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Forrest D. Colburn: Latin America at the End of Politics

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Chapter I

Introduction



LATIN AMERICA at the end of politics? Yes, of politics with a capital p. With the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, disenchantment with the Cuban Revolution, and arguably even more important, the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the impetus in Latin America for remaking state and society has withered. There is an end to ideological confrontation and contestation. What has triumphed, more through default than victory, is liberalism: democracy and capitalism. But it is a particular kind of liberalism. The region's democracies are fragile, inefficient, and chaotic in aggregating and implementing society's preferences. There is considerable politics with a lowercase p. Likewise, there are monopolies, weak regulation, and other impediments to a robust capitalism. However, the more serious shortcoming of the triumphant liberalism—a limitation that defines the era—is that liberalism has been sheared of its close association with egalitarianism. There is, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, a loss of confidence in the promise of liberalism: to promote equality, at least of opportunity.

What has been lost by the end of “high politics” (or politics with a capital p) is more than faith in the promises of the Bolshevik Revolution. Even the aspirations of the French Revolution, of an inclusive society, of *égalité* and *fraternité*, have been cast aside. The ideal of egalitarianism has been smothered by political fatigue and aspirations for acquisition. It is a period of very modest and carefully circumscribed passions.

The triumph of liberalism has been widely discussed. One of the most cited analyses is Francis Fukuyama's essay “The End of History?” published in the summer 1989 issue of the journal *The National Interest*. The title of the essay is misleading; Fukuyama really discusses the end of politics, not the end of history.

Still, Fukuyama had the prescience to suggest that the prevailing discord in Eastern Europe had a larger significance, that it marked the demise of socialism as an alternative to liberal democracy and to capitalism. Moreover, the demise of socialism was suggested to be of transcendental importance because liberalism now faced no other “challengers,” real or imaginable:

What we may be witnessing is . . . the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Surely, as Fukuyama well recognized, there will continue to be noteworthy events, political and otherwise, to attract our attention. Yet, Fukuyama suggests there will be no more fundamental challenges to the central questions of how state and society are organized.

This outcome is a surprise:

The twentieth century saw the developed world descend into a paroxysm of ideological violence, as liberalism contended first with the remnants of absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war. But the century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to an “end of ideology” or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.

The poorer parts of the world—Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America—were likewise damaged by the ideological turmoil of the century, at times because of competition among local groups with contending visions of how to govern, and at other times because poor countries became pawns in the struggles among the wealthy and powerful countries of the world.

In comparison with the rest of the world, Latin America was perhaps least affected by the ideological debates of the twentieth century. The region was not torn apart by fascist movements—or fascist invaders—or the victim of governments hell-bent on a “great leap forward” to “scientific communism.” But ideologies, all of them fashioned in Europe, did have a significant impact on Latin America in the twentieth century. They offered political elites visions of state and society, and they shaped public policy. And, so, the “end of politics”—the end of struggle among competing ideologies—is consequential for Latin America.

Latin America begins the twenty-first century with a near-universal embrace of liberal democracy. It is timely to inquire how well the institutions of democracy are working, how well they are fulfilling their responsibilities, in this particular corner of the world. But an inquiry should be broad. The issue is not just how well liberal democracy suits the region, but how it works without the strong voice of proponents of socialism, who were long a vocal presence in Latin America. Ultrationalists, though never quite so numerous, have also been marginalized. In other words, how does democracy work without the constant specter of alternative contenders? Indeed, since what has happened is that alternative ideologies have been discredited, and not that liberalism has been vigorously embraced on its own merits, it is perhaps fairer to ask how democratic institutions—and capitalism—work without serious ideological competition.

It is seductive to think that, at least in the case of Latin America, the functioning of democratic institutions and practices is facilitated by ideological consensus or even by ideological somnolence. But that con-

clusion would be facile. Democracy depends on choices, among contending candidates and among alternative programs of government. And democracy depends on opposition—on a loyal opposition to be sure, but on a vigorous opposition nonetheless. Underlying everything is the need for public participation. Perhaps ideological heterogeneity—in the case of poor countries—is needed to stimulate political choice, invigorate public participation, and prevent collusion among the political elite.

