once he abruptly shifted to neoliberal austerity, his re-election in 1995 rested on the promise of continuity of the one-to-one stability that had curbed hyperinflation, auguring enhanced purchasing power. In contrast, Milei has pledged a harsher reduction in public spending than the IMF, which he has dubbed the 'Chainsaw Plan'. For Milei, Argentina's problem is that the State functions on the basis of the principle of social justice, expressed in Eva Perón's quote 'where there is a need, a right is born'. Milei find this idea aberrant, arguing that it fails to address the financing of such rights and thus gives rise to indiscriminate and incessant social spending. As has been noted, Milei does not advocate for a market economy, but a market society. This is why he has come to favour the sale of organs, trading of newborns and a voucher system for public schools.

Notwithstanding this novelty, several features of Milei's discourse are classic in Argentine politics: personalism, voluntarism, anti-politics (Perón himself practiced it), regenerationism, and the identification of a parasitic minority as the

culprit for the country's ills. In Milei's discourse, this minority is the political class, referred to as 'the caste', a term originally used by Podemos in Spain. This is very representative of Milei's positions, in the sense that he has resignified expressions and symbols contrary to the status quo, typically associated with the left or Peronism, in favour of a mercantilist and reactionary social and cultural discourse. According to Milei, the political class, social justice and the oppressive State block the creative energies of the country and, once removed, would permit the nation to 'become great again', a period commonly associated – according to the official historical imaginary, but not only – with being the 'world's granary' between1880 and 1930, when Argentina attracted millions of immigrants from all over the world.

Despite the post-PASO discussions, Milei does not want to completely dynamite the State, but the precarious and intermittent social sector of the Argentine State. Milei seeks a minimal State that safeguards security, private property and the life of its members, understood as individual possessors. He advocates for a State that does not interfere, let alone intervene in their 'free initiative'. For Milei, an ounce of social State already equates to 'communism'. However, he would never renounce the monopoly on legitimate state violence, as it secures private property. His proposition for private firearm ownership seemingly challenges this monopoly, but, in truth, complements that state function by reinforcing the unrestricted defence of individual private property. This is evident in his acceptance of the dictatorship's discourse on state terrorism between 1976 and 1983 in terms of 'war' and 'excesses'. This allows us to see that his criticism is not aimed at State's power, but its use in unrestricted or limited defence of the private property of the dominant sectors. Hence, he would be willing to relinquish part of the monopoly on legit-

imate violence to the private sector if this serves to further shield the social power of the hegemonic groups and private property as a criterion of communal life's ideal.

At the time of writing, the first round of the presidential election has not yet taken place. In our analysis, the most relevant issue is not whether Milei becomes president, which is nonetheless of undoubted importance in many other aspects. What is key for us is that the approximately thirty percent of votes he secured in the PASO represents a significant political will. It should be linked to the hegemonic draw not only as part of the tendency to break it by force, but also because it makes the impasse more complex by adding a new protagonist: now there are three forces that make it up.

What does Milei's popularity mean? It seems to be the effect of the growing inequality and weakness of the State before the market that Argentina has been experiencing – with some exceptions – since 1975-76 ('Rodrigazo'[5] and the dictatorship's economic plan). However, it is a paradoxical effect, as it has brought together both the excluders and the excluded into the same political will. The popular sectors, feeling forsaken by the State, seem to have reacted not by recovering it, as seen after the 2001 crisis, but by rejecting it. In 2001, social protest set the political class and the State apart, favouring the latter and opposing the former with the '*¡qué se vayan todos!*' ('they should all go away!') slogan. Today, however, the baby is thrown out with the bathwater. Not just *this* really existing State is being challenged, but *any* State intervention.

[5] The 'Rodrigazo' refers to an economic plan implemented in Argentina in 1975, under the Economy Minister José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz. It aimed to freeze prices and wages, but later, due to economic instability, caused a massive devaluation of the Argentine peso, fuelling inflation and economic hardship for many citizens.

Those left behind have made a virtue out of necessity, becoming self-reliant Robinson Crusoes, as shipwrecked who distrust the rescuer and prefer to swim alone to the shore.

There are two mitigating factors to consider. Firstly, warnings that Milei would mean a 'leap into the void', might not represent a threat for those who have already felt in free fall for years. Argentina has not been growing economically for more than ten years and no redistribution of wealth, which does not necessarily depend on the level of development as conservatism maintains (Brazil is the eleventh most powerful economy in the world and has a high level of inequality), has taken place. Citizens have a negative perception of the last three governments: Cristina Fernández's second term, as well as Macri's and Alberto Fernández's mandates, thus including – which does not seem casual in light of the PASO results – the two dominant political forces in recent years. Disillusionment with Macri was especially important, as it meant disenchantment with the main liberal-conservative opposition to Kirchnerism, generating an open space that Milei savvily exploited. However, disappointment with Alberto Fernández's government was equally crucial, as it failed to attract non-Kirchnerist progressives. The other mitigating factor is that, as pointed out by Pablo Semán (2023) whose research focuses on Milei's voters, the PASO result does not necessarily reflect an endorsement of his programmatic contents, but rather an attitude of confrontation against the status quo and those responsible for it. In her last public appearance, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner took this interpretation further as she affirmed that, behind this protest-vote, there was a demand for welfare that was neither left-wing nor right-wing, but 'almost Peronist'. The problem is that such an analysis may apply to evaluating support for any political program. Although it has the merit of not falling into the moralisation of the other's

position, it does so at the price of sidestepping a deeper understanding of the relationship between aspirations and the chosen means to achieve them.

While there is a lack of protection, it is not entirely accurate to speak of 'abandonment' of the popular sectors by the State. This vulnerability among them results from various factors that need distinction. In leaving aside the significant precedent of the dictatorship (1976-1983) in order to focus on the period following the restoration of democracy, it is worth noting some elements. On the one hand, there have been administrations that sought to bring about change but faced hurdles, like that of Alfonsín (1983-1989) whose outcomes, primarily hyperinflation, impacted social equality. On the other hand, administrations like the early terms of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández (2007-2011) had the will and capacity, but did not manage to establish lasting welfare institutions or transform the unequal and exclusionary social structure created by Menem's openly neoliberal policies. It is also debatable whether this was feasible for a peripheral country with limited influence in the global market, like Argentina. It should also be noted that even in its period of decline, Cristina Fernández's second term (2011-2015) sustained a social push for social equality and inclusion. Finally, there have been administrations that implemented policies that divided Argentine society, notably Menem's government (1989-1999), which ushered in a massive neoliberal transformation, and the administrations of Macri (2015-2019) and De la Rúa (1999-2001), which deepened social exclusion.

Around Menemism and particularly Macrism, a new discourse took shape, which proved to be especially powerful for its capacity to unite and constitute political actors. It is the 'winners and losers' narrative, which targets a sector of society as a parasitic burden – the '*planeros*', recipients of 'social

plans'' funds from the State – while promoting the image of a 'productive', 'modern', 'self-made' sector that huge segments of the middle and popular classes aspire to join[6]. This discourse denounces the excessive dimensions of the State, the unbearable tax burden and the prohibition to exercise the human right to buy dollars. However, it is important to observe that Argentina, contrary to this narrative sustains and to what progressive discourse omits, has a regressive tax system, based on indirect consumption taxes, a symptom of the State's weakness in tax collection[7]. Likewise, so-called 'political' spending does not have a significant weight in the budget, as depicted in the neo-liberal discourse, which portrays the 'political class' and its privileges as dominantly controlling the country. For Milei, the spending of this supposed dominant class is what the rest of the citizens lack to lead the life they could in a prosperous country like Argentina.

Capturing what is new in politics, especially in a politically charged country like Argentina, is challenging. Historically, Eva Peron's notion of 'where there is a need, a right is born' translated more in the construction of subjects with the will to fight for the social recognition of their right to be part of the community, than it did in public policy and social welfare. Landmark events like the 'Revolución del Parque' of 1890, the University Reform of 1918, 17 October 1945, the Cordobazo in 1969, the return of Perón in 1972, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in 1977, the piqueteros in the '90s and numerous other instances underline this.

Politics is sediment: at once unprecedented, but not original. What is new in Milei, then? His violence, as Julián Melo

[6] For an analysis of this discourse in Macrism, see Semán, 2021, ch. 10.
[7] I develop this argument in Franzé, 2022.

rightly pointed out. Or, more accurately, that violence ingrained *within democracy*. Although Argentine society has become more violent in recent decades – a good sign of which is the transformation of television humour and language, for example – Milei's discourse simply hinges on delegitimising anyone who does not think like him. This delegitimisation, moreover, is not done indirectly or subtly, but openly and expressly, often through insults. Whoever disagrees with Milei is labelled as ignorant, malicious or corrupt, always serving 'the caste', i.e. 'the politicians'. This also allows him to sublimate his ideological dogmatism in a rejection of the existing situation. The mechanical and dogmatic reductionism of any problem to the (supposed malfunctioning of the) principle of the free market simplifies the supposed political solution, masking fanaticism as indignation and suppressing any debate. In this sense, Milei presents himself both as an academic and a hooligan.

Milei's discourse undermines a characteristic of modern democracy, identified by Lefort (1990, pp. 190-191): the idea that the place of power remains empty. Lefort employs this image to convey that in modern democracy, power, knowledge and law are not embodied by any one person, as in the *Anciene Régime*, but are contingent on the transient occupation of political power, which does not reside in anyone substantial, but derives from the sovereign decision of the people. The sovereign people do not occupy the place of the king, who embodied law, knowledge and power, because their will is plural and contingent, hence it is periodically renewed through elections. However, it is disputable that the Lefortian notion is actually embodied in modern democratic societies, because of the weight of the Western monist epistemological heritage, which ultimately leads to the invocation of *a reality* as an instance that puts an end to the different perspectives and resolves the existing debate. However, this desire to occupy the empty place of

power is more spatial than temporal in modern democracies: this invocation of reality never translates into a pretension of indeterminate permanence in power. It is more a hindrance of Western monism that clashes – from our perspective – with the constructivist and pluralist epistemology of modern democracy, than a commitment to authoritarianism legitimised by a supposed possession of truth.

Milei's discourse suffocates this empty place. On the one hand, because it employs a knowledge on how society should be organised as if were a law of the social – this is why his proposal is not a market economy, but a market society – not subject to the possibility of choice. On the other hand, because it does not reject this debate even in terms of honest scientific error, but instead impugns the person who wields it, covering them with insults. And as far as the law is concerned, Milei seems willing to live up to his last name ('Milei' sounds like *'mi ley'*, 'my law' or, better, 'the law is mine'). In the absence of a political structure, insofar as he has no governors, senators or mayors, but only three national deputies, one of whom is Milei himself, he was asked how he planned to implement his 'Chainsaw Plan'. His answer was that he would do so by issuing Presidential Decrees and/or by calling plebiscites. In Argentina, the executive power may exceptionally issue decrees only when the Congress fails to process a bill over a period of time. However, once enacted, a decree must be reviewed by Congress, which holds the authority to potentially revoke its validity. Although more frequently used than appropriate, there are matters (criminal, tax, electoral, and party regime) for which a decree is not valid. Regarding the plebiscite, it must also be initiated by the Chamber of Deputies for its decisions to be binding. Having embodied two of the three elements pointed out by Lefort, knowledge and law,

Milei would only be pending to personify the formal political power, from which the electoral act separates it.

Two issues arise from this. Firstly, Milei's discourse can be characterised, following Enzo Traverso's conceptualisation (2018, p. 18), as post-fascist. Not because it responds to a specifically fascist ideology, but because its logic mirrors that of a dogmatic and authoritarian discourse striving to achieve its objectives within democracy, rather than explicitly at the expense of it. Equally significant in Milei's discourse is a declared disregard for the past, as part of a mercantilist vision emphasising efficiency and profitability exclusively in the present and future.

