

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“[N]ew ideas and new actors are needed to fill the void  
in the region’s public sphere more than ever.”*

## Latin America’s Elusive Public Sphere

PHILIP OXHORN

A dynamic public sphere is one of the defining characteristics of a successful democracy. Yet achieving this goal has been problematic in Latin America. Centuries of political exclusion have exacerbated historical problems of inequality, and a vibrant public sphere remains more aspirational than real for the

**Public Spheres**

*Fourth in a series*

majority of countries in the region. Ironically, democracy’s most vocal opponents in Latin America understand this best. For both left and right, the free debate and open exchange of ideas associated with the public sphere is the biggest threat to whatever ideal order they seek to impose, and assailed as the breeding ground for a fifth column that threatens some greater public good from within. As a result, the public sphere has often been violently shut down for the “good” of the nation.

All of this was supposed to have changed in the closing years of the twentieth century. The region is more democratic than ever because of the political transitions that started in the late 1970s and culminated in the defeat of Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the 2000 elections, after more than 70 years in power. Democracy was arguably reinforced by the end of the Cold War and by the market-based economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which promised to rule out any possible alternatives.

Sadly, despite these high hopes, the promise of democracy has not yet been fulfilled. Notwithstanding important outbursts of democratic fervor, democracy’s institutionalization

remains shallow in a region marked by a precarious respect for fundamental rights. Bloody military coups and massive violations of human rights may be a relic of a not-too-distant past, but Latin Americans are far from enjoying the kind of democracies that political transitions were supposed to have ushered in decades ago.

Latin America’s public sphere offers important insights into this fundamental ambiguity of democracy in the region. The lack of a dynamic public sphere is both the clearest symptom of a larger problem and one of its principal causes. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that the potential of the public sphere to expand participation, elaborate democratic alternatives, and generate new sources of consensus around what unambiguously contributes to the public good is part of the solution.

The public sphere encompasses the ways in which the state and civil society interact through a variety of public mechanisms to define a common good. Communication is an essential part of this. A free press, and increasingly social media, therefore play an essential role in defining the quality of the public sphere. Different actors compete to influence public policy and define citizenship rights in pursuit of their own self-defined interests. The public sphere thus encapsulates nonviolent social struggle, competition, and negotiation. Its quality is conditioned by the groups that participate in it, as well as by state policies that facilitate or constrict such participation.

The excessive concentration of power—economic and/or political—by its nature threatens to stifle debate, preclude alternatives, and limit participation by less advantaged actors in ways that undermine the public sphere and democratic governance. Conversely, a dynamic public sphere contributes to the relative dispersion of political,

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economic, and social power throughout the polity by generating rich debates over genuine alternatives. Its capacity to peacefully mediate conflicts helps create societies that are more fair and equal. To paraphrase Jürgen Habermas, the contemporary political philosopher most closely associated with renewed interest in the public sphere, discourses do not govern but public debate is a source of policy alternatives, and it is through the public sphere that power is transformed in order to build societies that are more inclusive. This is particularly relevant for understanding Latin America today.

### UNFULFILLED PROMISE

For most Latin Americans, the 1990s were years of profoundly ambiguous economic and political change. The severe economic dislocations of the 1980s—the infamous “lost decade”—caused by unprecedented increases in inflation, poverty, and inequality were largely behind them, but the long-promised recovery failed to reverse negative structural dynamics that seemed increasingly chronic. While inflation was kept largely under control, economic growth remained sporadic, and unemployment rates and poverty levels failed to return to their pre-crisis levels.

Politically, with the notable exception of Mexico until 2000, newly elected governments replaced the old authoritarian regimes as Latin America enjoyed a democratic renaissance. Rule by the majority appeared to have finally triumphed. Overt dictatorship seemed condemned to the dustbin of history, often because of widespread social mobilization. Even the traditional left, which bore the brunt of political repression during the Cold War, exhibited a newfound respect for “bourgeois” democracy as democratic transitions dramatically reduced levels of political violence.