Throughout the twentieth century, Latin America was galvanized by numerous and almost sequential efforts at redistributing wealth and income. Each effort may have been centered in a particular country, but all had wide repercussions, goading elites elsewhere to pay at least some attention to issues of social equality. The most notable of these bids included the Mexican Revolution and the ensuing reforms of Lázaro Cárdenas, the regime of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, “Peronism” in Argentina, the Bolivian Revolution in 1952, the Cuban Revolution, the 1968 coup d’état by reformist military officers in Peru, the administration of Salvador Allende in Chile, and the Nicaraguan Revolution. During this extended period, even governments that embraced “free markets” did so cautiously, with some apologies, out of fear that too total a commitment to markets would be perceived as mean. Arguably, the strength of the “left” as a political force—or at least as a threat—compelled Latin American states to be as humane—or as benign—as they were in the past century. What will now elicit compassion from state and society in Latin America?

Thus, there are important questions to ask about Latin America at the end of the twentieth century—and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yes, it appears that we have come to an end point of ideological evolution, and that the universalization of liberal democracy and the unfettered markets of capitalism are the final forms of government and economic organization. But how well do these servants function in Latin America? Do they suit the idiosyncrasies of the region? And do they work the better for the absence of ideological competition? What sort of society are they spawning? These are pertinent questions without obvious answers.

There is another compelling issue, related but still distinct. As Fukuyama adroitly acknowledges, the end of politics—or as he says, “history”—has wide implications. Politics has more than an ephemeral relationship not just to economic organization and social structure, but also to culture. Just as the withering of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union—and in China, too—has undermined faith in socialism, so the triumph of liberalism has amplified the sirens of the largest and most successful case of liberalism: the United States. What

Fukuyama labels the “consumerist Western culture” has spread, and very prominently in Latin America. Advances in technology (especially in transportation and the sharing of information) and expanding trade have helped disseminate the social habits and cultural tastes of the United States and other successful liberal regimes. Here, too, useful inquiries can be made to measure the extent to which the triumph of liberalism in Latin America has been accompanied by changes in local culture, in particular from a desire to imitate the United States.

The urgency for questioning the impact of the “end of politics” on culture comes from the long association in Latin America between the “left” and nationalism, and between the “left” and an insistence on an autochthonous culture. Others who argued vigorously for an autochthonous culture were, perhaps paradoxically, those at the other end of the political spectrum, those on the far “right.” What are the cultural implications of “pruning” the ideological spectrum?

This contemplation of Latin America accepts Fukuyama’s premise that the exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to liberalism—to democracy and to capitalism—is a profound event. I do not assume that the change is good, and I do not assume it is pernicious. And I do not assume, either, that the change will last forever. But—for the moment—the collapse of all utopian ideologies marks the end of an era, and provides a starting point for a broad inquiry of Latin America at the end of one century and the beginning of another. Here I attempt to answer in an inductive way two central questions: (1) How does liberalism, which has been interpreted in Latin America as presidential democracy and unfettered markets, both shorn of any meaningful commitment to equality, “fit” the region? (2) What social and cultural changes have followed—or at least accompanied—the celebrated ascension of democracy and capitalism?

These two questions are addressed with a collage: a set of discrete essays, each exploring a different dimension of contemporary Latin America. The intent is to juxtapose descriptive detail with abstraction in a way that engages and illuminates the complexities of the region. Throughout this collage individual experiences abound, and so do arcane—but telling—facts and figures. Interspersed are generalizations and propositions.

The essays appear as chapters, but their sequence is inconsequential; they could easily have been shuffled. Moreover, other topics could have been explored, also used as windows to peer into Latin America at the passing of one century and the start of another. There are an endless variety of wonders and experiences in Latin America, and no effort to be comprehensive could be successful. I was only selective.

The task before me is not to respond to narrow questions, amena-

ble to answer through the identification and marshaling of a particular kind of evidence. Instead, the questions I pose are sweeping: how to fathom an enormous region at a moment of time, an unsettling period when previous paradigms for understanding have lost their grip. These grand questions can be answered for now only with ideas and images. Still, good ideas and images are useful. Indeed, there are times when ideas and images contribute to more understanding than the simple compilation of knowledge.

