This book provides a fresh interpretation of the rise and fall of Latin America’s “left turn”, or movement toward more progressive economic or social policies. From a historical and comparative perspective, the book argues that Latin America is entering a new phase of authoritarian statism.

Based on over ten years of research on Latin American political economy and social movements, including years of fieldwork in Chile, Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina, this book combines the stories of individuals and groups in particular situations with the macro-level political and economic trajectory of the region since the postwar period. The book draws on over 100 interviews with community activists, workers, union leaders, politicians, journalists and NGOs, as well as archival work. In addition, the book uses up-to-date national and regional economic data, including both standard and heterodox development indicators. By engaging with key case studies including Argentina’s recovered enterprises, Chile’s student movement, Brazil’s free transit movement and Venezuela’s popular economy, this book analyzes the complex relationship between “post-capitalist struggles” and the governance models of the “pink tide”, the wave of left governments that began to sweep the region at the turn of the century.

This book will be of interest to researchers across politics, development, Latin American studies and social movement studies. The original data and analysis of the relationship between social movements and governments will also benefit policymakers and those working within the NGO sector.

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The Latin American Crisis and the New Authoritarian State

Manuel Larrabure
Para Katie, Paulito y Dieguito
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Introduction

Even before COVID-19 entered the global vernacular, Latin America was undergoing one of its most acute crises in recent decades. This crisis exhibits a number of different aspects. The first of these is the dramatic decline of the wave of left and center-left governments that swept through the region during the first decade and a half of the 21st century, better known as the “pink tide”. Along with the decline of the left has come the ascendancy to power of right-wing forces, be it through the ballot box or through what has become known as the “institutional” coup d’état. The rise of right-wing governments, particularly in the case of Brazil under President Jair Bolsonaro, has been accompanied by the emergence of right-wing popular movements, sections of which display clear ultra-right and even neofascist tendencies. The region’s new right has acted swiftly, dismantling progressive reforms that took place under the pink tide, and in some cases implementing new radical forms of “free market” policies, often accomplished through the use of new forms of authoritarianism.

However, right-wing and authoritarian tendencies are also on the rise within what remains of the pink tide. This is most notable in the case of Venezuela where the Chavista government led by President Nicolás Maduro has responded to the country’s economic crisis and continued imperialist aggressions by the US by progressively weakening the revolutionary democratic content developed in the country under the vision of “21st-century socialism”. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista government led by Daniel Ortega has tightened its grip on power, removing presidential term limits, secretly approving controversial development projects and violently repressing any opposition. In Ecuador, President Lenin Moreno has returned the country to neoliberal orthodoxy, betraying the progressive legacy of the Alianza País coalition formerly led by ex-President Rafael Correa. In Bolivia, the MAS’s democratic credentials came into question with Evo Morales’ controversial decision to run for president in 2019 for a fourth consecutive term, defying the people’s will on the matter as expressed in the 2016 referendum.

This crisis of the pink tide coincides with an important shift in the economic fortunes of the region. The “commodities boom” that began in 2002, which fueled significant social and economic improvements, came to a screeching halt in 2014, severely undermining the capacity of progressive governments to engage in the kind of “pro poor” policies that had brought forth a variety of socioeconomic
improvements. The new economic fortunes of the region, with parallels to the 1980s “lost decade”, pushed progressive governments into revisiting orthodox neoliberal policies. However, far from triggering a new cycle of growth and stability, the return of austerity policies has led to further economic instability.

The political and economic crisis has also accelerated a social one, evidenced in an ongoing wave of popular resistance. In 2013, Brazil’s free transit movement triggered a cycle of dramatic political contestation that would eventually see the tragic fall of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and the incarceration of former president Lula. In Argentina, after years of relative complacency under the governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, the traditional labor movement once again flexed its muscle on the streets, staging significant opposition first to Cristina Kirchner in 2014 over the standard of living declines and then to Mauricio Macri over proposed pension reforms in 2018. More recently, in Nicaragua, popular sectors including those historically affiliated to the Sandinistas struggle organized strong opposition against the neoliberal social security reforms pursued by the Ortega government in 2018, triggering a national crisis. In Ecuador, as a reaction to Moreno’s political u-turn, indigenous communities organized mass mobilizations against the International Monetary Fund in September 2019. The following month, as a response to a 5% transit fare hike, Chile witnessed the biggest social mobilizations in its history, which President Sebastian Piñera responded to with the implementation of a state of emergency throughout the country, subsequently triggering the ongoing movement toward a new post-neoliberal constitution. In Bolivia, in the run-up to the 2019 elections, sectors of the indigenous movement took to the streets, protesting what they saw as Evo Morales’ illegitimate fourth bid for re-election.