While the transitions were applauded, there was a deep ambivalence in how people viewed the governments they were now electing—and democracy more generally. Public opinion polls showed that while the majority of Latin Americans felt that democracy was the best form of government, sizeable minorities did not. Even people who claimed to believe in democracy often expressed a willingness to accept nondemocratic practices if they contributed to

better economic outcomes. Key institutions of democratic governance, including legislatures and political parties, enjoyed the trust of less than one-third of Latin Americans. Large majorities believed that their governments were biased against them and working for the interests of others rather than the public good.

Instead of ushering in a renaissance in the public sphere, the triumph of democracy seemed to cause its stagnation. Growing political grievances coupled with greater respect for liberties such as freedom of the press and the right to organize did not lead to the kinds of results one might expect. With memories of dictatorship still fresh in the minds of many, there was a self-imposed retreat from the public sphere, particularly as the social movements active in achieving democratic transitions had to learn how to engage with elected governments that refrained from repressing them and claimed to represent them. Continued economic lethargy and restrictive legislation sapped the influence of organized labor as civil society

fragmented. While political violence dramatically declined, criminal violence began to rise throughout the region, often linked with the transnational drug trade, and the zero-tolerance

law enforcement policies intended to address it only contributed to higher levels of violence. Growing concentration in the ownership of traditional mass media (newspapers, television, and radio), particularly in countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, reinforced these conservative dynamics with their editorial policies, which favored the right and the center-right.

Despite such shortcomings, it is important not to lose sight of the importance of democracy's triumph. Relatively free and fair elections meant that these same shortcomings could be overcome by peacefully changing governments and enacting new policies. To realize that potential, though, the public sphere would need to be reinvigorated, juxtaposing new ideas, if not new actors, with those undergirding a less than satisfactory status quo.

### LEFTWARD SHIFT

It was precisely this kind of change in the public sphere that seemed imminent at the turn of the century. Beginning with the election of Hugo

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Chávez as president of Venezuela in 1998, progressive leaders came to dominate Latin American politics after successive victories throughout the region. Newly elected governments pledged sweeping social reforms and novel forms of political participation favoring disadvantaged groups. Their plans promised to fundamentally transform state-society relations, deepening democratic ties between elected governments and the people they represented.

These new governments fell into two broad groups. The first, represented by Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Néstor Kirchner and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, promised radical changes that were epitomized by Chávez's goal of creating "socialism for the twenty-first century." All four countries implemented significant redistributive policies favoring the lower classes through increasing state intervention in the economy and the nationalization of industries.

The political projects of these governments were equally radical. With the exception of the Kirchners in Argentina, they all introduced new constitutions that promised much greater participation for indigenous peoples and new forms of grassroots democracy. Despite that promise, they sharply increased the role of the presidency based on the expectation that they would remain in power for the foreseeable future. Eschewing formal political party structures, they personalized their rule by attempting to establish a direct relationship between the president and "the people," reinforcing the region's populist political tendencies.

A second group of countries adopted a more moderate, pragmatic approach, represented by Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. Here, the promise of economic reform rather than revolution prevailed, with a concomitantly smaller role for the state in regulating market dynamics. These reformist governments implemented important new social policies addressing the needs of the poor under existing constitutional structures, but with less emphasis on indigenous people's historical exclusion, particularly in Chile. They also promised new forms of political participation, but generally accepted the importance of institutions that mediated participation. While all three were led by presidents who enjoyed exceptionally high levels of voter approval (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, and Tabaré

Vázquez in Uruguay), none sought to bypass political parties or other formal structures in order to establish a more direct populist connection with the people.

The left's promises for greater social inclusion and participation coincided with the region's best sustained economic performance since the 1970s. After waiting decades for improvement in their standard of living, the majority of Latin Americans finally benefited from more than a decade of strong economic growth beginning in 2002. Poverty rates declined markedly as a new middle class emerged. Even the region's notorious economic inequality began to diminish. It seemed hard to imagine a more auspicious context for a burgeoning public sphere.

