

# A New Challenge for Latin America: Bringing Civil Society Back In

Francesco Davide Ragno  
Università di Bologna  
francesco.ragno3@unibo.it

## Abstract

This article offers a brief overview of the recent history of democratisation in Latin America. Looking back at the highlights of this process, the essay focuses on the ways in which democratic regimes, over the last forty years, have defined the relationship between the State and civil society. The latter seems to be a very useful resource that is all too often crushed. With particular regard to the rise of populist movements, cases from Latin America can offer interesting insights for European Countries.

## Resumen

*Este artículo ofrece un breve excursus de la historia reciente del proceso de democratización en América Latina. Al recorrer las principales etapas, el ensayo se centra en las formas en que los regímenes democráticos, durante los últimos cuarenta años, han definido la relación entre el estado y la sociedad civil. Este último parece ser un recurso muy útil que con demasiada frecuencia se tritura. Con especial referencia al auge de los movimientos populistas, los casos de América Latina pueden ofrecer perspectivas interesantes para los países europeos.*

In October 2019 various street demonstrations took place in Latin America, especially in Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador. Notwithstanding their simultaneity, these three cases revealed various differences. First, the three countries had three different histories. Moreover, their political backgrounds differed from each other: political systems, party systems, forms of government and, last but not least, political cultures. There were, then, different reasons that led to protests on the part of some citizens of Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador: in every national case, political reasons are interconnected, in certain forms, with social ones. If one had observed the political and social actors who participated in the street demonstrations, one would have realised that they were very different protagonists, as different as the solutions and consequences that put an end to the protests.

In the Bolivian case, protests escalated in opposition to the re-election of President Evo Morales (elected for the first time in 2005 and since then re-elected, thanks to a Constitutional reform), in the presidential elections of 20 October 2019. Once the polls opened, the demonstrations became even more extreme because there was a strong objection to the legitimacy and the validity of the electoral process, denouncing electoral fraud and vote rigging committed by the government – this accusation was corroborated within the report prepared by the Organisation of American States and released 20 days after the elections (OAS, 2019). At that time, the social and political situation of the country seemed difficult to manage: the military asked the newly elected President Morales to resign from his post; the latter stood down but the protests did not calm down. At that moment, in fact, Morales' supporters took to the streets.

What happened in Ecuador was different. In this context, the protest developed as a result of the choice of President Lenín Moreno to accept more loans from

multilateral international institutions, among them the International Monetary Fund. Since that time, the President has initiated a series of austerity reforms aimed at defending the dollarisation of the economy. Within the structural reform package, one measure led to an increase in the price of gasoline, which had been kept low thanks to a State subsidy. The goal of this reform was to limit the fiscal deficit, however mainly indigenous groups organised a strong wave of protests. After a few weeks of direct confrontation, the President negotiated with those groups until an agreement was reached. In this sense, a complex web of social and political (but non-party) organisations emerged in Ecuador, the interaction of which in the public arena led to a redefinition of policies. A sort of civil sphere, in other words, seems capable of gaining ground in the Ecuadorian public debate.

The development of the Chilean case is different again from that of Bolivia and Ecuador. On the 6th October 2019, an increase of 30 pesos (just under 0.04 US dollar) was applied to the Metro ticket price in the Capital, Santiago de Chile. This increase, decreed by the Ministry of Transport, inflamed tensions, with the streets filling with demonstrators, and the focus of the protests immediately shifting from the issue of the cost of public transport to a more general subject, namely the Chilean development model. This model, according to the protests, had been unable to reduce the great socio-economic fractures continuing to split the country. “No son 30 pesos, son 30 años” (“They are not 30 pesos, they are 30 years”), was the motto that raised global awareness of the political times, the complexity of which was rooted in the transition to democracy – a transition that stemmed from the end of the 1980s. The Chilean crisis lasted no more than two months after it began and ended with a guarantee from the President, Sebastián Piñera Echenique, to begin a constituent process to redefine the terms of the social contract between the political class and citizenship. The distance between the ‘country at large’ and the ‘ruling classes’ was due, amongst other things, to the highly distorting electoral system, which was extremely polarising and, for these reasons, profoundly unable to represent the complexity of Chilean society.

