

Latin America: Politically Unfinished and Unfulfilled?

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“Latin America is an Unfinished Construction, a Project to be Realised, an Unfulfilled Project Always Set on Our Horizons” (Aricó). How Much Do You Consider Latin America to Still Be in a Process of Political Development?

According to the Argentine socialist thinker José Aricó (1931-1991), Latin America is unfinished, unfulfilled, and its political potential has not yet been realised (Aricó in Munck 2003: 174). Yet, how do we compare Latin America's political development? Should we contrast it with the West or “is Latin America simply following a different path?” (Munch 2003: 170). Political development is understood in this essay to consider maturity, popularity, legitimacy and maintenance of political stability and order, with “political support, institutional trust, regime consolidation and mass consent” (Power and Cyr 2010: 253) all integral to a highly developed political system. This essay does not presume democracy to be universally superior to other forms of government. However, it will consider Latin America's turbulent history, and consequently immature and relatively inexperienced governments, to contribute to keeping Latin America in a process of political development. The very nature of politics requires that it is constantly evolving, maturing and developing and thus, Latin America is, like the rest of the world, still in a process of political development.

To consider whether Latin America is politically developed, one must question what the goal of development is, in order to ascertain whether Latin America has reached it. This goal is surely a legitimate government that maintains order and is supported by the people. Power and Cyr (2010: 256) describe political legitimacy as “the belief that in spite of shortcomings and failures, the existing political institutions are better than any others that might be established and that they therefore can demand obedience”. This essay will consider whether Latin America is still yet to achieve this goal.

According to modernisation theory, all countries are on a path to democracy, “but some countries are further along than others” (Wilson Sokhey 2011: 82). This theory holds that economies modernise by transitioning from agricultural to industrial, resulting in urbanisation. As the population shifts from the countryside to urban living, people have more access to information, technology, and education. With a more educated populous, economic wealth increases; resulting in a growing middle class that begins to participate more in politics and make demands on their leaders and government; “ultimately, the resulting changes in mass political behaviour make the emergence and survival of democratic governments more likely” (Wilson Sokhey 2011: 82). This theory suggests that “economic development leads to social and cultural changes that alter the political behaviour of citizens and ultimately result in democratic government” (Wilson Sokhey 2011: 82). According to modernisation theory, it is economic development that initiates political development and thus, one cannot be without the other.

Latin America's experience with economic development influencing political development is varied. Argentina's economic progress in the 1800s and early 1900s grew to a level where “Argentina had attained levels of prosperity and political stability comparable to the USA and leading European countries” (Williamson 2009: 459), and was considered amongst the ten richest countries in the world (Munck 2003: 96). With this economic development came an increased political stability and its “politics, which had once been so anarchic appeared to have been contained broadly within constitutional norms” (Williamson 2009: 279). This example is in keeping with the theory of modernisation. However critiques of modernisation theory have been made, suggesting that economic development

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is not alone sufficient to bring about political development.

Evidence of a state's economic growth is not necessarily felt nationwide; "excessive inequality may hamper citizens' ability to participate and may encourage development of institutions dominated by a few powerful elite rather than an active civil society" (Wilson Sokhey 2011: 87). Latin America suffers a widening gap between rich and poor, and thus, the consolidation, or even maintenance, of democracy is challenged by increasing social inequality (Munck 2003: 42). Economic development needs to be considered more holistically, considering whether the wider benefits of economic growth affect the population equally or if some are left behind. The recent global economic crisis has been significant for Latin America, but even before this "Latin America was already the world's most inequality-beset region" (Toleda 2010: 7). This inequality is associated with unequal access to education and with social tensions; it affects the population's willingness to be involved in politics and thus prevents political development. An educated population is central to "every case of a successful and equal development process, in both economic and political terms" (De Ferranti et al. 2004: 178). Huntington (1968: 5) argues that social and economic change is essential for political development; "urbanization, increases in literacy and education, industrialization, mass media expansion –extend political consciousness, multiply political demands and broaden political participation". Wiada (1989: 75-76) notes the correlation between literacy levels, economic development and democracy, however warns that correlations do not necessarily imply causal relationships. In the 1960s "a wave of military coups swept the civilian democratic governments out of power, greater literacy...did not lead to democracy".

This wave of military governments taking power across Latin America in the 1960s left seventeen of the twenty Latin American countries under military authoritarian rule by the late 1970s. However, this quickly reversed. By the late 1980s, sixteen of the then twenty-one countries (with a newly independent Belize), and over ninety percent of the population, were either democracies or en route to democracy (Wiada 1989: 76). This period in Latin America's history mirrors the cyclical hypothesis which holds that:

"neither authoritarianism nor democratic models have been able to generate widespread consent and thus they have continually yielded to one another without generating a lasting political order" (Power and Cyr 2010: 254).

This lack of political continuity and political and social order supports the idea that Latin America continues to be in a process of political development. However, despite this cyclical exchange between democracy and autocracy, the pattern is firmly towards stability and democracy.

