

INTRODUCTION

The self-institution of society: A democratic interrogation with no end

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Two different types of inquiry and normative concerns have dominated the literature on Latin American politics over the past three decades. During the 1980s and 1990s the key words were no doubt transition and consolidation. During that time, some type of mildly teleological thinking—after the rather strong critique of philosophies of history and the crisis of the Marxist revolutionary paradigm—still dominated the scene. This teleology offered an interpretive matrix that saw the wave of democratic emergence and re-emergence in southern Europe, South America, eastern Europe and South Africa as steps in a temporal continuum that could be measured and evaluated according to different degrees of progress vis-à-vis always tentative objective indicators. In this new century, however, certain global and regional events shifted the focus of analysts from the problem of democratic transition and consolidation to that of models of democracy, often dichotomized as being at base either populist or republican and liberal.

This shift was tied to two disparate phenomena. In the first place, 9/11 and the U.S. global war on terror, diverted attention to issues of security and a general confirmation that a teleological “end of history” horizon was definitively off the cards. At this time generalizations were produced from the electoral successes of left-of-center political forces in South America and their stabilization as fairly effective administrations. Although security and geopolitical concerns were probably related to the new agenda as well, it was mostly the second phenomenon that more directly determined the shift in the attention of both analysts and political and economic actors from the transition to the model paradigm.

This second phenomenon—the Latin American Turn to the Left—triggered a debate on the two different models of progressive politics that dominated the scene. On the one hand, there was the populist model, captivated as it became by a quasi-revolutionary imagination of an embodied popular will. On the other hand, there was the republican model, which had in the main remained faithful to the institutions and practices of liberal democracy and had been warmly embraced by most in the Latin American Left after the tragic failure of the 1970s’ project of revolutionary violence.

We hope this special section of *Constellations* will help clarify both sets of concerns—that of the path from authoritarian to democratic regimes and that of the models of democracy at stake, which are nonetheless intimately related. The democratic interrogation thus follows: What should the relation between the constituting and the constituent dimensions of democratic life be and how does that dynamic manifest itself in contemporary Latin American democracies (Peruzzotti)? Is the populist claim of the primacy of democratic equality over liberal procedural principles one to be taken seriously at the normative level or is it just a means of justifying the arbitrary use of political authority (Saffon and González Bertomeu)? Does the currently dominant dichotomy of populist or republican and liberal models sufficiently exhaust the Latin American landscape or is a third, more dramatic type focusing on the failure of democratic legitimacy urgently needed to complete a comprehensive typology (Crespo)? Finally—and emphasizing Latin America’s characteristic intertwining of political theorizing and democratic practice—how has the use of the Gramscian concepts

of passive revolution and the integral state by Bolivian critical social theorists helped in both the genesis and understanding of Evo Morales' presidency (McNelly)?

We then narrow the focus in order to see the details. When explicitly confronted, as it is shown in the paradigmatic case study that Chile is today, we may ask what is the best constitution-making model and which paths may take us to this goal (Arato)? If the lack of democratic legitimacy is the original sin of the Chilean Constitution, how should this deficit be remedied without trapping theorists by the myth of an embodied popular will? Moreover, in considering the best options available, is Arato's post-sovereign constitution-making model, theorized from the basis of the southern and eastern European as much as the South African experiences, suitable for South American republics (Kennedy)? Finally, if after careful consideration the Chilean "democracy of agreements" reveals itself as rather a well-designed mechanism to perpetuate authoritarian enclaves imposed by executive fiat, should we still fear triggering a process in which actual democratic deliberation, with contemporary agreements and civil society participation, could provide Chile with a well-deserved democratic constitution (Heiss)?

In brief, this special section exhibits the way in which democratic theory could greatly benefit from the intertwining of political thought and its interpretive encounter with empirical case studies. The Chilean constitutional problem is central to the larger question of the place of constitution-making in the life of contemporary Latin American democracies. In its turn, Latin American democracies and their current conflicts and dilemmas with populist, liberal, and simply failing legitimacy are testaments to the larger democratic question in both old and new democracies. In Chile, in Latin America and, after the 2016 elections in the U.S.A., in the Americas at large, the question of democracy as the enigma of the self-institution of society is as important as ever, part of an interrogation that has no end.

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