In addition to contributing, in a general but nuanced way, to our understanding of Latin America, the approach taken—that of moving frequently between individual experiences and generalizations—aspire to generate *empathy*. I remember discussing with a distinguished Princeton scholar, Robert Tucker, an article on politics we had both just read in an academic journal. I mentioned that I found it unsatisfactory. “Yes,” he said, “there are no people in it.” It was a simple but devastating comment. The best “theorizing” is said to be abstract and parsimonious. But here I stray, preferring to go back to particular individuals, to suggestive places, not just to explore nuances, but also to generate empathy for Latin Americans and the difficult choices they confront.

I also seek to contribute to the rehabilitation of the study of geographical regions, understood to be demarcated not only by their physical geography, but also by shared history, culture, and politics. Studying regions, and even individual nation-states, has fallen out of academic favor. There is a marked pointillism in recent scholarship, with ever more ingenious trawling of archives or statistical databases, either for information on subaltern communities and their struggles, or for insights into the behavior of small groups pursuing their interests in a well-defined arena. The attempt to see the larger picture through new eyes is rarely risked. Yet the nation-state, as vast and lumbering as it may be, remains the locus of most important political decisions. And the behavior of individual nation-states is often heavily influenced by the tack of neighboring states with which there is an affinity. This study is a return to the tradition of asking big questions about nation-states and clusters of nation-states. If its arguments—or even its approach—manage to encourage others into thinking, too, about the larger picture, it will have served one of its main purposes.

It would be fallacious to suggest that this study is entirely inductive. My search through the clutter of Latin America is guided, if only faintly, by a murky collection of hunches, beliefs, worries, and passions. Despite occasional pretensions to the contrary, every work of scholarship is noetic and, upon completion, an incarnation: the envelopment of a

subject with a *mentalité* or a set of ideas. So, in a sense, all scholarship is an “assemblage.”

Detailing just what set of concerns has guided me is difficult. I have concluded, though, that there is a salient dilemma in Latin America. The end of ideological contestation has lessened political conflict in the region, but it has also lessened the sense of urgency for solving trenchant problems of poverty and social inequality. I worry that there is now an acceptance of inequality with only minimal efforts at remediation or palliation. And I sense that the persistence of stark class divisions reinforces—or heightens—the rugged individualism of liberalism. The lack of *égalité* and *fraternité* complicates the performance of liberalism, of representative democracy and of capitalism, and, moreover, breeds social tension and cultural ambivalence.

Another worry is that liberalism in Latin America is, at least presently, unprepared to offer public solutions to serious collective problems, for example, of urban bias, crime, and environmental degradation. Instead, there are—at least to date—only piecemeal individual strategies for coping with these and other problems. States in Latin America are weak, and in this era of celebrating individual rights there are not determined efforts by political actors to strengthen state capacity. Yet, successful liberal regimes, including prominently the United States, have employed the state—sometimes extensively—to ensure domestic stability and to guide international economic adjustment. Efforts to build stable and prosperous societies in Latin America under the guidance of liberalism are hobbled not only by poverty and inequality, but also frequently by the inability to complement individual initiatives with effective public policies.

Another conviction is that the outcomes of Latin America’s wholesale adoption of liberalism at the end of the twentieth century are shaped in many subtle ways by the region’s own particular history and constitution. In so many discussions there appears to be the unstated assumption that if other regions of the world embrace the liberalism born and nurtured in Western Europe and North America, they are going to look—politically, economically, and maybe even culturally—like Western Europe and North America, perhaps a comforting thought for some. This assumption is naïve. Liberalism may be the paradigm of the era, even appearing to be the “peak of ideological evolution,” but nation-states embracing liberalism may well be—and remain—very different from one another. Liberalism is compatible with many different outcomes.

Assuaging these concerns, I acknowledge that democracy and capitalism have the virtues of being dynamic—ever in flux—and also mal-

leable. Shortcomings and undesired outcomes can be addressed within the paradigm—or ideological construct—of liberalism. And in any case, nothing in politics is ever really final. So what I can offer here is not a definitive evaluation of liberalism in Latin America. I can only hope to illuminate Latin America at a particular point in time, a moment when, incongruously as it may seem in the future, it truly appears to be “at the end of politics.”