Even so, it should be noted that Milei rescues aspects of Argentina's liberal and pre-democratic era of the 19th century. He echoes the dictatorship's discourse on the disappeared by affirming that 'during the 1970s there was a war, and in that war the forces of the State committed excesses' (Milei, 2023). Additionally, he extolls Menem as the best president. During the first presidential debate, Milei was the only one not to mention the word 'democracy'. In fact, within his political project, democracy holds no place, neither as an institution nor as a value. According to Milei (2022):

> Liberalism is the unrestricted respect for the life project of others, based on the principle of non-aggression and in defence of the right to life, liberty and private property, whose fundamental institutions are: 1. Private property; 2. Markets free from the (always violent) intervention of the State; 3. Free competition, understood as free entry and exit; 4. Division of labour; and 5. Social cooperation.

Conversely, there appears to be a remarkable contradiction – at least formally – between his condemnation of the 'always violent' intervention of the State in the economy and his characterisation of the systematic coup and terrorist actions

of the State during the dictatorship as a legitimate intervention in a 'war', where only 'excesses' were committed. This explains that the private carrying of arms that Milei promotes does not question the State's monopoly of violence, but rather complements, expands and reinforces it, giving it further reach. The only thing that Milei questions about this monopoly is its legitimacy as an expression of respect for the rule of law.

The key effect of Milei's discourse is that it shifts the political frontiers of Argentine democracy, previously symbolised by Human Rights and the rejection of the dictatorship. His enemy is no longer authoritarianism but 'communism', an empty signifier capable of encompassing everything that the speaker considers contrary to his project, just as during the era of state terrorism. Milei's discourse is a violence that seeks to nullify the legitimacy of conflict in democracy, intending to replace the heterogeneous composition of social bonds with the law of private capitalist profit. That is why in his society there is no room for any subject other than homo economicus, and anyone not conforming to this criterion does not deserve respect as a person, failing even to achieve the status of a human being.

Milei's discourse seems to be the profound consequence of the corrosion within Argentine social life. This corrosion has coincided with the emptying of the content of democracy itself, reduced to a mere electoral regime or, more specifically, to a pure market of parties in 'competition' for the citizen's vote, effectively transforming the citizen into a political consumer. This discourse raises two questions. Firstly, whether its effects, both the foreseeable consequences of its application and the violence it propagates, no longer hold any actual weight for millions of Argentines. Secondly and relatedly, whether a democracy can be truly such without its social di-

mensions, that is, the civilising principle implied by the Welfare State, which required the community to share responsibility for the well-being of its members. This principle fosters respect for the life projects of others, irrespective of their success in the market, allowing diverse criteria to guide these life projects, differing from those supposedly driving the homo economicus.

Milei's discourse is profoundly monistic and, therefore, dogmatic, inasmuch as he conceives that there is only one way of living life humanely – under the principle of private capitalist profit. This would supposedly harmonise all social actions of citizen-consumers. Anything that disrupts this harmony is considered an external disturbance to the mercantile logic, which cannot but come from the State, which 'violates' this automatic mechanism. While this form of market worship may appear to foster pluralism and diversity, its dependence on this singular principle and anthropology reveals its profound authoritarianism and an intolerance towards the diversity of ways of living. Consequently, it sees violence in the legal appropriation of private money by the State (taxation), but fails to recognise violence in the systematic terrorist plan of extermination of 'subversive communists' during the dictatorship.

We are thus faced with an epistemologically antidemocratic discourse, as it does not exclude authoritarianism, does not acknowledge the plurality of competing values, and seeks to eliminate them through a single criterion aiming to harmonise all social actions. This effectively suppresses the ability to choose which values will guide personal and collective life, inevitably resulting in the regression of freedom.

Conclusion

The hegemonic draw, as described by our authors, began to be resolved around 1983, following Argentina's most tragic night, not due to the reassertion of identity by a particular actor or the imposition of it over others, but rather due to the creation of something new using the existing pieces. Human rights organisations, Alfonsín, Peronist renovation and the citizenship gave rise to a new hegemony, democratic and based on the *'Nunca Más'* (Never Again) to the dictatorship[8]. Despite the continuation of the 'Argentine pendulum' in economic terms, along with its recurrent crises (1989, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2015, etc.), it was mitigated by the existence of this democratic common space, which generated a new collective identity.

The country followed a similar path after the serious crisis of 2001, when Néstor Kirchner appealed to transversality as a way of articulate a new identity from the fragments (or ruins) that the crisis had left behind. In both instances, 1983 and 2003, the contenders no longer entered the arena with the objective of knocking down their opponents and dominating the stage at will. Those who fight now seem to do so more to annul than to articulate the other.

Argentina grapples with two crises, connected and overlapping. Both are political and linked to the hegemonic draw. We can only distinguish them analytically. The first revolves

[8] 'Nunca Más' is the title of the report by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) in Argentina, dating from September 1984. It is also known as the Sabato Commission, named after its president, Ernesto Sabato. It was initiated by the newly elected Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín in the early 1980s to investigate thousands of cases of disappeared individuals during the Argentine military dictatorship.

around the acceptance of democracy as common ground. The '83 commitment to reject death as a political resource laid the foundation. What is at stake now is whether democracy will be understood as the rule of law plus an electoral regime or as a social rule of law. In other words, whether the community will take responsibility for the lives of the subjects it produces, or abandon them to their fate. This is what has given rise to the hegemonic draw. However, as we have said, this draw is not the problem itself, nor does it mean that the social terrain has become neutral for those who inhabit it. The second crisis, characterised by the actors' disposition to annul rather than articulate the other, degrades democracy itself by obstructing any horizon of transformation.

Both crises yield reduced democracy, whether as a social regime or a purely electoral one. The community's aggressiveness towards its members tends to deny the exercise of citizenship, even in a mobilised country like Argentina. Moreover, the public debate essential for electoral issues has been notably impoverished by virtue of the mutual delegitimisation among actors. The convergence of both crises illustrates how the imbalance underlying the draw is aggravated by the lack of hegemonic vocation of the egalitarian forces, furthering oligarchisation.

The core issue now is that the erosion of equality and coexistence is no longer an effect of the inability to deal with the hegemonic draw, but an explicit objective of certain discourses – like Javier Milei's – that question not only the ethical-political pillar of Argentine democracy – human rights – but also present a radical neoliberal program. Indeed, this Darwinist discourse, radicalised by liberal-libertarians, has questioned and mobilised an important popular sector, which sees the State not as an obstacle, but as an oppressor. If such a discourse gains prominence, the outcome would be an even more unequal country or, perhaps, an outright war against the 'losers'.

Should we diagnose false consciousness on the part of the victims? No. Each person's interpretation of their living conditions and the life they want to lead must be considered. It is not about being paternalistic or assigning blame: politics is a struggle to give meaning to social and individual life without a transcendent instance (be it a vanguard, a science of history, or the laws of the market) settling it. Therefore, from a perspective concerned with equality, we must examine what has not been known, wanted or achieved, and return to the challenging daily political task of shaping the world to come and gathering the will to do so. This is an unprecedented challenge for Argentine democracy since 1983, which obliges especially the pro equality sectors to recover the hegemonic vocation they have lost.

Aggressiveness towards the other, the asphyxiation of the common space, the glorification of the hunter is the environment in which millions of Argentines already live. The clash of Milei's discourse with pluralist democracy cannot be reduced to a question of forms or manners. The scandal is not that Milei says what cannot be said. To say is to do, and his words are violent, but the sensitivity toward his aggressiveness should not exceed the concern for the dehumanisation of many surviving in a kind of State of Nature, abandoned or worse, assaulted by the community that should provide shelter. Milei's discourse, to a large extent, reflects the Argentine political community. In short, Milei appears to be more a consequence than a cause.

It is not coincidental that Milei's discourse makes the lion figure its insignia[9]. 'A ruler who just plays the lion and forgets the fox doesn't know what he's doing', wrote Machiavelli (2001: 69).

[9] I am grateful to Gastón Soroujón for drawing my attention to the importance of this image as representative of Milei's conception of politics.

This asserts that politics, precisely because it is a struggle, is legitimacy, not just raw force. Winning is not simply about being the king of the jungle. What is lacking is not only the cunning and ingenuity of the fox, because force must be guided and subordinated to human will, symbolised in the law as the embodiment of collective agreements. According to the Florentine thinker, force, used minimally, is the last resort when human approaches are inadequate as delving into it signifies delving into evil. The politician comprehending what he has in his hands is akin to a centaur. Democracy effectively embodies this logic of the political, by consecrating persuasion and sustaining agreement – materialised in law – while maintaining the monopoly of legitimate violence as a last exceptional recourse against those who do not recognise it. This is not just founded on ethical-political reasons, because politics, by operating through beliefs and values, can only be performed in this way. To put it more succinctly, politics is hegemony. Some of this seems to be at stake in Argentina today.

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From Uribe to Petro: Unravelling Colombia's Political Turn

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Abstract. Colombia's political landscape has undergone a profound transformation. Throughout its history, the nation has followed a steadfast trajectory veering rightward, guided by influential elites whose privileges date back to its declaration of independence. However, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a groundswell of popular sentiment surged across the nation's expanse. Emerging from this simmering collective discontent, a novel political force aimed to challenge the enduring grip of a deeply entrenched ultraconservative cycle, which had centred on the prominence of the right-wing figure Álvaro Uribe Vélez. This shift ushered in a new political paradigm, spearheaded by the popular leader Gustavo Petro. Within this chapter, my exploration delves deep into the historical roots, the latent processes, the main strategies and the underlying logics through which the analysis attempts to provide a critical explanation of Colombia's recent political turn.

Keywords: Colombia, Uribe, Petro, crisis.

Introduction

Veiled in a shroud of obscurity, discussions regarding Colombia invariably begin with a caveat, highlighting the intricate

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complexities that underlie this nation's multifaceted context. At times, it is referred to as 'the Latin American Israel', while at other times, it is hailed as 'the most enduring among third-world democracies'. Colombia perplexes pundits and analysts alike with its enigmatic features. However, while often regarded as *terra incognita* within the American continent, its socio-political dynamics reveal profound entrenchment in regional roots. Segments of its history mirror the covert authoritarian excesses experienced in Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Brazil, and Uruguay. Others resonate with the indigenous resistance movements that have surged through the Andean highlands of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, as well as the persistent struggles associated with drug trafficking that have long plagued Mexico, Honduras, and Paraguay. Colombia even serves as a perpetual stage for guerrilla warfare, reminiscent of historic conflicts in Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador that rekindle memories of the Cold War era.

Colombia's historical developments, cultural expressions, and even its literary depictions, emerging from the often-overlooked segments of its territories and peoples, indeed resonate with broader regional processes that vividly unfold on the Latin American stage. A compelling illustration of this can be found in the works of Gabriel García Márquez. In an interview, the Colombian writer emphasised that all his literary compositions are firmly anchored in his early life experiences in his hometown of Aracataca. However, the imaginative transformation of seemingly mundane events, deeply rooted in rural Caribbean idiosyncrasies, serves as the crucible for the collective representation of a myriad of processes throughout the Latin American context, condensed with apparent coherence in the literary image of *Macondo*.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Colombia is not the sole embodiment of Latin America, just as Latin America does not

rigidly (over)determine its national course. So, how might one begin to reflect on Colombian events through a dialogue invitation about Latin America extended from the other side of the Atlantic? García Márquez argued in his Nobel Prize-winning lecture that 'the navigational advances that have narrowed the distances between our Americas and Europe seem, conversely, to have accentuated our cultural remoteness'. Drawing from the experiences of others while relying on our own expectations 'serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary', the writer contended. However, the aspiration of absolute particularity reinforces our limitation in understanding that our perspective is an endless, ongoing process of relating to another.