Three different forms of street demonstrations, three different political-economic solutions, three different political systems. What do these three cases have in

common? Apart from the forms they take in certain violent cases, there are two similar traits that should be emphasised in this essay. The first trait illustrates the great activism of social and political groups that more or less tangentially have usually occurred in political reality. These groups represent a kind of 'civil society' that seeks to gain political space in Latin American democracies. The second trait concerns the close connection between questions of a purely political nature and questions of an economic nature. This connection emerges clearly from the same modality in which the democratisation processes have been taking place in the Latin American region during the so-called 'third wave' of democratisation (Huntington, 1991).

The almost simultaneous timing with which these forms of protest developed drew the attention of international analysts to Latin America. Distinct reasons, distinct outcomes, countries with distinct pasts, distinct political systems, distinct political traditions, and distinct government political orientation. In spite of everything, these events (like the protests that broke out in Brazil in 2013, on the occasion of the Confederation Cup) reveal the features of a complex process: that of the reconfiguration of political *milieux*. In this sense, political representation seems, over the last thirty years, to have changed the volume and political space it occupies – in addition to the ways in which it is conceived. In other words, in Latin America, starting from the transition to democracy, a process of re-defining the systems of political representation (in regulatory and legislative terms but also in terms of political culture) began. This evolution, in the first instance, passed through the construction of political institutions, after years of authoritarianism. The structural reforms and the redefinition of relations between the State and citizens, also in economic terms, then commenced. Now, the season of civil society appeared to have come, in search of a place in the process of representation.

A little more than thirty years have passed since the beginning of the process of transition to democracy and, although there has been (and continues to be) a reappearance of instances of authoritarianism, the system of democratic representation seems to have been firmly established in Latin America. Without any doubt, there are national contexts in which democratic institutions do not appear to be strong and others which appear to be under pressure. Nevertheless,

looking at the 'big picture' of the region, one can note a great change from what existed forty years ago. It is clear that there are realities in which the democratic representation today seems more solid and others in which it seems weaker, up to extremely complicated contexts for institutions of political representation. Indeed, Latin America today appears to be a fractured and, in some respects, contradictory reality. In spite of this, this essay aims to provide a reading of the different events and contexts, using historical tools. In fact, using a medium-long term dimension, these events acquire depth and allow us to approach one of the Gordian knots of the social sciences, the relationship between the State and civil society (Rosanvallon, 2006). In this sense, civil society is not a residual category but rather is understood following the suggestions of Alexander (2006) to be part of the discourse of the 'civil sphere' in which many actors participate. In the construction of this huge and broad 'civil sphere', it seems clear that civil society accompanies political processes and, in this specific case, the redefinition of democratic systems.

## Building Democratic Institutions

The transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic forms of government took place in variable geometries and within different timelines from country to country, starting from the early 1980s. It should not be forgotten that there were cases in which there were no authoritarian and/or military regimes (such as in the case of Venezuela) or cases in which there were one-party 'democratic' regimes (such as in the case of Mexico). Beyond the evolution of each national cases, however, a renewed confidence in democratic systems spread throughout Latin America at that time (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Mainwaring and Scully, 2009). This confidence had at its basis the certainty that "with democracy one can eat, with democracy one can be treated, with democracy one can educate", following the argument of the Argentine Raúl Alfonsín, as stated when closing the first presidential electoral campaign after the end of the last authoritarian regime – just before he was elected President. In short, the idea is that the democratic political system would not only allow political representatives to be freely chosen but would widely generate better socio-economic conditions. In other words, there was full confidence that democratic

