

# A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

## SEEING OURSELVES IN OTHERS: HOW LATIN AMERICA CAN HELP THE UNITED STATES KNOW ITSELF

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Dear Readers: I learned a lesson during the preparation of the last issue, my first as editor of the *Journal of Global South Studies*. The lesson was this: the amount of time that passes between the submission of this essay and its printing and distribution is significant enough that the topic at hand might seem a bit dated by the time it reaches you. Such was the case with my comments on developments in Venezuela, which were red-hot in the news cycle at the time I submitted my initial draft, and absent from the news by the time the issue was out. This does not mean the relevance of the issues had disappeared. Quite the contrary. The grim realities I described have not been resolved just because they have disappeared from the ever-churning news mill, and the underlying causes of those realities are even more resistant to change. Nevertheless, the point that the news cycle moves very, very fast was not lost on me.

With that in mind, I will say that by the time you read this, the Association of Global South Studies—the parent organization of this journal—will have recently concluded its annual conference. At the time of this writing, many of us are packing our bags for Buenos Aires, Argentina, the site of this year's meeting. Therefore, it seems like an opportune time to reflect on what has been going on in Latin America. Admittedly this is low-hanging fruit for me, given my own specialization in Latin American political history. Nevertheless, Latin America is on one of its periodic up-cycles in terms of its exposure in the U.S. news (which, lamentably, usually means it's on something of a down-cycle in terms of its political affairs).

In Chile, protestors recently took to the streets, wreaking havoc in a country that routinely boasts of its functional, conciliation-oriented democracy (its

leaders and citizens made similar claims for decades, before the onset of a brutal seventeen-year military dictatorship in 1973 buried any illusion that such things simply do not happen in Chile). Ostensibly the demonstrators objected to a routine rate increase in subway fares, but popular grievances ran much deeper. What should have provoked a mild disturbance instead unleashed a welter of anger that wasn't really about mass transit prices at all. Rather, it had to do with the entire package of free-market reforms that collectively have come to be known as "neoliberalism." The ticket price hike was merely the last straw.

This is curious for two interrelated reasons: First, Chile is often seen as the birthplace of neoliberalism, or at least the place where it was first put into practice in a systematic, planned manner. Canadian journalist Naomi Klein, in her controversial book (and later documentary) *The Shock Doctrine*, notes that before Reaganism or Thatcherism, there was Chile—a kind of laboratory in which an intellectual project incubated over decades, beginning with the Mont Pelerin Society and its leader, Friedrich Hayek, and later by the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago and its most brilliant theorist, Milton Friedman, could be applied all at once, rather than piecemeal.

The story by now is relatively familiar—a generation of Chilean economists became disciples of Friedman at Chicago before returning to Chile. When U.S. economic pressure conspired with Cold War hysteria, Chile's middle classes called for a military coup, which occurred in 1973. Soon after, those economists, who would come to be known as "Los Chicago Boys," caught the ear of soon-to-be dictator Augusto Pinochet, delivering him an economic blueprint so extensive that it would come to be called "the brick." In it were plans to convert Chile into the world's first fully privatized and unregulated economy. There can be little denial, even by those who supported and stood to benefit from this agenda, that the armed forces had to inflate, then exploit, a crisis in order to get Chile's poor majority, who in the years immediately preceding the coup had supported the socialist politician Salvador Allende, to accede to this plan. Those who stood in the way, or who were even perceived as potentially standing in the way, were subjected to torture, or worse still, discarded altogether in the country's own version of the region-wide "dirty war."

Much has happened since then. The days of economic "shock therapy" are long gone, as is the dictatorship. But the efforts to create a deregulated, privatized, and export-oriented economy has continued its march ever since. This brings

us to the second reason the recent protests are curious: at each turn since the dictatorship ended in 1990, leaders have touted the “Chilean Miracle”—a myth that attempts to link Chile’s comparatively high average incomes, economic growth rates, and human development statistics to this pattern of economic decision-making. As has been true of other so-called economic miracles, what seemed too good to be true was just that. While Chile is by one measure Latin America’s wealthiest country on a per-capita basis, it is also among its most unequal, and for a growing number of people suffering the day-to-day hell of poverty, there is a limit to what they will tolerate.

These protests, even if they go on for some time, most likely will not bring down the Chilean government, although they might bring its leaders to the table to negotiate some relief. They most likely will not last forever (as noted above, they may not even last until this essay is published, and they are almost surely to be absent from U.S. news by that point regardless). They may have some temporary electoral implications, but as the outcomes of Chile’s procedural democracy since 1990 have demonstrated, a change in political party does not necessarily mean a major shift in economic policy. But these protests have nonetheless sent a clear warning to the political establishment that a new generation of Chileans, one with no direct memory of the 1973 coup d’état or the ensuing dictatorship, will not endure flagrant exploitation at the hands of an elite minority or global financial institutions.

Meanwhile in Bolivia, we have just witnessed the longstanding mandate of President Evo Morales, the folksy Andean politician known for wearing colorful, handmade alpaca wool garments in lieu of suit and tie, crumble in a matter of days this past November. While Morales, as Bolivia’s first indigenous president and one of the leading figures of the region’s “pink tide,” remains highly popular with the country’s poor and predominantly indigenous masses, his overall support has waned in recent years, just as his opponents have become more mobilized and focused. However compelling Morales has been as a voice for Bolivian sovereignty and indigenous rights, opposition to his sustained presidency (he has been in office since 2006) is not without its legitimacy, and the counts against him have grown: his recent efforts to skirt term-limit laws and to avoid a second-round runoff in favor of declaring an immediate election victory, followed by mounting evidence of irregularities in the October 2019 election, have inspired popular protest from multiple social sectors. Protesting

corruption or other extra-legal action, even if it is committed by someone with whom you identify and who supports your interests, is always a valid, even noble act. Many within the United States would do well to remember that.