This chapter makes no claims of exceptional singularity or pretentious universality. Its aim is to craft an analysis of a national political transformation that emerges from the conversations that have made this book possible. This analysis aligns with broader Latin American regional processes and maintains its deep-rooted national specificities. It intends to invite the European reader closer to a Latin American perception, all while incorporating a Western-inclined reasoning style into its problematisation. It seeks to not only modify an external perspective but also foster an openness to my own perspectival transformations after being exposed to the other chapters comprising this book.

Empirically, this text primarily centres on recent transformative political events that have marked a historical turning point in Colombia's trajectory. Initially, it provides a critical explanation for the emergence and subsequent crisis of a powerful yet ruthless hegemonic bloc. This bloc coalesced around a political figure, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who managed to achieve social leadership despite his origins outside the privileged circles of Colombia's capital elite. Moreover, this chap-

ter further analyses the conditions that led to the unprecedented election of a former guerrilla fighter – who, as a tribute to García Márquez, assumed the clandestine alias 'Aureliano' – to secure a left-wing presidency in Colombia for the very first time in its history: the presidency of Gustavo Petro. In doing so, it will present a genealogical account of the dynamics that laid the historical foundations of both political movements. This account will encompass the prominent actors and organisations involved, as well as the distinct strategies and events that help explain and critically assess the most recent transformation of Colombian politics, ultimately seeking to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discussions that have paved the way for the development of this analysis.

Tracing a genealogy: the popular-resistance formation and the narco-bourgeoisie consolidation

Throughout Colombia's history, a resilient institutional framework has acted as an imposing fortress for privileged minorities, granting them unwavering dominion over the nation's economic and political domains. This enduring control, deeply ingrained in Colombia's colonial heritage, has consistently aligned with the interests of landowning and industrial elites. Within the confines of the liberal and conservative parties, these elites meticulously fashioned an oligarchic, two-party electoral system during the 19th and 20th centuries, purposefully designed to preserve their stranglehold on power. This system marginalised significant portions of the population, depriving them of access to formal political participatory mechanisms and the benefits associated with Colombia's burgeoning yet fragile process of modernisation.

In the 1920s and 1930s, prominent landowners orchestrated a profound territorial reconfiguration, forcibly displacing rural communities and extending their dominion over vast tracts of untitled land. This audacious expansion, often sanctioned by state authorities, posed an existential threat to the livelihoods of these communities and their aspirations for land ownership (LeGrand, 1988). Amidst this sweeping territorial transformation, the seeds of initial resistance movements were sown within *campesino* and indigenous enclaves, blossoming into diverse agrarian movements and yielding forth prominent figures of popular leadership, such as Manuel Quintin Lame[2]. As North American multinationals solidified their presence across the Colombian geography, and US capital influx rapidly escalated, these movements orchestrated widespread territorial resistance.

Indeed, intensified by the Kemmerer mission in 1923, the expansion of finance and the inflow of foreign capital into Colombia's economy skyrocketed. Beyond mere investment, the surge in US loans increased from 4 million dollars in 1913 to 80 million in 1925, only to contract after the 1929 crisis (LeGrand, 1988, p. 128). This capital infusion, primarily facilitated through public debts, laid the foundation for an initial endeavour at national modernisation. Consequently, this modernising expansion, further intensified by the settlement of North American companies, heightened the social tensions surrounding land ownership, ex-

[2] Manuel Quintín Lame (1880-1967) was a prominent Colombian indigenous leader who advocated for the rights and self-determination of indigenous communities in Colombia during the early 20th century. His impassioned advocacy served as a catalyst for the formation of the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame, which emerged as the first indigenous guerrilla movement in Latin America in 1985 and remained active until its demobilisation in 1991.

acerbating long-standing disputes between rural masses and dominant sectors over land titles.

Additionally, the United States sought to mitigate its dependence on Mexican oil reserves by initiating the exploration and extraction of new oilfields in Colombia. In parallel, it embarked on an ambitious attempt to expand banana production, a project spearheaded by the United Fruit Company (Rippy, 1931). Led by Minor Keith and Andrew Preston, the United Fruit had been steadily solidifying its foothold in Central America and the Caribbean since 1899, extending its presence and export capabilities by dominating banana production along the Colombian coastline (Bucheli, 2005).

The exploitative conditions inherent in the expansive banana production industry prompted the emergence of labour strikes. Aspirations to ameliorate working conditions through articulated demands, formally conveyed by the *Unión Sindical de Trabajadores del Magdalena*, regrettably culminated in widespread arrests, torture, and even fatalities. The events of the December 1928 strikes, and the subsequent repressive measures, are depicted with poignant depth and vivid imagery in Gabriel García Márquez's Nobel Prize-winning novel, 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'.

> [W]aiting for a train that was not arriving, more than three thousand people, workers, women, and children, had spilled out of the open space in front of the station and were pressing into the neighboring streets, which the army had closed off with rows of machine guns (García Márquez, 2006, p. 290).

Preceding the tragic events known as the *Masacre de las Bananeras*, conservative president Miguel Abadía Méndez (1926-1930) declared a 'state of public order disturbance'. This governmental manoeuvre had dual intentions. On one hand, it aimed to establish a communication conduit with the bur-

geoning union movement, which was rapidly growing in size and influence. This signalled the government's readiness to negotiate. On the other hand, the government orchestrated a tactical siege operation, led by General Carlos Cortés Vargas, with the objective of quelling the revolts discreetly yet forcefully. In the words of García Márquez:

> They were penned in, swirling about in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodological shears of the machine gun (García Márquez, 2006, p. 292).

Beyond the debate regarding the interplay of literary emotion and historical accuracy (Posada-Carbó, 1998), the 'bananeras' constitutes an event that has left an indelible mark on Colombia's social and political memory, persistently influencing its national trajectory up to the present day. The events of December 1928 brought to the forefront the underlying crisis within the so-called 'Conservative hegemony', a regime that had held political power from 1885 to 1930. Its appeal had been waning, becoming evident since the early 1920s with the gradual erosion of popular support (Pecaut, 2012).

In this period, the figure of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán emerged in the political arena, and his legacy would go on to reshape Colombia's social reality long after his tragic assassination in 1948. Gaitán, a young liberal parliamentarian at the time, initiated a congressional debate on the issues surrounding the 'bananeras' two months after the events. His impassioned speeches and masterful oratory skills in defence of rural workers quickly propelled him to national prominence.

The resurgence of popular movements, ignited by the injustices laid bare during the 'bananeras', bore witness to the deepening of agrarian and labour movements, forging robust

bonds of solidarity. As the early 1930s unfolded, this newfound vitality began to coalesce into more structured expressions of popular resistance (Posada-Carbó, 1998, p. 400). By the 1940s, the socio-political organisations arising from these grievances gave birth to national-popular movements that fearlessly confronted the oligarchic establishment in the name of popular sovereignty. During this period, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán adeptly lent voice to the democratic demands of the people for political participation and economic inclusion, mounting a compelling challenge to both liberal and conservative elites with his passionate rallying cry: *'Pueblo, por la derrota de la oligarquía, ¡a la carga!'* (People, for the defeat of the oligarchy, charge!).

However, the Gaitanista movement, driven by its aspirations for transformative change, faced brutal repression, ultimately giving rise to a regime brokered by the ruling classes, famously known as the *Frente Nacional* (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2007; Palacios, 2001). Spanning from 1958 to 1974, this bipartite oligarchic regime served as a means for landowning elites to consolidate their influence over their industrial counterparts. The zenith of this consolidation was exemplified by the *Pacto del Chicoral* in 1972, an agreement that perpetuated the concentration of land ownership among a privileged few. This pact embodied a social model focused on the accumulation of productive land, which became a defining feature of wealth representation within Colombia's oligarchy.

The far-reaching consequences of rural dispossession and impoverishment rippled across Colombia, triggering a substantial rural-to-urban migration wave that took shape between the late 1960s and early 1980s. Faced with daunting circumstances, some dispossessed peasants sought refuge in coca cultivation as a means of subsistence, while others found shelter within the ranks of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Co-

lombia (FARC). This convergence heralded a rapid swell in both the size and influence of the guerrilla movement, cementing its role as a significant player in the burgeoning and clandestine market by the mid-1980s (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2004; Ronderos et al., 2022).

The concentration of land and the expansion of the cocaine trade, however, were chiefly orchestrated by local landlords, ranchers, and drug lords who assumed leadership roles in rural areas. This evolving territorial reorganisation, notably conspicuous during the 1960s and firmly established in the early 1990s, gave rise to a burgeoning regional bourgeoisie. Their prominence revolved around territorial expansion, cattle ranching, and the production of cocaine. Among the noteworthy rural families that wielded territorial control and gained influence in local power dynamics, often acting as intermediaries between drug lords and national elites, was the Uribe family (Cepeda and Rojas, 2008). The ascent of this novel local ruling class played a pivotal role in reshaping national power dynamics, particularly in the departments[3] of Córdoba and Antioquia. Notably, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, the eldest of the five sons from the Uribe Sierra family, would subsequently spearhead a new hegemonic political force in the aftermath of the dissolution of the bipartisan system in the early 2000s.

The era that followed the National Front indeed witnessed a diminishing influence of both the Liberal and Conservative parties. Electoral dynamics lost their appeal as the two major parties were seemingly aligned with shared vested interests to such an extent that '[t]he only difference today between Liberals and Conservatives is that the Liberals go to mass at five o' clock and the Conservatives at eight', borrowing the words

[3] The departments form areas of political and administrative organisation.

of García Márquez. The long-standing dominance of the elites gradually receded, giving rise to a reshaped political landscape defined by popular resistance and the ascent of a ruling narco-bourgeoisie establishment at the local and regional levels.

Additionally, the rapidly expanding urban peripheries, which absorbed a significant influx of rural migrants uprooted by paramilitary massacres and the violent actions of drug cartels, became a fertile ground for political disillusionment and discontent. These marginalised communities, burdened by economic hardship and social exclusion, played a central role in reshaping the political landscape and restructuring established power dynamics in Colombia.

While the FARC's message encountered difficulties in gaining ground among the urban population, the M-19 guerrilla emerged as a profoundly influential force in the 1970s. Their audacious, James Bond-like operations, coupled with a seductive and coherent political discourse of national sovereignty, captured the public imagination, garnering significant attention and support from lower and middle classes. Simultaneously, centre-left political forces rallied around the ideology of New Liberalism, led by Luis Carlos Galán. Their goal was to counter the intrusion of the narco-bourgeoisie into the political establishment and offer an alternative progressive liberal vision, long championed by historical liberal figures who propelled a popular imagination of plebeian republicanism such as Gaitán or Alfonso López Pumarejo[4] (twice president: 1934-1938; 1942-1945).

[4] Pumarejo's 'Revolución en Marcha' (Marching Revolution) attempted to implement far reaching social and political reforms, laying the groundwork

The fervour for increased political participation had a profound institutional impact. The onset of Belisario Betancur's presidency (1982-1986) marked a significant departure from the previous administration of Julio Cesar Turbay (1978-1982). Turbay's tenure was characterised by severe repression against both insurgent groups and social resistance movements (Archila, 2003). In contrast, Betancur's presidency witnessed the initiation of peace negotiations, ushering in an era where social movements and political parties gained prominence in important urban centres.

At the time, the Patriotic Union (UP) emerged as a political party, uniting former left-wing guerrilla fighters and representatives from diverse social movements under a common banner. Their shared mission was the pursuit of political transformation through lawful and institutional channels, driven by the collective aspiration to break free from the cycle of violence that had long fuelled land accumulation, political marginalisation, and societal upheaval.