The "nationalist social and political movement" of General Juan Perón in Argentina was, although "quite authoritarian" (Munck 2003: 104), popular. Following his death in 1974 and after the presidency was passed briefly to his wife, Isabel, a state of emergency was declared in November 1974 as the country struggled with a stricken economy; initiating the 'dirty war'. The "anti-subversive net widened arbitrarily to take in students, lawyers, journalists, trade-unionists and anyone suspected of aiding the guerrillas" (Williamson 2009: 476). José Aricó left the country, escaping to Mexico fearing that, as a left-wing government critic, he would be in line to face the "illicit death squad as people were made to 'disappear'" (Williamson 2009: 476). Munck (2003: 38) describes the dramatic democratic stage in Argentina in 1983 as "the military dictators retreated due to the double impact of defeat in the 1981/82 Malvinas/Falklands military adventure and growing unpopularity and discontent at home".

Argentina's strengthening democracy contrasts with Mexico, which is emerging as a "post-revolutionary state, more integrated with globalization but not necessarily more democratic" (Munck 2003: 41). Mexico's current ruling political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), were in power continually for seventy-one years. The "monopoly of power enjoyed by the PRI neutralized opposition so effectively that virtually omnipotent presidents became unaccountable to the electorate" (Williamson 2009: 409). Alleged corruption and ballot-rigging plagued their years in power, however, by the 1990s, opposition parties, such as The National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN), had gained sufficient popularity that ballot-rigging no longer seemed feasible. Gradually "by the 1990s, experts cautiously began to describe Mexico as a country 'in transition' to democracy" (Shirk 2005: 1). After seventy-one years in continual power, the PRI were defeated in the 2000 presidential election by Vicente Fox, the PAN electoral candidate. With this defeat came expectations of strengthened democracy and an end to "decades of corrupt and authoritarian rule by the PRI" (Shirk 2005: 1). The 2000 elections have been widely

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viewed as “the quintessential and definitive moment of Mexico’s transition” (Shirk 2005: 2). However, in 2012, the Mexican people voted back to power the PRI, the party who had run a “corruption-riddled, authoritarian system for much of the twentieth century” (Flores-Macías 2013: 128). Despite 12 years out of power, the “PRI’s return is likely to reinvigorate several features of the old regime that the transition of 2000 never uprooted, potentially representing a setback for Mexico’s young democracy” (Flores-Macías 2013: 128). The fact that the Mexican people have voted into power a party that led them in authoritarian rule for seven decades is surprising. However, the peaceful turnover of power in 2012, which contrasts with the bitter protests in 2006, “stands as a welcome sign that democracy is maturing and the principle of electoral accountability is gaining ground” (Flores-Macías 2013: 128). In this sense, Mexico remains in a process of political development but is evidently firmly on the road to a consolidated democracy.

Poverty has been considered to be a significant barrier to political development and democratic growth. In 2000 it was estimated that “thirty-five percent of Latin America’s households were officially ‘poor’ and a further fifteen percent were ‘extremely poor’”. Poverty and inequality contribute to a difficult political environment, and “the odds of a country remaining democratic are higher in richer countries” (Wilson Sokhey 2011: 82). A poor population can impact development but as can a poor government. Underfunded governments risk failing to attract talented people to policymaking. This can result in human capital flight, putting the country further behind on the road to development (Solimano 2005: 47). Aristotle noted that democracy would struggle in a society with high levels of poverty (Aristotle, in Wilson Sokhey 2011: 81). Toleda explains this by suggesting that rich countries are more easily politically “cohesive and moderate than poor ones” (Toleda 2010: 7). In the absence of tangible economic improvements, citizens grow apathetic towards politics and “grow dangerously ready to forfeit their human rights and their country’s liberal-democratic safeguards to a strongman who promises immediate results” (Toleda 2010: 8). Despite the growing inequalities, since the 1980s Latin America has seen a deepening of democracy, or at least there has been no clear-cut case of democratic reversal. Expectations of democracy have not been met, but despite the people growing disaffected by their governments, there has not yet been a desire to return to authoritarian rule (Philip 2005: 208). Instead, there emerged by the 1990s a “widespread disenchantment (*descanto* in Spanish) with democracy generally” (Munck 2003: 165).

Like the issue of inequality and poverty, the rule of law is also essential to achieve not only democracy, but also a stable and supported political system. Munck maintains that:

“the rule of law (in Spanish *estado de derecho*) is generally deemed a prerequisite for democracy and good governance, it means, above all, that basic civil rights should apply equally to the whole population” (Munck 2003: 67).

With regard to Latin America, violence and a disregard for the rule of law remain a reality; “the experience of violence has been ubiquitous and endemic for the poor in Latin America and not only under dictatorships” (Munck 2003: 68-69). In Mexico there is a deeply ingrained culture that the powerful are above the law, and the country has seen the killing of political opponents carried out with the collaboration of the state authorities (Munck 2003: 68-69). As recent as 2010, the nongovernmental organisation Human Rights Watch and the US Department of State claimed there remained grave examples of human rights abuses, including assassinations, kidnapping, physical violence, and arbitrary arrests resulting from a culture of impunity amongst the powerful and government corruption (Schatz 2011: 1-2).