Despite some telling exceptions, however, the public sphere did not flourish in Latin America, particularly under leftist governments. Old problems, such as the growing concentration of media ownership, continued to narrow the range of opinions in the public sphere. More seriously, the rise of the left was less a consequence of vibrant debates and opposing political projects than a rejection of the status quo and the traditional politicians and political parties who dominated it. This rejection was so strong that even the conservative media could not prevent the rise of the left.

## VENEZUELAN CHILL

Hugo Chávez epitomized this reality. A former army colonel, Chávez came to political prominence in 1992 by leading an unsuccessful coup against one of the oldest democratic regimes in the region. Chávez promised to "rescue the Venezuelan people" from corrupt politicians who stood by as poverty soared, even though Venezuela had the largest oil reserves in the world. It was a powerful message that, combined with his personal charisma, allowed Chávez to dominate the country's politics until his death in 2013. Despite his revolutionary rhetoric, his policies were an ad hoc mix of reforms that took advantage of opportunities to expand his own influence and that of his closest political allies, particularly the military, in the economy and society, and stopgap measures intended to appease popular frustrations with state hand-outs. Chávez's rhetoric also identified a scapegoat for failed economic policies by reviving Cold War fears of US imperialism.

Chávez's control over the public sphere was a key source of his political endurance. Opposition

media, particularly television, were under constant threat and the most hostile outlets were shut down. This intimidation was complemented by a barrage of government propaganda and Chávez's adept use of television—frequently interrupting scheduled programming with hours-long speeches—to reinforce his image. Opposition divisions were exacerbated by the constraints on the public sphere, as different factions could not agree on how to combat them. This made it difficult for them to present a coherent alternative to the elected government or to establish deep ties with civil society organizations.

The government did create a variety of participatory institutions, particularly at the local level. Their explicit intent is to increase citizen participation, particularly by the poor. Community councils are the most important. Loosely modeled after Cuba's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, which were established at the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s to protect the Castro government from the US threat, the community councils constrain meaningful debate by allowing the state to penetrate society, rather than spawning autonomous participation on the part of citizens. They subordinate civil society to the central state through their links with the executive branch. At best, by ostracizing dissenters, the councils have a chilling effect on society's capacity to develop and debate policy alternatives. At worst, they may become a mechanism for state-sponsored repression if unconfirmed rumors that some councils are armed prove accurate.

These negative effects were clearest in 2014, when a series of protests swept Venezuela. Beginning ostensibly as an outcry against a surge of criminal violence, the protests became a substitute for a democratic public sphere. Despite the fact that Venezuela was experiencing the highest inflation rate in the hemisphere and shortages of basic goods, along with the reality that the poor are the principal victims of one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world, the protests were led by university students and the middle classes. The poor stayed largely on the sidelines, aside from occasional outbursts of support for the government.

While there were dozens of deaths on both sides and thousands of arrests, the protests became one of the few avenues for dissent, even if their ultimate goals were never clear. Yet it was only behind the secrecy of the ballot box in the December 2015 parliamentary elections that an

overwhelming majority of Venezuelans could voice their rejection of a government that seemed increasingly incapable of managing the economy and halting the spiral of criminal violence. True to form, the government is exploring ways to reduce the power of the legislature rather than seek any compromise with the new majority.

## ANDEAN INDIGENOUS MOVEMENTS

Chávez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro, may be an extreme example, but the problems they created for the public sphere are common to the other radical left governments in the region. Neither Evo Morales in Bolivia nor Rafael Correa in Ecuador elaborated any clear socialist economic model, although nationalization in the extractive sector was key for both. Yet this was anything but a new policy. Ecuador first joined OPEC in 1972, withdrew in the early 1990s, and rejoined in 2007. Bolivia's history of nationalization in the extractive sector goes back to its 1952 revolution. Like Chávez, both Correa and Morales used the growing profits from the sector to fund new programs intended to win the allegiance of marginalized groups. They also enacted various formal and informal measures to curtail public debate in order to limit the emergence of credible political alternatives. Politics were centralized in the office of the presidency, limiting the space for anything approaching a vibrant public sphere.