Tragically, the consolidation of criminal forces, a coordinated effort involving drug lords, corrupt military figures, paramilitaries, and the emerging narco-bourgeoisie, launched a ruthless campaign to maintain control and stifle social change by suppressing burgeoning popular movements. UP bore the brunt of this relentless violence, enduring the merciless assassination of over 4,000 of its members, including council members, congressmen, and even presidential candidates like Jaime Pardo Leal in 1987 and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa in 1990. In the same vein of violence, Luis Carlos Galán faced a similar tragic fate when he was shot while preparing to

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for essential efforts in agrarian reform and the implementation of mechanisms for popular participation.

address a gathering in a public square during his presidential campaign (Delgado, 2008).

The same year also witnessed the cold-blooded assassination of Carlos Pizarro Leongómez, the leader of the M-19 guerrilla movement. This tragic event unfolded shortly after he had signed a peace agreement with the Virgilio Barco government (1986-1990). Pizarro had successfully demobilised all guerrilla members and was gearing up to launch a presidential campaign that had garnered significant popular support, positioning him as the frontrunner before his untimely and tragic murder.

Notwithstanding the assassination of Pizarro, the demobilisation of the M-19 guerrilla group marked a significant turning point, setting the stage for the adoption of a new constitution in 1991. This constitution emphasised popular participation, signifying a shift towards a more inclusive and participatory democracy. However, this constitutional reform also incorporated prominent principles outlined in the 1989 Washington Consensus, setting the state policy course towards market liberalisation from César Gaviria's government (1990-1994) onwards – only to find a rupture after the electoral victory of Gustavo Petro, a former left-wing M-19 member, in 2022.

The surge of violence experienced in Colombia during this period can be attributed to a dual dynamic. On one hand, it reflected the growing desperation of the national ruling classes as they grappled with the loss of their traditional leadership. On the other hand, it bore witness to the consolidation of a new power structure, born from the alliance between traditional sectors of the oligarchy and the emerging regional narco-bourgeoisie. This evolving power configuration played a pivotal role in the formal expansion of land accumulation, territorial control, and the implementation of a neoliberal agenda. However, despite its capacity to enforce

territorial obedience, this nascent power structure lacked the broader social consensus required for the consolidation of a popular force with the capacity to advance a political project with national leadership.

In the early 2000s, Colombia found itself entangled in the increasing influence of paramilitary groups. The traditional elites sustained their power through military force and fuelled anti-insurgent sentiments, all backed by the United States through *Plan Colombia*[5]. This support underscored the entrenched dominance of the ruling elites during a period marked by a visible organic crisis. Amid this intricate backdrop, the ill-fated Caguán negotiations between the Pastrana government (1998-2002) and the FARC served to further stoke anti-insurgent sentiments, particularly among the urban population.

This prevailing anti-FARC sentiment played a decisive role in reshaping the political landscape leading up to the 2002 presidential elections. In a surprising twist, both liberal and conservative factions converged, offering their support to Álvaro Uribe Vélez as the presidential candidate. This union signified a notable decentralisation of the role traditionally held by the political elites and marked a significant shift in Colombian politics, impacting party coalitions and the actor typology shaping social and political power dynamics (as will be further analysed). It was the first time that a candidate from outside the traditional elite circles ascended to the pres-

[5] A bilateral agreement between the governments of Colombia and the United States, conceived in 1999 during the administrations of Presidents Andrés Pastrana Arango and Bill Clinton, was initially publicly promoted as a new Marshall Plan for social support. However, it was later redefined as a plan for expanding military support, incorporating North American troops into Colombian territory in an active manner.

idency. This historic moment also heralded the beginning of a new hegemonic radical right-wing project that would endure for at least two decades.

The reaction of the elites

With Álvaro Uribe Vélez's ascent to the presidency, the conventional fault lines of Colombian politics underwent rapid transformation. Uribe, known for his persuasive oratory skills and accessible demeanour, adeptly harnessed the surging anti-insurgent sentiments within the lower and middle classes, which had become apparent after the failed Caguán negotiations. He effectively engaged with regional sectors, personally convening community councils and frequently making appearances on local radio and television programs. Uribe's unwavering message, underpinned by strong moral principles and an unyielding stance against the insurgents, found natural resonance among a population long accustomed to a dearth of formal institutional presence.

Álvaro Uribe's acute sensitivity to the social sentiment allowed him to smoothly navigate through and redesign the contours of antagonistic ideological, social composition, earning the liking from both liberal and conservative elements of society. He swiftly garnered widespread support, solidifying his stature in the political arena. However, Uribe's presidency marked a transformative shift in power dynamics not only in ideological terms but also effectively bridging the gap between the national and regional ruling classes. In so doing, Uribe solidified a novel array of political order, and with it, his moral and intellectual leadership in the constitution of a novel hegemonic bloc.

A prominent part of this fresh political composition was a revamped approach to national security. Its main tents were publicly presented in 2003 by the then Defence Minister, Marta Lucía Ramírez – a key conservative elite cadre who, after Pastrana's Caguán fiasco, swore allegiance to the Uribista cause. Inspired by the recently proclaimed Bush Doctrine, Uribe's Democratic Security Policy (PSD, in Spanish) entailed a preventive war campaign that designated labour unions, critical journalism, the student movement, indigenous organisations, and most notably, the *campesinos* as tangible targets of terrorist support, thereby making them legitimate military objectives.

To lend academic credibility to Uribe's vision of militarised neoliberalism, the core of the PSD was echoed through NGOs and think tanks, such as the *Centro de Pensamiento Primero Colombia* (CPPC). These institutions staunchly backed his governments (2002-2010) and the rocketing military spending, which reached the mark of 3.9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of his second term. This figure exceeded the global average and surpassed the levels observed in most regions worldwide, with the Middle East as the sole exception (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute).

The significant surge in military expenditures during Uribe Vélez's presidency intended to halt guerrilla activities, reduce kidnapping incidents and enforce social compliance through coercive force – a strategy openly known to be backed by the support and training of *death squads* (paramilitares) enforcing obedience through widespread massacres. In turn, this outspread national militarisation favoured the advancement of the government's economic agenda. Uribe was a fervent proponent of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and provided robust legal assurances to foreign corporations operating (or wishing to operate) within Colombian borders.

Despite the government's progress in subjecting social movements and guerrilla action and bolstering its (mostly urban) prominence, its ambitious endeavours to open market boarders encountered formidable obstacles. International human rights organisations remained unyielding in their efforts to exert pressure on Colombia under Uribe's rule. They vehemently decried the endemic human rights violations and crimes against humanity transpiring at various levels, ultimately hampering the applicability of Uribe's free trade pursuits (especially with the United States). This increased scrutiny and weight of condemnation started to be directed towards a somewhat paradoxical figure within the Uribe government, who would assume a more prominent political role in the coming years: that of Juan Manuel Santos (Uribe's second-term Defence Minister; 2006-2010).

During Santos' tenure as Defence Minister, the PSD extended its influence, resulting in unsettling occurrences of massacres, forced disappearances, and torture through systematic armed action such as the *Falsos Positivos*[6] scandal. These actions, aimed at pushing the boundaries of the policy to its extremes, had consequences that extended beyond national borders. An example of this was the 2008 Colombian bombing in Angostura, Ecuador, which brought Latin America perilously close to a regional armed confrontation. Santos, by aligning with the unbridled expansion of Uribe's ruthless project for left-wing and peasant eradication, solidified his

[6] The 'Falsos Positivos' scandal in Colombia was a case where innocent civilians were falsely portrayed as enemy combatants and then killed by the military to inflate their success against insurgent groups. Soldiers were given incentives for increasing enemy casualties, leading to the unjust killing of innocent people.

reputation as a trustworthy and reputable figure to further advance the Uribista project.

Juan Manuel Santos belongs to a prestigious lineage within the Colombian oligarchy. He boasts a great-uncle, former President Eduardo Santos, and is a direct descendant of the renowned pro-independence figure María Antonia Santos Plata. Given his unwavering support for the militaristic expansion as defence minister and his credentials among the most privileged political groups within Bogota's society, his designation as Uribe's successor came as no surprise. Santos's selection solidified support from the most influential sectors of the traditional Colombian ruling classes within the Uribista alliance. This move firmly entrenched their influence and presence while seemingly ensuring the continuity of Uribe's project for at least another four years.

However, a faction emerged within the Colombian traditional oligarchies that no longer felt comfortable with the ordinary regional ranchers, *narcos*, and paramilitaries who were gaining prominence within the Uribista coalition. Scandals tainted political and economic interest groups due to the unbridled expansion of paramilitarism favoured by Uribe's government, leading to a prevailing sense of unease among the upper echelons of power. Given its historical and even etymological significance, few last names were better suited than the 'Santos' (*saints*) to redeem the purity and national command of families whose wealth and prominence dated back to the proclamation of national independence. After taking office, Santos made a decisive move away from Uribism, permanently severing his ties with the political alliance that had propelled him to the *Casa de Nariño* (the presidential palace). Moreover, while keeping Uribe at bay, new allies would soon join Santos' political camp.

The sudden and outrageous divergence of Santos from Uribe's forces created an unexpected opportunity for politically inclined cadres within the FARC's ranks, notably the newly appointed commander-in-chief, Guillermo León Sáenz (*nom de guerre* Alfonso Cano). Following the death of the legendary rebel Pedro Antonio Marín (*nom de guerre*, Manuel Marulanda Vélez) in 2008, due to a heart attack, Cano assumed command. Known for his urban upbringing, Cano held less sway over FARC's more militarily oriented factions. Since the 1990s, he had harboured a deeply rooted belief that a political resolution involving specific segments of the elite was achievable, a vision of peace revitalised with renewed vigour after Santos's presidential victory.

As I have detailed elsewhere (Ronderos et al., 2021), the conjuncture was favourable for fostering a broad consensus within the FARC around Cano's more politically oriented perspective. The guerrillas had become increasingly isolated from the predominantly urban majority of the Colombian population, aptly captivated (and coopted) by Uribe in recent years. Furthermore, while the FARC retained the military capacity to prolong the conflict for another half-century, their strength had significantly eroded since 1998. This decline was attributed to the modernisation and realignment of the Colombian army, bolstered by substantial support from the U.S. military through *Plan Colombia*, and further fuelled by Uribe's expansive militaristic spending. Indeed, it did not take long for the rebel group to extend a formal invitation to the newly-installed government, signalling their readiness to engage in serious discussions and pursue a common peace agenda[7].

[7] For an in-depth analysis of FARC, from its creation to its demobilisation be referred to Ronderos, et al., 2021.

Santos, drawing upon his extensive political experience, possessed a keen awareness of the inherent limitations of relying solely on military means to quell the insurgency. He grasped that the evolving power dynamics, encompassing both the contentious elements of the conflict and the broader politico-institutional balances, required a novel approach. The key lay in Cano's proposition, through which Santos devised a dual-pronged strategy. Firstly, he understood that the FARC could only be effectively countered at the politico-strategic level. Secondly, he comprehended that without the FARC as a menacing other figure to the majoritarian urban sectors of society, the conditions enabling the sustenance and perpetuation of Uribism would swiftly erode, creating a political opening. Santos went all-in for peace, expecting to attain, through a one-move double-attack strategy, the formation of a new form of hegemonic leadership. In this way, he ardently championed the neoliberal reign so desired by Uribe, yet secured through peace rather than war.

During his two terms in office (2010-2018), President Santos simultaneously pursued two major objectives: advancing neoliberal economic policies and consolidating the peace agreements. His government prioritised the rapid development of mining and energy extraction projects, which had commenced under Pastrana and expanded under Uribe. By the end of his second term, Colombia had entered into a record number of free trade agreements, ushering in an unprecedented opening of the country's economy to global markets.

Furthermore, the peace agreements signified not only the potential weakening of the Uribista alliance but also the opportunity to access and exploit resource-rich areas that had long been under the sway of both legal and illegal armed groups. Paradoxically, the resolution of the armed conflict enabled the government to establish control over territories

previously restricted by war dynamics. In this context, this expansion of extractive industries primarily favoured national and transnational capital, while leaving Uribe's landowners and mercenaries on the sidelines. It was not merely a government agenda but a blueprint for a political reconfiguration of oligarchic leadership in a new phase of national modernisation.