How do we explain Latin America’s political, economic and social crisis? How do we conceptualize the “left turn” and the subsequent movement toward authoritarian politics? What progressive paths might exist out of the current situation? These are the central questions pursued in this book.

These questions have been the subject of ongoing discussions and debates, spanning a range of perspectives. Upon seeing the rise of a new left in the region in the early years of the new millennium, mainstream analysts developed what became the widely accepted theory of the so-called “two lefts” (Petkoff, 2005; Castañeda, 2006; Llosa, 2007). Those working within this theory argue that the moderate, “good” left (Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) was on a path toward gradual progress and deepening democracy, leading their countries through a rational and balanced integration into the global economy. In contrast, the radical, “bad” left (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua) were successfully manipulating marginalized sectors, using a new discourse of socialism and the implementation of “pro-poor” programs that cemented clientelism and patronage within the political system. Through these mechanisms, the “populist thesis” tells us, charismatic leaders concentrated power in their own hands and proceeded to dismantle liberal democratic institutions. Similarly, literature drawing on the framework of competitive authoritarianism and hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2010) argues that radical leftist governments have tended to use authoritarian practices to skew
the playing field in their favor, albeit while retaining the formal institutions of democracy. From both these mainstream perspectives, the conclusion is the same: leftist politics lead to crisis and authoritarianism.

A second range of literature, in contrast, focuses on how various leftist governments have, to different degrees, broken from the neoliberal paradigm, noting socioeconomic improvements and a more cooperative relationship between movements and governments (Ciccariello-Maher 2007; Lebowitz, 2007; Harnecker, 2010; Linera, 2011; Félix, 2012; Sader, 2013; Wylde, 2016). Relying on a wide range of classic Marxian scholarship, this side of the debate tends to see Latin America, during the height of the pink tide, as having entered a new phase of post-neoliberalism. This more optimistic perspective overlaps somewhat with the work of those using a social democratic lens. For some in this camp, the pink tide represents a Polanyian “double movement”, as progressive governments look to safeguard society from neoliberalism (Silva, 2009; Munck, 2015). For others using western development theory, the pink tide represents the long-term victory of democratic institutions in a region prone to authoritarianism (Huber and Stephens, 2012, Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 2017; Bohn and Levy, 2019).

The third range of literature interprets the left turn as rather expressing significant continuities with the neoliberal period. This more critical scholarship, encompassing autonomist, post-colonial and regulation theory, sees participatory governance and other pro-poor policies as the pink tide’s attempt to co-opt and re-direct rather than empower social movements (Leiva, 2008; Chavez, 2008; Greaves, 2012; Dinerstein, 2013). In addition, they argue that socioeconomic improvements are built on commodification, rather than the extension of social rights (Lavinas, 2017), as well as new forms of economic dependency based on the pink tide’s strategy of maximizing natural resources extraction (Gudynas, 2009; Svampa, 2011; Borras et al. 2012; Rosales 2013; Chiasson-LeBel, 2016). Instead of post-neoliberalism, these critics often use the concept of neo-developmentalism or neo-structuralism to understand this phase of development. Using more orthodox approaches to Marxism some scholars go even further, arguing that the left turn, even in the more radical cases, represents a form of “passive revolution” and “reconstituted neoliberalism” (Webber, 2011, 2015, 2017; Modonesi, 2012).

While broadly sympathetic to the Marxian approaches, both the more supportive and those more critical of the pink tide, in this book, I develop an alternative, and in my view better, explanation for the region’s ongoing crisis and the rise in authoritarian politics, while also elucidating potential progressive paths forward. Using a qualitative case study approach based on the theoretical insights that I label the “new Latin American Marxism”, I focus on Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil and Chile, arguing that the left turn’s crisis can be understood as a result of the misalignment or disjuncture that emerged between the pink tide and social movements with respect to notions of democracy, development and progress. This misalignment, in the context of important changes in the regional economic outlook, opened the door to new and highly novel authoritarian politics that are poised to become part of a long-term trajectory toward a new authoritarian state. Simultaneously, the crisis of the left turn has opened new avenues for democratic
renewal, as evidenced in the emergence of new popular forces and political initiatives seeking to displace the exhausted politics of the center-left.