political systems would perform better socio-economically than authoritarian regimes (Heredia, 2006; Ragno, 2018). This confidence, however, clashed with the economic crisis that, starting in 1982, involved the whole region. This is illustrated, for example, by events that developed in Peru, where the end of the military regime was accompanied by the creation of a Constituent Assembly. Writing a new constitutional charter restored new confidence to the young Peruvian democracy which, however, was put under pressure by inflation, a problem that gripped the country throughout the 1980s. At the end of the decade, in fact, Peru entered a hyper-inflationary spiral and culminated in the elections of 1989 where Alberto Fujimori, a political outsider who led a party founded a few months before the consultation, triumphed. With the presidential vote, the citizens of Peru rejected a political class recently returned to power, choosing a candidate who came from a reality outside politics (Cotler, 1986; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 2010).

In this sense, the history of Peru is not entirely different from that of other Latin American countries: one could take for example the case of Brazil with the election of President Fernando Collor de Mello, whose results were connected to the inflationary spiral that the country was experiencing at the end of the 1980s. The case of Brazil, like that of Peru and, in some respects, that of Argentina, highlights how the democratic institutions built after the military regimes were already in difficulty after less than a decade of existence. In a certain way, the leaders of some countries were aware of the dangers that could come from armed forces in power, which still had ambitions for political activity. In this sense, for example, the Presidents of Argentina and Brazil moved to try to protect democratic institutions, promoting the first contacts which then, in 1991, led to the regional integration of the Southern Cone area, under Mercosur (Gardini, 2010). There are, then, cases in which the deterioration of the economy could have been avoided, as in the case of Chile where the transition was channelled through the institutional directions outlined by the 1980 Constitution, with the 1988 referendum and the presidential elections of 1989.

It should not be forgotten that in those years a new spirit of the times paved its way, leading to a new relationship between politics and the economy. In those years, in fact, the idea that the State should have been less involved in

economic activity emerged. A large portion of the States that had initiated neo-liberal reforms moved in this direction. In Latin America, this process had emerged sporadically and with much reluctance during the 1980s. From the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, the principles of free market were affirmed in the Latin American context, centred on the proposals that emerged from the agenda of the so-called 'Washington Consensus'. With variable geometries, most of the Latin American countries initiated reforms that had privatised and, partially, liberalised important sectors of their economy, in order to regain macroeconomic stability after the crises that had exploded in the region throughout the 1980s. These were reforms that aimed at a drastic fiscal discipline (cutting State expenses, services and subsidies), indirect taxation extension, financial and commercial liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, and freedom of exchange rates between currencies (Weyland, 2003; Bulmer, 2006).

The Washington consensus agenda gave Latin American democratic systems a new lease of life for young Latin American democracies, establishing new terms in the relationship between a democratic form of government and citizenship. It was a form of democracy with authoritarian features, which the political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell defined as "Delegative Democracy", i.e., a type of democracy which "rest[s] on the premise that whoever wins the election for the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office" (O'Donnell, 1994: 59). O'Donnell argued, in other words, that this new type of regime was refractory with regard to respect for civil and political rights and the guarantee of political opposition and minorities. The President did not represent the nation, but rather embodied it in order to save the country from economic turmoil.

The emergence of "delegative democracies" showed two fundamental characteristics of the political systems of a large portion of Latin American countries. In the first place, reference is made to that depoliticisation of civil society which, guided by technocratic advances, took place at the end of the 1980s – re-proposing, *mutatis mutandis*, the paradigmatic monolithic representation. This image was accompanied by a profound 'leaderistic' imprint of the political

systems that limit and depress the action of Parliament and, in turn, the strength of the parties. In other words, the mystical connection between the people and their leader was based on instances and contents distinct from those of classical populism, but replicated their forms, modalities and, in many respects, their discourses.