While things appeared to be running smoothly at the institutional level, with Santos' re-election and favourable progress in negotiations with the FARC, he still needed a public victory over Uribism to strengthen his political movement. In 2016, he orchestrated a national plebiscite regarding the peace negotiations as a means of openly affirming Uribe's defeat. Santos was confident in Uribe's imminent plebiscitarian defeat due to an avalanche of public and private opinion polls all indicating society's majority support for the peace negotiations. It remains unprecedented in history for a peace agreement crafted within the confines of intra-state violence dynamics to be subjected to public scrutiny, laying bare the plainly political motivation behind its development – Santos was simply aiming to gauge popular muscle against Uribe.

However, silently yet steadily, moral panics orchestrated by Uribista forces captured significant urban social segments who feared that, with FARC's active engagement in politics following their demobilisation, Colombia could follow the path of Venezuela[8]. This undercurrent was not fully captured by the polls, and, as a result, the agreements were rejected in the plebiscite by an almost imperceptible margin (of 0.5%) whose political impacts, however, remain unmeasurable to date.

[8] A common red scare strategy deployed against left wing forces in Colombia.

The plebiscite not only highlighted the deep divisions within Colombian society, primarily between urban centres and provinces, but also showcased the resilience of Uribism. Despite achieving a historic peace agreement with the FARC, Santos struggled to establish a lasting legacy and faced persistent challenges, leaving his presidency with widespread disapproval. As a result, Santismo, as a national leadership project, found itself adrift in a sea of uncertainties, leaving behind a context of political disarray characterised by a fragmented party-system with no evident form of governmental coalition nor leadership. In parallel, new societal sectors with no concrete political loyalties emerged onto the public arena, signalling the commencement of a novel epoch in Colombian politics.

Uribism on life support, Petrism in the delivery room

In spite of the regressive economic agenda pursued by the Santos government, the peace process (2012-2016) ushered in an era of expanded political pluralism. As the negotiations sought to resolve the long-standing armed conflict, the entrenched foundations of Uribista dominance gradually crumbled, marking a profound transformation in Colombia's political dynamics.

Indeed, the peace process provided fertile ground for marginalised and underrepresented segments of the population to voice their demands and grievances, thus awakening a social mobilisation that had long been silenced by state repression. The resounding agrarian strike (May-July 2016), the impassioned protests of precarious delivery workers (October 2018), and the determined disruption of public education by student action (October-December 2018) were all a testament

of dissenting voices that started to resonate across broader social sectors, gaining progressive traction.

These events illuminated the deficiencies of existing democratic representation and paved the way for a novel form of political organisation to emerge from the dislocated spaces left behind by the previous one. With the 'war against communism and terrorism' narrative pushed aside, social collective action arose, fearlessly challenging oligarchic rule in the offensive of a popular force, which advanced in the name of the democracy to come. Nevertheless, despite appearing weakened, Uribism remained far from vanquished.

In an attempt to amend past missteps, Uribe endorsed his heir apparent, Iván Duque, for the 2018 presidential run. Virtually unknown to the public at the time, Duque was a young lawyer and an affiliated member of Uribe's *Partido Centro Democrático*. His limited work experience in public affairs included serving as an advisor to Pastrana's finance ministry and as the Colombian representative in the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) during the Santos government.

Severely critical of the previous administration, Duque brought a fresh breeze of youthful renewal Uribism so desperately needed to circumvent the criminal associations that tainted the coalition. Uribe knew well that, in that concrete juncture, the only way to electorally sway the public was through an unfamiliar face, unburdened by the weight of violence that had marked Uribism, that became all the more visible to the Colombian populace after the peace process. Lacking political allies, social bases, or influence over economic interest groups, Duque posed no threat to Uribe's control over government actions, effectively overshadowing the potential menace that Santos' impish move vividly represented.

As a true member of the traditional elite based in Bogotá, who remained steadfast in their allegiance to the Uribista

pact, the conservative militarist Marta Lucía Ramírez joined Duque on the presidential ticket. This strategic manoeuvre aimed to consolidate support from conservative oligarchic sectors within the Uribista coalition, securing parliamentary backing that promised governmental stability. Nevertheless, as will become evident, despite Uribe's shrewd efforts to regain political prominence and national leadership, the divisions within society, increasingly apparent during Santos's administration, persisted without remedy. The Duque administration stumbled right out of the gate, with vote-buying scandals involving narco money, such as the infamous *ñeñepolítica* scandal. Additionally, presidential decrees promoting wage precariousness further tarnished public perception of Duque's (Uribe's third) term.

Amid this transformative period, a new political alignment began to take shape, eventually coalescing into a national popular movement by 2013. Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M-19 guerrilla group and a former mayor of Bogotá, had been steadily gaining support among the underrepresented popular sectors that felt marginalised by the Uribista hegemony that Santos' forces failed to represent. As a leftist intellectual and a former participant in the 'Eme' movement (as known in local jargon), Petro quickly emerged as one of the most articulate parliamentarians, wielding rhetorical elegance and discursive eloquence reminiscent of the days of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

Since the rise of Uribe, Petro has assumed the role of his most formidable adversary, fearlessly unveiling, through meticulously documented debates, a myriad of scandals intertwined with the complex web of alliances connecting elites, the military, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers that have facilitated Uribe's national dominance. Petro assumed the role of mayor of Bogotá in 2012. During his tenure, Colombia's

capital city swiftly emerged as a bastion of progressive forces, championing a politics centred on care. His approach focused on fostering social inclusion programs and aligning the urban development plan with climate change mitigation strategies. Petro's governance during this period served as a foundational experience, laying the groundwork for his prospective national project. However, his initiative, known as *Bogotá Humana*, disrupted entrenched local power structures and elite interests, ultimately leading to Petro falling victim to reactionary lawfare on 9 December 2013.

Within the hallowed halls of the *Palacio Liebano*[9], Petro skillfully harnessed and expressed the prevailing sentiments of the discontented masses gathered in the *Plaza de Bolívar*, determined to resist the coup against the progressive mayor. Petro's gripping speeches, delivered from the grand balcony of the mayoral palace, echoed through the days and even the darkest hours. The arresting social enthusiasm, energised by the evidently anti-democratic measure to thwart Petro's transformative agenda, soon sparked a national awakening that captured international interest.

In a momentous turn of events, an Inter-American Human Rights Court decree demanded the restoration of Petro's political rights, an order that the government, under then-President Santos, had no choice but to heed. This development not only saw the former guerrilla member regaining his public mandate and political rights, but also harnessed a groundswell of popular energy that officially propelled Petrismo into a new, national-level political alternative.

The 2018 presidential election marked a historic moment for Petrism as it confronted Uribe's forces. This contest, the

[9] Mayor government palace, within Bogotá's main square, Plaza de Bolívar.

first presidential election following the conclusion of the peace agreements in 2016, was marked by a unique and tangible popular enthusiasm, with mass mobilisations sweeping across the nation. In a style reminiscent of bygone eras, Gustavo Petro addressed public squares, delivering impassioned speeches that ignited strong social sentiments, particularly in municipalities deeply scarred by historical violence. While Petro did not secure victory, his performance was a triumph in its own right. In his presidential bid, against an establishment that had held sway for nearly two decades, he achieved the highest electoral result a leftist candidate had ever attained in Colombia's electoral history.

Contingency everywhere

Not unlike the rest of the world, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020 marked a profound transformation in the fabric of everyday Colombian life. Strangely, for the Duque government, this development felt somewhat akin to the comforting embrace of warm waters. It provided relief from the escalating social tensions that had been simmering since the Santos administration. These tensions had begun to resemble a pot on the brink of boiling over, with the visible crisis within Uribism only intensifying the heat.

Nonetheless, the brief interlude of relative tranquillity due to the prevailing social perplexity engendered by COVID did not last long. Urban centres, with Bogotá at the vanguard, were soon swept by a wave of social indignation, fervently protesting police brutality. Like matches and gunpowder, the killing of Javier Ordóñez, a taxi driver and law student, by police during a public arrest in September 2020 ignited the social bonfire. The ensuing protests witnessed the incineration of

police stations and drew energy from the unrest that had erupted in the United States just four months prior, following the public execution of George Floyd. This turbulent period in Colombia resulted in at least 11 fatalities, with thousands left wounded, and distressingly, reports emerged of police committing sexual assaults against female protestors.

The riots in the capital city soon sparked a wave of social indignation that extended throughout the country. In a show of solidarity with the Bogotá protests and to denounce the ongoing killing of social leaders, over 7,000 protestors from indigenous, *campesino*, and Afro-Colombian communities set out from Santander de Quilichao[10] with the goal of reaching the Colombian capital. Along the way to Cali, various indigenous communities joined the rallies, significantly increasing the size and impact of a growing social mobilisation represented under the name of '*minga*'[11].

The *minga*'s arrival in the capital on Sunday 18 October was met with a warm and jubilant reception from enthusiastic crowds. With their arrival, a resounding call for a national dialogue with then-President Duque echoed through the voices that had gathered, establishing an enduring presence in the *Plaza de Bolívar*, with barracks and camping tents scattered everywhere. An empty chair, symbolising the deep desire for dialogue, stood as a poignant sentinel in the heart of the square. Its silent vigil awaited a presidential response that, regrettably, would remain unattended.

However, the mounting number of COVID-related deaths soon took its toll, visibly quelling the popular energy once

[10] Within the Cauca Department, west region of Colombia.

[11] In Guambiano, the language of the indigenous Misak people of southwestern Colombia, '*minga*' means collective work.

more. As the health crisis deepened, stricter quarantine measures found greater social compliance. This, coupled with President Duque's announcement of a structural reform to the police, fostered a subdued context, seemingly appraising the social anguish. It is worth noting, however, that Duque's proposed reform amounted to little more than cosmetic changes. Nevertheless, with the pandemic resurging, the social fervour rapidly turned into adamant silence. Once more, the Uribista camp grew confident in their perceived safety – and Duque again miscalculated the depth of the social discontent.

As social unrest appeared to be subsiding, the Duque administration launched a counteroffensive in early April. Armed with the prospect of having quarantined the revolting spirit of Colombian society for good, Duque announced the introduction of a bill in Congress aimed at increasing taxes on essential goods, public services, and fuel. Backed by a chorus of government 'experts', the bill was presented as the only technically-sound solution to address the fiscal gap left by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Colombia's finances. The announcement shattered the facade of social tranquillity that had characterised the period from December 2020 to March 2021, unveiling the looming storm of popular discontent destined to sweep across the nation.

The mobilisations were orchestrated by a coalition of student, indigenous, *campesino*, and labour organisations collectively referred to as the *Comité Nacional del Paro* (the National Strike Committee; CNP). On 28 April 2021, the CNP called upon Colombian society to join in a strike, unaware of the magnitude and fervour that would characterise the ensuing social upheaval. Termed the *estallido social* (social outburst), this succession of popular resistance actions in response to

Duque's tax reform would go on to revolutionise the nation's political landscape.

Between the 28 and 30 April, a surge of protests and social mobilisations, accompanied by artistic expressions and the resounding clatter of pot-banging protests, as well as the symbolic toppling of colonial statues, swept through numerous Colombian cities and municipalities. During this period, peasants and transporters strategically blocked major roadways, disrupting transportation networks and commercial activities at a national level, thus effectively severing terrestrial access to the capital. On 30 April, the disruption escalated further as workers, through collective action, impeded the operations of Buenaventura, Colombia's primary national port.