Morales's political success, however, has had important positive consequences that are unique in the region. It effectively marked the end of the historical exclusion from the public sphere of the majority of Bolivians who are of indigenous origin. Taking advantage of the opportunities opened by Bolivia's 1994 Popular Participation Law, he created a social movement that brought him to power in the 2005 election, making him the country's first indigenous president. He legitimated local participatory institutions that until then were viewed with suspicion since they had been imposed by a state that was viewed by most indigenous people as racist because it had historically marginalized them. Those institutions, which included elected city governments, substantial funding from the central government, participatory budgeting, and local oversight of how funds were spent, became a source of local empowerment and novel development programs.

Morales's 2009 constitution created the Plurinational State of Bolivia, dramatically

redefining the public sphere by recognizing the country's diverse indigenous heritage. Being indigenous became a source of pride for the first time. The public sphere was nurtured further by the predictable frictions between Morales's social movement base and the inevitable compromises stemming from the demands of governing. This led to dissent that came from within the governing coalition, which meant it had to be tolerated. The opposition outside the ruling coalition was more readily marginalized because it was seen as a direct threat, representing class and racial interests that contradicted Morales's political project.

### BRAZIL'S EPHEMERAL VIBRANCY

The moderate left offered a more propitious environment for a vibrant public sphere in Brazil and Chile. Its unambiguous commitment to political democracy meant that there were no overt attempts by the state to silence the opposition. Conservative business interests dominated the traditional media, yet this was obviously not sufficient to prevent the left from repeatedly winning the presidency. Political party institutions played a central role that at least gave reason to hope that multiple voices from society would be heard, not only the leaders. Unfortunately, however, the vibrancy of the public sphere was not sustainable in either Brazil or Chile.

Brazil has been governed by the Workers' Party (PT) since 2002, when Lula was first elected president. Much like Morales's Movement Toward Socialism party in Bolivia, the PT had cultivated close ties to civil society at the local level since its founding in 1980. This led the PT to campaign for office on a pledge to create new participatory structures intended to involve civil society in key decision-making processes within the Brazilian state.

The hallmark of this program was participatory budgeting, which became famous in Porto Alegre after it was adopted by the local government in 1989. At its peak, thousands of people, particularly poor people, participated in deliberative decision making on a variety of issues. Each year, citizens met in 16 district assemblies throughout Porto Alegre to elect delegates responsible for representing their communities' interests in the municipal budget. These delegates also met to

discuss larger issues that transcended community interests so that priorities could be set for distributing funds among the districts in accordance with larger citywide priorities. They even monitored actual expenditures.

Similar participatory processes were created at the national level. The most prominent of these were the dozens of national conferences organized by the PT government to influence federal policies, particularly social programs, through active citizen participation.

While the scope of these various participatory mechanisms should not be exaggerated, they all expanded Brazil's public sphere in important ways. Yet they proved ephemeral. When the PT was voted out of office in Porto Alegre in 2005, the new government restricted the opportunities for participation. And with ordinary citizens no longer confident about the usefulness of attending public meetings, participation declined even further. At the national level, Lula's designated

heir and successor, Dilma Rousseff, similarly restricted the influence of national conferences and other participatory institutions after she was first elected president in 2010, reflecting her technocratic approach to politics.

This mercurial quality of Brazil's public sphere stems from the dominant role played by political elites rather than citizen initiatives. Tellingly, the national conferences date back to the 1940s, under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas. In a similar vein, Brazil's 1988 constitution paved the way for greater citizen participation, but it was only when the PT gained power and remained committed to participation that the constitution began to realize its potential.

As with Venezuela in 2014, social frustration grew and when the public sphere could not accommodate it, the result was mass protest. Deteriorating public services, increasing economic insecurity, and widespread accusations of corruption led hundreds of thousands to take to the streets in 2013, in Brazil's largest protest movement in decades. The protests prompted some minor reforms, but it seemed as if the real moment for change would come in the 2014 presidential election. Unlike in Venezuela, however, the election did not change anything. Not only was Rousseff returned to power, but the problems that sparked the 2013 protests grew

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worse. Brazil entered its deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and corruption scandals revolving around the state-owned petroleum company Petrobras led to an equally serious political crisis. Rousseff's public support fell to all-time lows amid growing calls for her impeachment.