Nevertheless, the subsequent effort to oust Morales has been anything but legitimate, even if some common grievances against him are. Moreover, the case against him has, perhaps predictably, been tinged with anti-indigenous racism. As has become a familiar story in Latin America and elsewhere, the country's armed forces ultimately did the bidding of the political right, with its strong linkages to external capital. In this case, the activist Luis Fernando Camacho succeeded in whipping up popular dissatisfaction to the extent that the armed forces, in their self-professed role as defenders of the nation from internal threats, overwhelmed the security forces of Morales, leaving him no plausible choice but to resign. Within days, the politician Jeanine Áñez had declared herself interim president. Morales, having seen his private residence ransacked, accepted political asylum in Mexico, where he remains in exile. The drama of the situation has led to confusion about what exactly had happened: Was it a coup? Was it a popular revolt? One could probably make the case that it was a little of both. Regardless, persistent instability, for any reason, always comes with drawbacks—supply shortages, capital flight, violence—that have negative or even mortal effects on people's lives.

The current situation in Bolivia perhaps most closely resembles recent developments in Venezuela, which I discussed at greater length in the editorial message of the prior issue of the *Journal of Global South Studies*. Other quarters in Latin America have also experienced significant, if somewhat less wild, swings in their internal politics. For the fourth time in the last five elections, Argentines have sent a left-leaning Peronist to the Casa Rosada, after the four-year term of conservative technocrat Mauricio Macri failed to produce the promised benefits of economic stability and opportunity. Mexicans in 2018 opted for a similar route by sending stalwart social activist and erstwhile presidential contender Andrés Manuel López Obrador to Los Pinos. Brazilians went another direction, electing a self-avowed arch-conservative with a military background to the presidency. Jair Bolsonaro, whose unapologetic and bombastic manner has endeared him to a certain segment of the population while enraging another, bears a striking resemblance in his demeanor to the current U.S. president.

Mention of that latter figure—an almost irresistible temptation I have vowed not to indulge too much in these essays—brings me to the point I'd like to make:

We can, in fact, learn a lot about ourselves, and our own institutions, by looking at places in the Global South, including Latin America. On the surface the differences between the Global north and south—between the core and the periphery, the rich and the poor, the colonizing and the colonized, those who demand and those who supply—seem so significant that the only logical conclusion is to adopt the view of those regions and their peoples as inherently different, as Other. As is well established in the postcolonial literature, the entire purpose of creating such an other is to construct a vision of the self; the two constitute one another mutually. Most understand the differences between the two on an intuitive level—one is prosperous and stable, the other poor and unstable.

Recent political developments in the United States and Europe, the details of which will have to wait for another day, have begun to suggest that this division might become less and less useful, perhaps entirely irrelevant, in the decades to come, as similarities grow, difference shrink, and the system that created the division in the first place destabilizes. If we take this as a premise at the outset, then what might our not-so-different counterparts in Latin America teach us?

As Chile taught us in 1973, uncritical trust in national exceptionalism can be disastrous. In that case, popular belief that Chile's democratic political culture and republican political institutions were strong enough to survive total assault proved to be a disastrous mistake. The moment people adopt that mentality—that *things like that simply don't happen here*—the threshold of tolerance for deviations from political norms goes up, and that's when things fall apart. The underlying, unstated assumption is that problems will self-correct if a country's political forms are sound. That assumption blew up in the faces of Chileans then, and it is a vital lesson for those of us in the Global north today.

Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico today teach us perhaps above all that people have a remarkably accurate innate sense of when they are being maltreated, but also demonstrate enormously varying levels of understanding of the connection between that exploitation and formal politics. That is a potent and dangerous imbalance: righteous anger can lead to horrifying political experiments if that anger is not tempered by knowledge, compromise, and reasonable expectations. This might explain the wide swings in popular support in Latin America, often from the same social classes, for leftist and right-wing political parties or even military dictatorships. It certainly goes some distance in explaining how masses of people can consent to policies or leaders working against the

group's collective interests. Once again, the lessons are obvious but useful all the same for the United States today.

Setting aside the various forces that influence the political experiences in Latin America at any given moment (above all external forces, arguably the greatest among them), the pendulous nature of Latin American politics since the end of the Cold War might tell us that the solutions to the region's internal problems, including economic inequality and poverty, endemic corruption, and violence, might not be found on the left or the right. They certainly weren't during the Cold War, when the region's politics were far more polarized. Latin America has come a considerable way since then. The political right no longer looks like military dictatorships and death squads. Rather, it has taken the form of pro-business parties, many of them aligned with global Christian Democracy. And the left is no longer represented chiefly by guerrilla movements resorting to armed struggle out of desperation. Again, we see social democratic and other centrist institutions in their place. These two forces and the parties that represent them have largely been able to cooperate, if not always agree, with one another. Yet, whether in concert or at odds with one another at any given moment, they have not resolved the central tensions within those societies.

All of this is to say, Latin Americans are still trying to find their political footing while the sand continues to shift under their feet. And in that, we can find something familiar with our own reality here in the United States. We might even learn something about ourselves from their experience.