Since the protests began, social media platforms have been inundated with disturbing online videos, providing a vivid depiction of the brutal actions of security forces against the demonstrators. These distressing images capture security forces, at times dressed in plainclothes, callously firing upon crowds of protesters as part of a systematic repressive campaign. Although paramilitary activities have long been prevalent in rural areas, the mass killing of civilians by a coalition comprising police, military personnel, and mercenaries on such a staggering scale within Colombia's major urban centres finds its sole parallel in the civil war dynamics of the 19th century. Shockingly, within the first 24 hours of the protests, eight lives were tragically lost. This grim toll would ultimately rise to 67 verified deaths, accompanied by 3,789 cases of police violence (including instances of torture), 25 victims of sexual violence, and 1,649 arbitrary detentions by June (Temblores, 2021).

The escalation of violent acts, extensively shared on social networks, had the unintended consequence of energising the protesting masses. From May to June, a resolute resistance

took shape, effectively turning numerous cities into focal points of rebellion. Lower and middle-class families united, providing essential services such as healthcare, food distribution, and even educational initiatives. These months of unrest evolved into a remarkable showcase of autonomous governance, revealing the creative spirit of a populace yearning for meaningful social engagement that transcended Duque's regressive tax reforms. This period underscored the radical contingency underlying Colombia's social representation, offering fertile ground for the emergence of novel political formations that could articulate the unleashed popular demands and pave the way for new political horizons.

The Petro Moment

The disintegration of the social fabric, initially evident after the Santos-FARC peace agreement but exacerbated and glaringly pronounced during Ivan Duque's presidency, gave rise to a resounding demand for democratic deepening. Amid the tumultuous sea of social unrest, few political figures managed to effectively navigate through and connect with the latent aspirations for meaningful political engagement. Gustavo Petro emerged as an exceptional figure in this landscape, distinguished by his unique ability to forge a deep connection with the prevailing social sentiments. Petro allured to historical popular grievances, which had long been suppressed by oligarchic rule, and managed to articulate these with emerging democratic demands that surfaced from the societal fervour generated by recent mobilisations. In doing so, he offered a new political direction that resonated with the aspirations of a population yearning democratic depth.

Discursively, Petrism asserts its political force within the imperatives of land reform and popular sovereignty. Through a profound transformation in the national developmental paradigm, Petrism places climate change at the forefront of its agenda for productive development, deliberately distancing itself from the exploitation of fossil resources and stressing the connection between land ownership and social labour. These discursive foundations resonate across social strata, rooted in historical processes intertwined with prominent forms of popular leadership. Historical figures such as López Pumarejo and the social and political reforms under his 'Marching Revolution', and Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a staunch advocate of popular sovereignty, serve as enduring examples of this legacy upon which Petro's political movement builds. In doing so, the progressive leader distances himself from the oligarchic spirit of the liberal party, which, for a long time, supported Uribe's forces, while aligning with the radical experiences channelled through Colombian liberal thought, which enjoyed widespread popular resonance among the liberal militancy.

Petrism, however, did not merely entrench itself in historical grievances long suppressed under various forms of oligarchic rule, but also skilfully cultivated connections with the emerging and dynamic youth of Colombian society. This youth had become conspicuously visible through their active participation in public protests during previous administrations. The establishment of this connection was facilitated through the recognition and promotion of emerging demands that surfaced in response to the evolving social landscape following the conclusion of the Santos-FARC peace agreements.

These demands encompassed the endorsement of the LGBTQIA+ agenda, active support for significant feminist

causes, and the resolution of issues affecting rural peasants, indigenous communities, and the vulnerable young labour force, such as informal workers subjected to food delivery platforms. These groups often spearheaded recent protests against Iván Duque's administration, rapidly assuming central roles within Colombia's socio-political landscape, which Petro quickly recognised and effectively represented. Furthermore, historical demands for territorial recognition and the abolition of a racist establishment from the black communities in the Pacific coastline gained momentum within the Petrista coalition, notably through the influential figure of Francia Márquez, a strong regional leader whose prominence rapidly grew in electoral intent, making her the second most visible figure in Colombia's progressive politics.

With Petro leading the 2022 presidential campaign and Márquez as the vice-presidential candidate, the Petrista coalition emerged as a political force with widespread popular support and a robust programmatic agenda, challenging a right-wing force whose bases had eroded and splintered. However, what seemed like a guaranteed victory soon turned into yet another moment of desperation as, throughout the electoral race, an unexpected, unknown challenger emerged. One cannot but borrow here Antonio Gramsci's overused terms, for indeed Uribism resisted demise and Petrism was yet to be born, giving way, through the contingency at the heart of this organic crisis, to the emergence of morbid symptoms in the political fray.

Virtually unknown to the public, the incumbent figure Rodolfo Hernández gradually began to dominate public debate through *TikTok* videos featuring pop dances and anti-establishment slogans. Through these videos, he managed to appeal to both right-wing social bases, disoriented by the Uribista crisis, and social sentiments desiring a profound political

transformation but resisting the appeal of formally known political figures. As such, Hernández emerged as a formidable threat to the presidential prospects of Petrism.

Eventually, however, Petro and Márquez managed to overcome this new contender, securing victory in the presidential election's second round by a relatively narrow margin of 3.24%. This margin highlighted the political moment's fragility in terms of shifting political loyalties and evolving ideological preferences. Hernández, a corrupt figure who rapidly rose to prominence and soon after disappeared from the public arena, serves as a vivid representation of the vacuum that still characterises the political crisis, imposing limitations on the formal establishment of a new hegemonic bloc. It also lays the groundwork for future political challenges and emerging conflicts that will confront the newly elected progressive government.

Despite its fragile political formation, Petrism symbolises a historic triumph for democratic forces that have endured suppression by oligarchic rule. This victory draws strength from practical experiences of radical politics and popular organisation woven into Colombia's history. It signifies not only a break from Uribista hegemony but also the ushering in of a transitional and democratic phase for addressing the deep-rooted social issues that have fuelled ongoing contention. The violent dynamics that had long silenced the popular outcry are now receding, asserting the dawn of a profoundly political epoch.

Conclusion

In the Colombian context, the rural dynamics from the 1940s to the 1980s are of central importance in understanding the

political movements that emerged in the early 21st century, primarily represented by Uribe, and others that, although dormant in their collective structure, gained newfound strength to challenge the established social order in Colombia later on, as exemplified by Petro and Márquez. By examining these evolving dynamics between social crisis and political reconfiguration, peace negotiations have played a pivotal role in shaping power dynamics.

Indeed, peace negotiations have often acted as crucial moments of rupture in Colombia, creating space for new political movements to emerge. In Uribe's case, the failed Pastrana-FARC negotiations led to a political realignment towards the radical right. This shift was driven by an organic crisis in the existing two-party system and a social consensus that united against the insurgent groups. In contrast, the peace agreement between FARC and Santos allowed for the emergence of political pluralism that had been historically suppressed. This environment paved the way for a leftist shift, with Gustavo Petro at its core.

In the current dynamics of political articulation, however, the contingency revealed by the Santos-FARC peace agreements remains present to date, as no form of political representation has succeeded in advancing a social reconfiguration and recomposition. While Petro and Márquez have embarked on a historic, transformative process, marking the first time a left-wing coalition has reached the presidential office, the tensions expressed through Santos' peace plebiscite in 2016 endure.

The recent local elections, held in October 2023, have witnessed a significant surge in local-level coalitions through which Uribe has garnered substantial strength throughout his political tenure. This demonstrates the resilience of local ruling forces that can still mobilise significant social sectors of Colombian society. Petrism today represents an amalgama-

tion of various disconnected movements, including *Soy Porque Somos*, *MAIS*, and the Communist Party, which have yet to establish organisational and ideological coherence in their vision of a lasting political project. Their ability to formulate a broad political coalition with a unified strategy while remaining attuned to the social dynamics beneath the surface of formal electoral politics will be tested in the coming years, as new right-wing leaderships are likely to emerge on the scene.

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Political interregnum in Latin America: from the constituent to the destituent?[1]

PABLO STEFANONI[2]

Abstract. In contrast to prior decades when certain ideas were imposed as a kind of 'climate of the times' – democratic transitions, neoliberalism, pink tide – or aspired to a refounding of politics, Latin America is currently experiencing a complex political moment. Today, the prevailing trends lean towards rejecting elites, dissatisfaction, and electoral volatility. Presidents without parliamentary majorities, the rise of outsiders, the weakening or disappearance of traditional parties, and the emergence of radical right-wing movements indicate a strong crisis of representation. Within this framework, there seems to be a process of democratic erosion stemming from two dynamics: the traditional concentration of power and the dilution of power. Political leaders now contend with more evasive electorates and shorter political horizons. The region has shifted from the constituent will of the early 2000s to destituent dynamics amidst strong citizen discontent.

Keywords: Latin American politics, radical right, democracy, crisis of representation, elections.

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In a recent article, Rodrigo Barrenechea and Alberto Vergara discussed the prevailing assumption in academic discourse regarding democratic erosion, indicating that while the general belief is that democracies collapse due to the concentration of power, the case of Peru contradicts this, suggesting that democracies can deteriorate due to the dilution of power (Barrenechea and Vergara, 2023). They also wondered whether the 'extreme case' of Peru, where President Dina Boluarte remains in power with 5% support (Gómez Vega, 2023), might be anticipating a keystone for understanding forthcoming developments in the region. This observation could complement instances of actual power concentration, as seen in countries like Venezuela, Nicaragua, or El Salvador, resulting in a more comprehensive view of de-democratisation. The authors emphasised electoral fragmentation, political inexperience, and the absence of substantial, enduring connections between politicians and society. As they argue in their article, 'Peruvian politicians are capable of engaging in unbridled institutional conflict, but not of aggregating demands or mobilising society to resolve conflicts'. Does Peru foreshadow the future trajectory of the region?

It remains premature to draw definitive conclusions, and it may be necessary to incorporate various nuances when analysing power dynamics – Peru being a rather particular case where the stability of its economic elites coexists with a succession of political crises (Adriansen, 2014). However, it is possible to observe the risks of an increasingly hydroponic politics – and party systems, where they resist – without roots in society (Altman and Luna, 2015) and processes of political fragmentation. This is evident in the dispersion of votes, resulting in final presidential victors lacking parliamentary majorities. A vivid illustration is seen in Guatemala where president Bernardo Arévalo, elected in August 2023 with a progressive and anti-corruption discourse, obtained only 15.5% in the first round on 25 June 2023 (Arroyo, 2023). Similar-

ly, in Ecuador, the eventual second-round winner, Daniel Noboa, initially obtained 23.4% support. Moreover, in Argentina, the 2023 presidential elections saw a shift from bi-coalitionalism to a divided three-thirds scenario, resulting in the far-right libertarian Javier Milei assuming the presidency with limited parliamentary support. These cases, along with preceding electoral processes, further contribute to the diversity of electoral outcomes.

In what we might think of as a 'political interregnum' – to borrow a term from Sanahuja (2022a) for the global order – we witness the continuation and deepening of trends noted in 2002: fragmentation, disaffection, polarisation (Stefanoni, 2022). Simultaneously, newer trends are becoming more apparent. Under the leftward shift between 2000 and 2010, the region was characterised by post-neoliberal re-foundational discourses, regardless of whether they took the form of new constitutions. Are we now facing processes of a 'destituent' type? While in the past talk of 'hegemonic tie' reflected the progressive/conservative polarisation, it appears that more forces are at play today, alongside significant societal dissent, with neither 'neoliberal' conservatist-liberalism nor 'left-wing populism' garnering past support. What lies ahead for these new radical right movements in this context?

Although the main Latin American economies are governed by progressive administrations, the radical right has become stronger while in the opposition, in a context of low growth levels in 2023 and 2024. In the new annual report, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) indicates that the region's countries will continue to face a low-growth economic outlook. The agency projects that regional gross domestic product will grow by 1.5 per cent in 2024, slightly lower than the 1.7 per cent estimated for this year. By 2023, ECLAC projects that all sub-regions will show lower growth than in 2022: South America will grow by 1.2%

(3.7% in 2022), Central America and Mexico by 3.0% (3.4% in 2022), and the Caribbean (excluding Guyana) by 4.2% (6.3% in 2022) (ECLAC, 2023).