### CHILE'S MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Chile is another example of opportunities for a more vibrant public sphere that were largely lost. Responding to growing popular frustration with a political system controlled by party elites, Michelle Bachelet won the presidency in 2006, promising new institutions for citizen participation after her predecessor, Ricardo Lagos, failed to follow through on similar promises. Within months of her taking office, hundreds of thousands of high school students held street protests demanding fundamental reform of the education law inherited from the military regime. Their objectives were clear: eliminating policies that favored private education and creating municipal school boards to allow for greater citizen participation in the educational system.

With clear aims and widespread public support, the student protesters' success seemed inevitable when the Bachelet government agreed to implement significant changes. But optimism was short-lived. Congressional negotiations ultimately sapped most of the substance from the reforms, and popular support for the students' demands dwindled when people realized how expensive they would be. More seriously for the public sphere, the sight of thousands of student protesters in the streets brought back memories of the violence and uncertainty associated with the 1973 military coup, and the Bachelet government stepped back from its promise to create more participatory institutions.

Constitutionally barred from reelection, Bachelet was succeeded in 2010 by the country's first center-right government since the 1950s. Within a year, student mobilizations returned, now led by university students. Their demands were similar: They called for reversing policies that favored private schools to such an extent that access to quality education, from grade

school through university, was among the most unequal in the hemisphere. This movement catalyzed genuine debate over alternatives, based on widespread agreement that access to education should be democratized and that compromise was necessary, given the conservative government's refusal to accede to all of the students' demands.

The student movement was part of a more generalized increase in social unrest in Chile as various civil society groups mobilized after the turn of the century, including workers and environmentalists. In contrast to their counterparts in Venezuela and Brazil, these mobilizations tended to focus on concrete policies—aims that could fuel public debate in an increasingly vibrant public sphere. When Bachelet won reelection in 2014 on a platform that adopted many of the key demands of the student movement and other groups such as organized labor, the public sphere had reached a new zenith, more than 25 years after Chile's democratic transition.

Once again, Bachelet made some progress in implementing reforms while popular support for them remained high. Then a rapidly slowing economy and growing corruption scandals

brought the political system to a near standstill. Civil society was in retreat as students became disillusioned and workers went on the defensive, most concerned with protecting the gains that they had already achieved. Chile's public sphere seemed to shrink, highlighting its ephemeral quality.

### MEXICO'S FRUSTRATIONS

It is important to emphasize that the left's failure to sustain a vibrant public sphere had more to do with politics and the nature of Latin America's unequal societies than with ideology. The left's progressive pretensions only made that failure more frustrating. The fate of the public sphere in Mexico, which has had a succession of conservative governments since its democratic transition in 2000, is no different. More tolerant of dissent than the governments of the radical left in Venezuela and elsewhere, but with levels of media concentration similar to those in Brazil and Chile, Mexico has witnessed important instances of a vibrant public sphere that quickly receded.

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The Zapatista uprising that broke out in 1994, when indigenous rebels launched an insurgency in the southern state of Chiapas, is a good example. After the government passed relatively weak constitutional reforms in 2001 to address the historical marginalization of the country's large indigenous population, the movement lost much of its political influence as the larger public lost interest.

The same fate befell Mexico's pro-democracy movement, which had mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to help ensure free and fair elections leading up to the historic 2000 victory by the opposition, ending seven decades of unbroken rule by the PRI. Since the democratic transition, Mexico's public sphere has been punctuated by a number of smaller, short-lived mobilizations, particularly against rising levels of violence associated with the growing influence of drug cartels and the government's reaction to them. Lacking clear policy proposals and inspiring limited public debate, these mobilizations allowed people to vent their frustrations but gave them little opportunity to contribute to real change.

### EXCEPTIONAL COLOMBIA

The most important exception to this general pattern is found in the least likely of places: Colombia. It is hard to imagine how a public sphere might be able to flourish in a country racked by violence, with a civil war dating back to the 1960s and a growing drug trade since the 1970s. Yet it did, and Colombia is now on the cusp of a peace accord to end the civil war.