These forms of “delegative democracies” or neo-populisms emerged in much of Latin America, interweaving the neo-liberal structural reforms with the political forms of populism. In this sense, little by little, the young Latin American democracies formally became representative democracies within a non-liberal cultural horizon, also with a tendency to repress political differences by praising the unity promoted by the technicalities of neo-liberalism. The consolidation of this peculiar political form, however, was accompanied in the nineties by certain attempts to subvert the constitutional order *manu militari*: the best known case is that of the coup promoted by a group of army officers in Venezuela, in 1992. At the same time, there were hybrid forms of political regimes that seemed to pass unscathed through to the season of the end of the bipolar world. In Mexico, in fact, the “one-party democracy” led by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (which had held the presidency since the 1920s) was able to embrace the demands coming from the free market without making any changes to the nature of its political regime. In Chile and Uruguay, on the other hand, the democratic-liberal political systems were well structured (Panizza, 2000).

The 1990s ended with the outbreak of violent economic crises in Latin American countries, which corresponded to a paradigm change in the definition of the ‘social contract’: the economic performances, in fact, highlighted the criticisms of the ruling class in solving the political and social problems that the Latin American States were experiencing. The most emblematic examples were the Argentinean crisis of December 2001 and the start of the presidency of Hugo Chávez in 1999, with the beginning of the constituent process that changed the main features of the nature of the State of Venezuela. The crises of the 1990s, in other words, allowed the emergence of a trend that attributed greater powers to the State in relation to civil society: in economic terms, the Brazilian economist (a former minister from the 1980s) Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira defined this new

model of the State as “neo-developmental”: “New Developmentalism is a project, a work in progress. Its contribution to macroeconomics and, mainly, to the exchange rate theory is already reasonably defined, but one way to summarize it is to state that it is based on the right macroeconomic prices which are not guaranteed within the market, especially in an exchange rate policy, that makes technologically competent firms economically competitive. [...] As for the political economy of New Developmentalism, its constituent elements are based on: the thesis that the industrial and capitalist revolution is crucial to the change of each country; the thesis that these revolutions were always carried out within the framework of a developmental strategy; the thesis on the decisive role of class coalitions and the developmental state; and the thesis of the complementary character of developmentalism and social democracy” (Bresser-Pereira, 2016: 261-262).

In the relationship between the State and civil society, a process very similar to that which took place in the economic sphere has occurred in the political-social field. Also within this field, the State and governments have occupied milieux once belonging to civil society, jeopardising issues and actors. Let us consider, for example, the indigenous question and the ways in which it has been addressed since the early years of the 21st century by some Andean Countries (Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador, to name a few). Political spaces once occupied by indigenous Latin American communities, today are coordinated by the State. This is a clear trend, but with nuances that are neither minor nor ignorable. In Bolivia, for example, the issue of indigenous communities has entered the Manichean dynamics of the political debate, generating division and opposition: the point is that the issue has been politicised and used for electoral purposes. In Chile, on the other hand, the process of coordinating the activities of these communities was not subject to politicisation by the ruling classes. The same can be said, for example, of human rights associations in Argentina starting from 2003, when the issue of human rights became central to strengthening the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (Alvizuri, 2012; Sarlo, 2011).

The links between State and civil society and between young democratic systems and economic development that had weakened due to the crises of the 1980s were rebuilt, starting from the neo-liberal, technician and neo-populist

paradigm. The crisis of the last years of the twentieth century also detrimentally affected this neo-populist reconstruction. The State then built new foundations of the democratic form in civil society, occupying the spaces of the latter.

## Has the time for empowering civil society arrived? Some suggestions

The trajectory described so far has again been questioned in recent years. As previously mentioned, the protests in Brazil in 2013 and those in Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador in 2019 are only epiphenomena of the difficulties that the Latin American ruling class is experiencing. This ruling class, in fact, seems to be incapable of interpreting the requests coming from the citizens who, at that time, have begun to organise themselves. The cited epiphenomena, it goes without saying, emerged in moments of great difficulty for the economies of Latin American countries, which from 2013 onwards have experienced a crisis in the international prices of commodities, on whose export a large part of their GDP is based. Furthermore, a strengthening of a self-sufficient civil society, separated from the political class, could give new life to democratic legitimacy, breaking the dependence that the latter has developed on the economic performance of Latin American countries. This is a topic that becomes even more relevant today with the economic crisis triggered by the covid-19 pandemic. How could this be possible? This essay does not intend to give solutions, nor to prefigure scenarios, but rather intends to offer some suggestions of how to strengthen the role of civil society, at a time when democratic systems seem to be definitively consolidated in much of Latin America.