Can't anyone?

The results of the Argentine presidential elections constituted a political earthquake. The 55% of the votes of the 'anti-system' outsider Javier Milei in the runoff (30% in the first round) revealed the accumulated unrest, but, at the same time, the expectation generated by radical proposals linked to 'libertarian' ideas. Milei views the state as the 'absolute evil' and regards social justice as an aberration, attributing to it the 'fatal arrogance' of socialists. Despite his vote being socially and economically transversal, it reflects challenges in sedimenting a new political hegemony. His vision for moral reform, carrying significant utopian aspirations, poses difficulties in translating into a government project. Nevertheless, his remarkable electoral performance has permitted the libertarian candidate to surpass the conventional liberal-conservative right, which revolves around former president Mauricio Macri.

Milei has capitalised on social non-conformism, in a country experiencing over 120% annual inflation, particularly harnessing the disdain for conventional politicians. His primary campaign slogans targeted the political 'caste', encompassing both Peronists and anti-Peronists (his supporters chant '*La casta tiene miedo*', 'The caste is afraid'). As a 'paleolibertarian' candidate, Milei epitomises a local manifestation of the global alternative right. He has expressed support for Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, and participated in events of the Spanish Vox party. Bolsonaro had already become emblematic of the extreme right within the region, and these diverse 'uninhibited rights'

have exerted pressure on the conventional right and centre-right, as they grapple to adapt to a world diverging from the 'optimistic' globalisation of the 1990s. This era was characterised by free trade agreements and a belief in a future rooted in the combination of liberal democracy and a market economy. Since 2016, a series of 'electoral riots' have unfolded, intertwining socio-economic demonstrations with cultural anxieties, varying across different regions and countries. These events coincide with processes of de-globalisation and emerging geopolitical tensions (Sanahuja, 2020b). This atmosphere has spread across the Latin American region. Despite Peronism exhibiting resilience, it aligns with a centrist and pragmatic candidacy, counterbalancing the competition from a radicalised candidate like Milei, perceived by many as a leap into the unknown.

Mauricio Macri's triumph in Argentina in 2015, intended to showcase the potential of 'anti-populism' in Argentina and Latin America, did not go beyond a single four-year term marked by a mega-loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as poverty and inflation rates contradicting his promises of establishing a 'normal country'. Subsequent crises faced by Sebastián Piñeira in Chile and Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador highlighted the challenges encountered by these 'nineties' right-wing leaders. Simultaneously, the experiences of the new left represented by Gustavo Petro in Colombia and Gabriel Boric in Chile emphasised the constraints within their political and social coalitions, especially in parliamentary representation, with their current popularity hovering around 30 percent[3].

[3] According to the Invamer Poll, Petro holds a 33% approval rating, with a disapproval rating of 61%. In September, the Criteria poll indicated a 28% approval rating for Boric, marking the lowest point in his administration

The Chilean case is extreme due to the tensions between the constituent and the destituent. The 2019 'explosion' marked the crisis of Piñera's government and also questioned the 30-year period of democratic transition, in which the centre-left – Social Democrats and Christian Democrats – played a pivotal role. This 'wave' brought Gabriel Boric to power, who, a decade ago, was a youthful student leader publicly at odds with Piñera, the same president who, after a tumultuous second term, handed over the presidential reins to Boric. Apart from the foreseeable challenges for a new government, especially one with no managerial experience like Boric's, based on a small progressive party, an additional hurdle surfaced: an abrupt shift in societal concerns.

The rise to power of Boric was associated with a social-political agenda focused on equality and 'dignity' in a society where commodification had pervaded all aspects of life. Boric's ascent was the culmination of a series of movements in preceding years that pushed for non-profit education, the abolition of the private pension system (No+AFP), and a broader call for social justice, aligning with a potent feminist movement advocating for gender parity. In a context of growing anti-elitist non-conformism, 'the old centre-left, that old political culture called *Concertación*, failed to provide a compelling narrative or resistance. Unlike the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which successfully navigated the youthful challenged posed by Podemos in time, in distant Chile, the sons defeated their fathers' and 'the old centre-right in power struggled and eventually succumbed to an extreme right as authoritarian, nationalist and conservative as before, recharged with

after a four-point decline, accompanied by a disapproval rate of 62%. Concurrently, the Cadem poll in the third week of the month reported a 32% approval rating for Boric, contrasted by a 65% disapproval rating.

populist steroids' (Bellolio Badiola, 2023, p. 65 – translated by the author). But, as Bellolio Badiola recounts, this agenda seemed to mutate rapidly as he took office, with the economy and security concerns beginning to take centre stage, which particularly benefited the extreme right embodied by José Antonio Kast and his Republican Party.

Boric's fate was largely dependent on the outcome of the Constitutional Convention that emerged from a plebiscite, with an overwhelming 80% voting 'yes' for a new Constitution to replace the one established in 1980 during the Pinochet dictatorship, and only partially modified during the democratic transition. The new millennial president considered it so crucial that he waited for the approval of the constitutional text before introducing his reform project, aiming to show that the change longed for in the streets had its institutional correlate. However, the Convention, primarily representing the left, failed to fully comprehend the rapid societal shifts occurring. Rather than Chilean society as whole, this conclave represented a very particular political moment, namely the one following the crash, in which the aspirations for change and the rejection of the political 'caste' – although the term was not used – electorally benefited the radical left, largely non-partisan. It was the *momentum* of 'ordinary people' against politicians, but such a *momentum* waned as the constituent assembly veered too far into radicalism, entertaining discussions about a complete overhaul. Although these radical proposals did not ultimately make it into the final text, they dominated the narrative surrounding the new constitution (Titelman, 2021). The result is well known: the complete failure of the new constitutional draft. While the shift from voluntary to compulsory voting might offer some explanation for the result, the resolute rejection, even within the strongholds of the left, dealt a severe blow to the hopes of the Chilean leftward

transformation. (Titelman, 2022). As summarised by Bellolio Badiola (2023, p. 68 – translated by the author): 'If the fathers and grandfathers succeeded in removing Pinochet from power in 1988, it was up to their grandchildren to exorcise him forever by banishing his institutional legacy. They could not. Even worse: their parents faced significant challenges, yet managed to succeed. Conversely, this younger generation had favourable circumstances but failed to capitalise on the opportunity'. This sense of missed opportunity has characterised Boric's government to this day, leading to seek support from the traditional centre-left in order to strengthen its support base. The clearest symbol of this shift was the replacement in September 2022 of Izkia Siches – a young symbol of the new political generational – with Carolina Tohá – a respected politician with experience in the transition – as head of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security.

After the *Apruebo's* defeat at the ballot box, a drastic shift occurred: first, it was decided that the responsibility for drafting the new Magna Carta was no longer to be entrusted to ordinary people, but to a group of experts that could avoid any constitutional 'adventure'. Even more significantly, in the new elections, where compulsory voting was introduced, the extreme right came out on top, wielding veto power over the new text. Anti-elitism, now spearheaded by a party endorsing Pinochet's historical role, appeared to sidestep the barriers against the *anti-qualunquista* sentiments and challenge the established 'system'. However, what is particularly noteworthy in the context of the theories presented in this article is that, right from the outset of the process, even before any initial text was drafted, a trend of growing rejection was evident in public polling. Simultaneously, the extreme right began to experience the consequences of their initial triumph (Titelman, 2023). Kast's bid for the presidency, linked to the accomplishments of his political influence in the Constitutional

Council, appeared to weaken after the initial success, amidst internal divisions between the extreme right and a more moderate faction unwilling to align its political assets with the radicals (Titelman, 2023). If the first constituent assembly seemed to flounder due to leaning excessively to the left, the second one faced the same fate due to leaning excessively to the right. Without an opportunity for a new endeavour, the continuance of the 1980 Constitution with its persistent legitimacy issues might become the reality as the new constitutional proposal failed in the December 2023 plebiscite. Meanwhile, two figures seem to be gaining credibility: the former socialist president, Michelle Bachelet, on the center-left, and the former minister and mayor of the Independent Democratic Union (UDI, representing the traditional right), Evelyn Matthei (The Clinic, 2023). Both have familial connections to generals; Bachelet, associated with anti-Pinochet sentiments, and Matthei, having a background connected to the dictator's regime. Bachelet voted 'no' in the 1988 referendum that marked the conclusion of the dictatorship, while Matthei voted 'yes' (Laborde, 2023). While Bachelet's political and electoral intentions remain uncertain for the moment, Matthei stands a good chance of becoming the face of the right to regain votes that have shifted toward the extreme right. Will this mean a swing back to traditional politics, and could the left-right axis be reinforced once again in the face of the elite vs. anti-elite divide? Or could Kast be the figure to spearhead dissent and steer Chile towards the far right?

Crisis of left populism, new alternatives?

In Latin American, particularly South American politics, there is a noticeable withdrawal of left-wing populism, a trend that once characterised the 'leftward turn' during the 2000s.

A prime example is seen in Argentina. Though Cristina Fernández de Kirchner remains a significant figure in Argentine politics, she no longer held the same influence over Peronism's nomination in 2023 as she did in 2019. Despite her efforts to rally support around Kirchnerist candidates for legislative positions, the attempt to 'encircle' Sergio Massa with Kirchnerist candidates on the lists faced challenges. The Peronist candidate and then Minister of Economy faced rejection from a substantial portion of Kirchnerist supporters, who had previously viewed him as a 'neoliberal' and even a 'traitor'. Amid a profound economic crisis, the Kirchnerist discourse, primarily centred on opposing the agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiated by Alberto Fernández, struggles to resonate with a large segment of the populace significantly impacted by inflation. However, the erosion of Kirchnerism is not solely attributed to the economic crisis. *Cristina's* particular method of political construction, characterised by secrecy and unexpected actions, appears insufficient to maintain the unity, particularly the morale, of her support base. While her prolonged periods of silence were once associated with a sense of her leadership being faultless, today they expose their limitations for a faction that has not fielded its own presidential candidate in three consecutive elections (2015, 2019, 2023). They also regard the presidency of Alberto Fernández, who was appointed by Cristina Kirchner, as a 'government that never was'. The rise of Milei, whose electoral support is primarily among the younger demographic (aged 16-30)[4], particularly males, coupled with a decline in Kirchnerism within this age group (Natanson,

[4] In Argentina, voting is optional between the ages of 16 and 18 and compulsory after 18.

2023), is a clear indicator of the ongoing transformations. Another indicator is the rhetoric employed by Massa, who, aiming to counter the right – where Milei and Patricia Bullrich secured almost 50 percent of the votes in the open, simultaneous, and obligatory primaries (PASO) of August 2023 – appeals to centrist language. Massa even called for a 'government of national unity' involving centre-right figures, while implementing a series of measures to mitigate the impact of the crisis on voters. United in Juntos por el Cambio (JxC), the centre-right party has Bullrich as its candidate. She, the former security minister, defeated the moderate Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, the mayor of Buenos Aires, with a radical discourse summarised in his campaign slogan: 'If it's not everything, it's nothing', during the primaries.