The process started when center-right President Juan Manuel Santos, who was elected in 2010, broke with his predecessor and mentor, Álvaro Uribe, to begin secret negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Uribe, first elected in 2002, had a clear mandate to militarily defeat the guerrillas after previous attempts to negotiate peace only seemed to give the FARC time to rebuild its strength. Santos was his defense minister.

The 2014 presidential election became a referendum on a choice of continued war or peace, pitting Santos against Uribe's designated candidate, Óscar Iván Zuluaga. More than a debate on strategy, the election inevitably had to address fundamental issues of justice, human rights violations, and social equity—the difficult moral issues that were unavoidable after decades of intense vio-

lence affecting millions of people. The campaign opened a discussion of alternatives for addressing some of the most pressing problems any country could face, and it enriched the public sphere. Santos ultimately triumphed, and the vibrancy of the public sphere is perhaps the best omen of the peace process's likely success.

### THE INTERNET AS EQUALIZER?

The close link between inequality and the weakness of Latin America's public sphere raises the possibility that the information technology revolution might be the necessary precursor to realizing the promise of democracy in the region. The relative accessibility of social media, growing Internet use, and the limited capacity of states with democratic regimes to control access suggest that the Internet could finally shift the balance of power within the public sphere by expanding it through the introduction of new ideas, alternative sources of information, and new actors. Indeed, all of the protests discussed here have benefited in numerous ways from new forms of connectivity.

The outcomes of those protests, however, offer important insights into the limits of the Internet for catalyzing social change. The symbolic importance of the protests was beyond dispute: Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people expressed their frustrations openly. Yet the protests did not generate change. At best, the protests became a potent gauge of public discontent, but any true transformation of the public sphere and society more generally could not follow, given the lack of clear objectives and proposals for realizing them. Rejection of some element of the status quo is not enough—it has to be replaced by something. Elections still offer the most potent means for achieving change, but they are dependent on the choices voters have. This is why Colombia stands out: The choices could not be clearer, and it was through the public sphere that those choices were defined.

Ideally, the Internet could help generate alternatives and nurture the emergence of leaders prepared to enact them. This has not happened. The fluid leadership of Internet-based movements, limited opportunities for online debates to transcend the relatively small communities involved in them, and the still formidable divide between the virtual world of the Internet and the practical world of politics have prevented the realization of new alternatives.

The experience of the *Yo Soy 132* social movement in Mexico's 2012 presidential election is a cogent example. Composed of university students, the movement was born when Mexico's major media outlets refused to air a video in which the PRI's presidential candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, showed no remorse when questioned about the excessive levels of violence used against protesters in the state of Mexico when he was governor. Recorded on May 11, the video went viral on social media. Thousands of students mobilized to oppose Peña Nieto, and opinion polls showed a marked decline in support for the front-runner. But with less than two months to go before the July 1 election, the movement was too little, too late, and Peña Nieto narrowly won.

The unasked, and ultimately unanswerable, question is what would have happened had *Yo Soy 132* succeeded? The movement defined success as Peña Nieto losing the election, with no consideration of the consequences this might have had for the country or the public good. There were no replacements for Peña Nieto as the PRI candidate waiting in the wings, and none of the rival parties

made any significant changes to their electoral platforms.

### A NEED FOR THE NEW

The end of the commodity boom that fueled Latin America's recent economic success marks the return of uncertainty and the likely erosion of many of the gains that were made in the first years of the twenty-first century. The need for a more vibrant public sphere has only grown. Rather than recycling old policies and old politicians, new ideas and new actors are needed to fill the void in the region's public sphere more than ever.

The challenge is to confront this need head-on, learning from the shortcomings of the region's leftist turn and taking advantage of the tools that the information technology revolution can provide. The example of Colombia's peace process and the many seeds of a more vibrant public sphere expressed in diverse, albeit limited, mobilizations throughout the region remind us that much can be accomplished if shortcuts to achieving democratic participation are eschewed in favor of public debate and dialogue. ■