When assessing the level of political development in Latin America, it is essential to make some comparisons with other states to acknowledge how politically developed the region is. However, such comparisons have been criticised as being ethnocentric and “derived from the Western experience of development” (Wiarda 1989: 69). Having been established democracies for generations, the timing and sequences of political development in the West may not be replicable in Latin America today. Latin America faces very different problems in the twenty-first century than centuries past. Munck (2003: 165) argues that “the main political challenge facing Latin America today is the question of governability in the era of globalization”. The “web of dependency and interdependency” (Wiarda 1989: 70) makes it harder for states to become self-reliant and politically developed.

However, advances have been made for Latin America to increase its political cooperation with other developing

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regions such as Africa. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) facilitated a gathering in 2012 of Latin American and African ministers to increase “South-South cooperation and exchanges” (Clark 2012). Both regions are heavily reliant on natural resources and can benefit from sharing each other’s experiences of political development. When compared with African development, Latin America is more politically developed. Over the last century, Africa has experienced “slower growth of incomes, slower social development, more corruption and bureaucracy and more frequent civil wars” (Przeworski et al. 2000: 273) than Latin America; all of which act as barriers to real political development. In contrast, Latin America has seen a move towards political stability opening up the way for democracy and political development.

In Latin America, Argentina can be seen as a leader in terms of political development, a “success story of neo-liberalism” (Munck 2003: 56), and “a model reformer” (Daseking et al. 2004: 1). However, its relative immaturity and lack of political development can be seen to explain the economic crisis in 2001, or their inability to foresee or predict the economic collapse. The monetary regime that pegged the peso one-to-one against the US dollar for more than a decade, and the propensity of politicians to spend and borrow too much, have largely been seen to explain the economic crisis (Schamis 2002: 81). With riots and police repression that cost thirty lives and defaulting on international debt, President Fernando de la Rúa ultimately resigned, resulting in serial handovers of executive power with three interim presidents. Despite the chaos of 2001-2002, Argentina resolved “a serious political crisis without violating the laws, procedures and institutions of the democratic process” (Schamis 2002: 90).

Consolidation is a term denoting the “final stage of development where democracy becomes stable, immune to authoritarian reversal and self-reinforcing” (Schamis 2002: 89). Argentina’s response to economic crisis in 2001 in a democratic way “should count as evidence of consolidation” (Schamis 2002: 90). Thus, Argentina should be considered politically developed. There is danger however, in suggesting any state is democratically consolidated or politically developed, as it prevents analysts from spotting early cracks in the political system. Schamis (2002: 89) gives the example of Venezuelan democracy in the 1980s: being seen as a consolidated democratic system ultimately prevented analysts from predicting its virtual breakdown in the early 1990s.

Huntington (1968) places political order above political development, controversially concluding that “stable authoritarian systems would be preferable to unstable democratic ones” (Huntington 1968 in Wilson Sokhey 2011: 84). Huntington considers the growing gap between developed and underdeveloped countries and economies, and suggests that of equal concern should be the widening gap between developed political systems and underdeveloped political systems (Huntington 1968: 2). Thus, whether Latin America remains in a process of political development is of perennial concern. The road to democracy in Latin America has been challenging and the “expectations that democracy would deliver were undoubtedly inflated” (Munck 2003: 166). However, it remains the most desired path to development.

Toleda (2010: 8) notes the work of the Global Centre for Development and Democracy (GCDD) which seeks to formulate policy recommendations considering the “interrelationships among poverty reduction, social inclusion, economic growth and democracy, thus preventing the resurgence of authoritarian populism in the region”. Given the immaturity and inexperience of much of the regions’ democratic systems and indeed political systems, there remains a risk of returning to authoritarian rule. Toleda (2010: 8) recognises the risk that poverty and inequality bring to an underdeveloped democracy, stating that “poverty could truncate our economic prosperity and conspire against democracy”.

Given many of the political systems are new in comparison to Western standards, there is much institutional growth and development that is needed before Latin America can be deemed politically developed. Fairer and more efficient tax systems need to be sustained, as well as achieving a representative number of women and minority groups in governments (Toleda 2010 9-11). Bolivia is currently leading the way, having elected their first indigenous president in 2005 (BBC 2011). Furthermore, the Uruguayan President, Jose Mujica, is proving that the Western way is not always best; questioning the possibility of worldwide sustainable development if each country were to use resources like the West. He lives an austere lifestyle himself, donating about ninety percent of his monthly salary to charity (Hernandez 2012). Latin America is clearly not equally politically developed to the West, yet it is on the road to sustainable democracy. Whilst, on the whole, engaging and interacting with the worldwide arena, Latin America

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seeks to become self-helping by signing new trade and economic agreements such as MURCOSUR. Latin America remains autonomous enough as a region to abstain from blindly following Western models, and instead is set to carve its own unique path to political development.

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Date written: May 2013