However, even left-wing populism is encountering a crisis in one of the nations where it once thrived most prominently: Bolivia under Evo Morales. In this country, the internal conflict between Morales and President Luis Arce Catacora reached a climax in 2023. To comprehend the turmoil within the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), one must revisit 2020: from exile, Morales endorsed the presidential candidacy of his former Minister of Economy. The strategy proved successful, leading MAS to reclaim power sooner than anticipated. Yet, from the outset, the new president resisted the control of the coca growers' leader. This set off a subdued internal struggle between the two leaders and their supporters, which this year escalated into violent confrontations between Evistas ('radicals') and Arcistas ('reformers') during congresses of peasant farmers and social organisations constituting MAS. Morales accused the government of plotting to remove him from the political arena, engaging in multiple conflicts with Government Minister Eduardo del Castillo and Justice Minister Ivan Lima. The former President contends that

the 'endogenous right' has taken charge of the government and is striving to block his return to power in 2025, which he perceives as the sole means of redeeming himself after the 'coup d'état' of 2019 that ousted him from office. On August 26, Minister Del Castillo shared a video on a social platform featuring former Uruguayan President José Mujica, who stated: 'The most exceptional leaders are those who, upon departure, leave a community far more capable than themselves. The struggle is collective and spans across generations'. The intended recipient was unmistakably Evo Morales, who has been retreating to the coca growers' movement and its political stronghold: the Tropic of Cochabamba (Molina, 2023).

Morales regularly posts critical tweets against the government. During internal tensions at the MAS congress in October 2023, he expressed: 'It's deeply painful that a government elected with our votes and under our banner is now focused on attacking us to dismantle us. As our ancestors taught us, we will never give up. As always, we will overcome animosity and deceit with truth, dignity, and unity alongside our people' (Morales, 2023a). Just before launching his presidential candidacy for 2025, Morales responded to criticism from the Arcistas and Choquehuanquistas (led by Vice-President David Choquehuanca, who is also against him): 'In response to the government's assaults, its intent to outlaw MAS-IPSP and dismantle us through political proceedings, or even physically eliminate us, we have decided to heed the appeals of our supporters and numerous individuals attending rallies nationwide to stand as a candidate for the presidency of our beloved #Bolivia' (Morales, 2023b). The former president did not refrain from criticising a sensitive aspect for the current president, who previously, as a minister, played a role in the so-called 'Bolivian economic miracle' and now faces a challenging situation: 'If the economy is flourishing, why is the

government concealing information from the Central Bank of Bolivia? We lament that, due to the right-wing economic model, our people and our nation are more indebted. It is urgent to recover economic policies designed for the poorest' (Morales, 2023c). More recently, Arce was expelled from MAS in a Congress contested by the Arcistas.

Morales upholds an unwavering 'Bolivarian' narrative that might hinder his ability to broaden his support base, particularly in urban regions (where his influence is less pronounced compared to rural areas). He has authored numerous tweets endorsing Vladimir Putin, whom he regards as a 'brother' and an 'anti-imperialist'[5]. Explicitly aligning himself with the administrations in Venezuela and Nicaragua, he has made a return to power his primary political aspiration. Despite his potential to win an election if he were to run, Evismo, a term associated with the period between 2005 and 2019, seems to be a phenomenon of the past. Morales now seems to employ a discourse that, despite its repetition during his 14-year tenure, has lost its hegemonic effectiveness. In 2005, Evo's electoral triumph was perceived as a representation of the desires for change among Bolivia's indigenous and popular majority. However, in the present day, he seems immersed in ongoing internal disputes where the pursuit of power lacks any collective aim or vision for the future. Nevertheless, the shortcomings in Arce's administration offer the former president an opportunity to manoeuvre, capitalising on the relative weaknesses of his competitors. Similar challenges within left-wing

[5] 'Many congratulations to the brother president of Russia, Vladimir Putin on his birthday. Dignified, free and anti-imperialist peoples accompany his struggle against the armed interventionism of the USA and NATO. The world will find peace when the USA stops threatening life' (Morales, 2022).

populism are observable in Ecuador: Correism stands as the sole leftist movement unable to regain power. While Peronism/Kirchnerism, Bolivia's MAS, and Luiz Inácio Lula Da Silva have triumphed over adversity to return to government, Rafael Correa, exiled in Belgium, has been unsuccessful in doing so. This trend persisted in 2023 when Correa's candidate Luisa González lost to Daniel Noboa in the election's second round, following the 'mutual death'[6] declared by President Guillermo Lasso (Ramírez, 2023; Ospina Peralta, 2023). The President, holding liberal-conservative views, resorted to this measure in extreme circumstances to evade impeachment by a parliament where he lacked majority support. Despite the nation facing a profound crisis, notably in terms of security, there is a yearning for the bygone Correa era. However, *Revolución Ciudadana*, Correa's political force, faces strong opposition in regions like the Sierra, particularly in indigenous areas. These communities recall the repressive policies towards their protests during Rafael Correa's regime. While Correism, supported by an 'intense minority' performs well in initial election rounds, it struggles in the subsequent run-offs. This pattern was evident in the municipal victories of Guayaquil and Quito, both single-round elections, contrasting with the defeat in the presidential elections on 15 October 2023, as observed in 2021. Moreover, Correa prioritised loyal-

[6] The 'mutual death' (*muerte cruzada*) is a constitutional clause in Ecuador. It allows the President to dissolve the Legislature, call for general elections, and govern by decree until new Legislative and Presidential representatives are elected. This action initiates a collective departure, prompting new elections and a fresh government start. However, it doesn't commence a new legislative term as the subsequent elections occur within the same legislature's timeframe. Additionally, the Legislature holds the power to initiate the same procedure.

ty, selecting González over more competitive but potentially less 'reliable' candidates, a concern rooted in his fixation on loyalty following Lenín Moreno's perceived 'betrayal'.

The prevalence of this intense minority dynamic characterises most of the current left-wing populist movements in the region, except for Mexico, where President Andrés Manuel López Obrador sustains a high approval rating surpassing 60 percent. Morena, Mexico's National Regeneration Movement, has designated Claudia Sheinbaum, the former head of government of Mexico City, as its presidential candidate for the June 2024 elections. This decision caused a rift with former Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, who was excluded from the candidacy due to Morena's (or López Obrador's) decision, purportedly based on various electoral polls. Amidst this backdrop, a new left has emerged in the region, primarily embodied by Boric in Chile and Gustavo Petro in Colombia. This emerging left seeks to rejuvenate its discourse and agenda by placing a stronger emphasis on democratic principles and environmental issues. While Boric grapples with the challenges previously noted and his administration lacks defining projects to establish its identity – even the commemoration of the 1973 coup d'état was marked by internal tensions within the governing alliance and the growth of the extreme right – Petro has initiated an ambitious agenda. At the core is his complex proposal for 'total peace', addressing political and criminal groups and their myriad intersections. Petro successfully passed a tax reform focused on equity and social justice, estimated to generate an additional 1.2 percent of the GDP. Yet, Petro's ambitious anti-fossil fuel environmental policy, which aims at an international scope, has encountered obstacles. His commitment not to enter into new oil and gas exploration contracts has faced challenges, alongside setbacks involving the Minister of Mines, Irene Vélez, who advocated for 'degrowth' in Northern

countries and was accused by the opposition of generating 'economic panic' in a parliamentary censure that failed to succeed. She finally resigned last July after allegations of influence peddling. Addressing ecological concerns poses significant complexities for Petro: 40% of Colombian exports are derived from oil, and coal production notably surged in 2022.

Petro's victory in the elections was supported by traditional figures associated with Uribism and Santismo, such as Armando Benedetti and Roy Barreras. He commenced his government with a broad parliamentary coalition of centre-right parties, which later fragmented, impeding the passage of his reforms. An 'administration reshuffle' in April witnessed the departure of Economy Minister José Antonio Ocampo, a respected academic instrumental in the fiscal reform. The contentious health reform became a focal point of crisis within the government and the supporting coalition.

Furthermore, the government contended with the 'nanny' scandal, resulting in the resignation of Laura Sarabia, the highest-ranking official in *Casa de Nariño*, and the ambassador to Venezuela, Armando Benedetti, amid a scandal involving the two (González, 2023). Subsequently, President Petro confronted an even graver situation: the arrest and subsequent prosecution of his son, Nicolás, on charges of money laundering and illicit enrichment (Glatsky, 2023). These allegations implicated Petro's campaign funding, an issue the left has consistently criticised the right for, particularly regarding its associations with questionable businessmen and drug traffickers.

In July, during the onset of the second legislative year, Petro faced a significant setback in the Senate as his candidate for the upper house presidency failed to secure support, further complicating his reform agenda (Hernández Bonilla, 2023). The regional elections on October 29 also revealed weaknesses within Petrismo in the regions and unveiled divisions within

the Historic Pact. As noted by *El País* correspondent, 'his success, given the lack of territorial influence of his party, will hinge on the agreements made with new governors and mayors, pivotal for implementing the National Development Plan approved by the government, a cornerstone of his mandate' (Santaeulalia, 2023). An important factor to note is the lack of potential re-election for either Boric or Petro beyond their initial term. In Colombia, the situation is more stringent – since 2015, the Colombian Congress abolished presidential re-election, including non-consecutive terms. Consequently, the scope for change is constrained, particularly in a setting with more volatile electorates and weaker hegemonies.

Last but not least, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's return to power has implied a profound political shift in Brazil, with regional implications. In 2022, the former metalworker narrowly defeated the Bolsonarist 'confederation', a veritable socio-territorial network (Singer, 2023), and assumed office in January 2023. However, Lula da Silva faces the challenge of dealing with a Congress controlled by the ultra-pragmatic but extortionary *Centrão*. To effectively govern, Lula da Silva is obliged to distribute budgets and ministries among allied parties to secure the required votes in a more influential Congress compared to his first two terms (2003-2010). For instance, to pass measures like lifting the cap on public spending, the government must satisfy congressmen in various ways. As journalist Eric Nepomuceno recalls, 'this is not an essentially political or ideological opposition, but rather what in Brazil is called 'physiologism'. The so-called 'physiologists' are deputies who demand more and more budget to approve projects of interest to the government' (Nepomuceno, 2023). Moreover, Bolsonaro sanctioned a 'secret budget' within Congress. In these negotiations, Lula da Silva allocated a ministry to the Republican party, the political wing of the Universal Church of the Kingdom

of God and Bolsonaro's former ally (Infobae, 2023), illustrating why Lula presides over 38 ministries.

As a closing note

The focus of the Latin American agenda has shifted towards security and the economy, leading to a weakening of progressive initiatives, while the right-wing faces pressure from emerging radical factions[7]. None of the current regional leaders advocate for spearheading a process of regional integration to break the deadlock. Additionally, they all contend with more unpredictable electorates and shorter political horizons. The region has transitioned from the early 2000s' constitutional drive to the dynamics of destitution and an escalating crisis of representation.

More generally, the current political landscape in the region does not represent a new 'cycle', whether right-wing or left-wing, within a world rife with various geopolitical tensions. The Western world grapples with a crisis of the notion of the future, and a global interregnum whose conclusion appears uncertain.

[7] In this framework, Nayib Bukele of El Salvador is perceived as emblematic of 'popular authoritarianism', primarily due to his cinematographic crackdown on gangs. His clout has extended into Central America, notably influencing the style of the progressive Honduran leader Xiomara Castro. However, the adoption of 'Bukele-ism' as a campaign strategy in South America has not distinctly produced visible outcomes.

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Latin America at a Glance: Recent Political and Electoral Trends presents an incisive collection of academic essays derived from a series of international seminars held at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan between November 2022 and April 2023. Edited by Samuele Mazzolini, this volume synthesises the intellectual contributions of some leading experts, offering a meticulous exploration of contemporary Latin American politics. The essays traverse the intricate terrain of the region's political landscape, delving into historical underpinnings, democratic dilemmas, social protests, electoral challenges, unexpected political outcomes, and the emergence, evolution, and ramifications of populism. With nuanced discussions on Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and broader regional trends, this collection illuminates diverse perspectives, providing invaluable insights into the multifaceted realities of Latin American politics. This anthology serves as a foundation for comprehending the dynamics of the region's political evolution. It is an essential resource for scholars, researchers, and students seeking to comprehend the historical legacies and complex transformations that shape current Latin America's political identity and trajectory.

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Latin America at a Glance

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