In the first place, the ruling class must be called upon to make an effort to avoid representing the political and social reality of different countries in a monolithic form. Latin American societies today seem very different, with many faces and multiple identities. The spasmodic search for a principle of unity, today, therefore appears not only anachronistic but also coercive. Another aspect of recognising this process of differentiation that happens in Latin American societies should be the end of the “Trojan horse syndrome”. This is a representation of a part of national society seen as the enemy of the Nation and therefore inherently dangerous (Zanatta, 2004).

Secondly, the time for detaching civil society from the influence of political parties has arrived: that is to say establishing the independence of the former from party politics and its dynamics. In a region where populist regimes have found (and continue to find) fertile ground, this means preventing the demands of civil society from being eroded by the Manichean dynamics of politics. Civil society, in other words, could not enter the process of political delegitimisation that represents the political opponent as an enemy. This is a challenge that becomes even more difficult if we consider the situation in Latin America in the times of the covid-19 pandemic (Zanatta, 2013; Arnson and De la Torre, 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The third and final suggestion concerns the withdrawal of the political world from occupied social spaces in order to rebuild its legitimacy. In this sense, the creation of the Under-Secretariat for the Strategic Coordination of National Thought in Argentina (created in June 2014 during the presidency of Cristina Fernández and dissolved 18 months later during the presidency of Mauricio Macri), was one of the most emblematic examples of political occupation of distinctive spaces, quintessential for civil society development. On the contrary, the State should now promote spaces for the politicisation of civil society independent of political parties, to reflect the complexity of the society within Latin American contexts and to make democratic systems more complex. Moving in this direction means promoting an independent press free from the political system, strengthening institutional checks and balances between independent political powers and authorities, and promoting synergies between public institutions and private entities (for research and education, for example).

In a certain way, the path of the Latin American democracies could be seen as interesting when analysing the contemporary European reality. Firstly, the Latin American experience tells us how populist political movements have been able to hybridise democratic regimes (in some cases liberal democratic regimes, in others authoritarian democratic ones). This is significant above all for some European countries that have seen an increase in the electoral success of populist movements in recent years, albeit with due distance between Latin American and European populisms. A second aspect, intimately linked to

the first, concerns party democracy. Faced with the end of party democracy in Europe (Mair, 2013), the Latin American cases must be observed carefully. In Latin American countries, in fact, only rarely have well-institutionalised political parties been the protagonists of political regimes. Others, in fact, have been central players, such as political leaders, trade unions, and the military, which are just some examples of these actors. Where parties have assumed a certain centrality, they have not been characterised by a particularly strong level of institutionalisation. This, once again, reveals the contribution that civil society could and, in some respects, should have in defining the political space. The sphere of civil society, whether understood in economic, political and cultural terms, plays an important role as an implicit actor in enacting the checks and balances of Latin American political systems, especially in the case of populist regimes. In fact, in the presence of a continuous delegitimisation and limitation of legislative and judicial powers, a strong and independent civil society seems to be able to become the counterweight of an overwhelming executive power. If for Latin American political realities this process may seem to be a sort of *deja-vu*, for a large number of European Countries it seems to have become a novelty over the last thirty years. The weakening of political parties and the excessive personalisation of political systems of the 1990s have, in recent times, shown the strength of populist movements and leaders (both 'right-wing' and 'left'). These movements have been united by an ability to hybridise liberal democratic systems and by a critique (harsh and ferocious, in certain cases) of European institutions.

These are, to a certain extent, some of the suggestions that governments can follow to bolster civil society in Latin America, although there are important differences within the regional context. This enforcement is becoming increasingly necessary also in light of the criticisms that democratic systems are experiencing, not only in the region but more generally, on a global level. Today it is difficult to imagine a democracy without political parties and, as Reinhart Koselleck argued, it is difficult to imagine political parties without presupposing a reality in which opinions have a relative normative value (Koselleck, 1972). If civil society is one of the arenas where opinions are formed and transformed, it is precisely thanks to the strengthening of its contribution

that it would be possible to create opportunities to stem the impoverishment of democratic political institutions, in Latin America and beyond.

- Alexander J.C. (2006). *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alvizuri V. (2012). *Le savant, le militant et l'aymara: Histoire d'une construction identitaire en Bolivie (1952-2006)*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Arnson C.J. and De la Torre C. (2013). The Meaning and Future of Latin American Populism. In Arnson C.J. and De la Torre C. (eds.). *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bresser-Pereira L.C. (2016). Reflexões sobre o Novo Desenvolvimentismo e o Desenvolvimentismo Clásico. *Revista de Economia Política*, 36, 237-265.
- Bulmer T.V. (2006). Globalization and the New Economic Model in Latin America. In Bulmer T.V., Coatsworth J.H. and Cortés Conde R. (eds.). *The Cambridge Economic History of Latin America. Vol. II* (pp. 135-166) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Cotler J. (1986). Military Interventions and "Transfer of Power to Civilians" in Peru. in O'Donnell G., Schmitter P.C. and Whitehead L. (eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule – Latin America* (pp. 148-172). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gardini G.L. (2010). *The Origins of Mercosur. Democracy and Regionalization in South America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heredia M. (2006). La demarcación de la frontera entre economía y política en democracia. Actores y controversias en torno de la política económica de Alfonsín. in Pucciarelli A. (ed.), *Los años de Alfonsín. ¿El poder de la democracia o la democracia del poder?* (pp. 153-198). Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI Editores.
- Huntington, S.P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press.
- Koselleck R. (1972). *Critica illuminista e crisi della società borghese*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Mainwaring S. and Scully T. (eds.) (1995). *Building Democratic Institutions. Party System in Latin America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mainwaring S. and Scully T. (eds.) (2009). *Democratic Governance in Latin America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mair P. (2013). *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso.

Mudde C. and Rovira Kaltwasser C. (2017). *Populism. A very short introduction*. Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

OAS [Organization of American States] (2019). Electoral integrity analysis. General Elections in the Plurinational State of Bolivia (October 20, 2019). Preliminary Findings Report to the General Secretariat. Online: <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Electoral-Integrity-Analysis-Bolivia2019.pdf>.

O'Donnell G. and Schmitter P.C. (2010). *Transiciones desde un gobierno autoritario. Conclusiones tentativas sobre las democracias inciertas*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros.

O'Donnell G. (1994). Delegative Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 5, 55-69.

Panizza F. (2000). Beyond 'Delegative Democracy': 'Old Politics' and 'New Economics'. *Latin America. Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32, 737-763.

Ragno F.D. (2018). La parabola della democrazia yrigoyenista, 1916-1994, in Ronchi V. and Rosti M. (eds.). *Argentina. 1816-2016* (pp. 87-98). Milano: Biblion.

Rosanvallon P. (2006). *La contre-démocratie. La politique à l'âge de la défiance*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Sarlo B. (2011). *La audacia y el cálculo: Kirchner 2003-2010*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.

Weyland K. (2003). *Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: How Much Affinity?*. *Third World Quarterly*, 24, 1095-1115.

Zanatta L. (2004). La sindrome del cavallo di Troia: l'immagine del nemico interno nella storia dell'America Latina. *Storia e Problemi Contemporanei*, 35, 107-135.

Zanatta L. (2013). *Il Populismo*. Roma: Carocci.