To mobilize my argument, I develop four concepts. The first emerges out of a new interpretation of the social movements that emerged amidst the social devastation brought forth by the neoliberal revolution that began to spread across the region in the 1980s. I call this wave of movements, post-capitalist struggles, that is, a form of class struggle that begins to reconfigure the production and distribution of use-values through the articulation of new forms of cooperation and democracy that point beyond capitalist social relations, part of a long and ongoing transformation in the terrain of popular struggles. As such, they were not simply struggles for citizenship or for a larger piece of the economic pie, as the mainstream and social democratic literature often understand them (Foweraker and Trevizo, 2016; Balán and Montambeault, 2020). However, neither were they revolutionary in either the classic 20th-century Marxist sense, or in the “localist” autonomist notion of the concept.

With the rise of the pink tide at the turn of the millennium, a particular relationship developed between post-capitalist struggles and the region’s new left, one that reshaped the contours of the Latin American state and the region’s development trajectory. In contrast to the neoliberal period, characterized by the well-known policies of the “Washington consensus” mixed with a high degree of repression of popular movements, the rise of the pink tide ushered a new phase of development, commonly known as neo-structuralism, or neo-developmentalism. Central to this new development model is what I call the neo-structuralist bargain, a historically specific mode of conflict management in which the most vulnerable sectors of society are granted real material gains, but horizons beyond liberal democracy within the ruling block are temporarily closed off. This has a twofold and contradictory effect. In the short term, the existing state structures are reinforced, but in the long run, the legitimacy of neo-structuralism and the pink tide is undermined, as movements seek new avenues for political contestation through which state transformations that point beyond the pink tide can be articulated.

I refer to this emerging articulation of forces, bringing together struggle from below and political contestation through the state beyond the neo-structuralist bargain, as the new democratic road to socialism. Building on the work of Nicos Poulantzas and Paulo Freire, this road features not simply an alliance, but a dialectical fusion between the social movement and political party, one through which representative and direct democracy are combined with the aim of transforming the state and eroding the division between worker and politician, a strategy that requires an emphasis on popular education and amounts to a relatively long transitional period toward a socialist society. Conceptualizing a new democratic road to socialism, therefore, provides us with a fresh way of assessing Latin America’s left turn, one that neither makes simplistic dichotomies between movements and the state, nor uncritically attempts to reconcile them. As will be shown, fueled by post-capitalist struggles, this new democratic road to socialism in Latin America took distinct forms, finding expression in diverse challenges to pink tide governance.
A different kind of challenge to pink tide governance and to the left turn more broadly also emerged in the form of a new authoritarian politics, containing several distinct features. First, unlike the classic period of authoritarianism of the 1960s and 70s, the new authoritarian state is more bipartisan in character, emerging in both left and right-wing governments. Second, the new authoritarianism eschews the traditional mechanisms of the military coup d'état and dictatorship in favor of more dispersed forms of conflict and repression that traverse the democratic institutions, pushing these to the brink. Third, the new authoritarianism embraces aspects of “the popular”, seeing at least some popular sectors as allies rather than enemies.

Finally, unlike the old authoritarianism, the new authoritarianism fully integrates and even extends within its vision of society key features of what has become the neoliberal status quo: heightened volatility, unpredictability and even chaos. In doing so, the new authoritarianism is actively changing the traditional meaning of crisis and, in turn, also what is deemed to be normal accumulation. In short, unlike the old authoritarianism whose top priority was to establish order in society (O'Donnell, 1988), the new authoritarianism rather seeks to both instill and manage the disorder, a process that can be thought of as “controlled chaos”. This perspective, therefore, challenges notions of an emergent fascist state in the region that have become widespread in recent years.

The Latin American Crisis and the New Authoritarian State

On the afternoon of April 7, 2018, former Brazilian president, Luiz Ignacio “Lula” Da Silva, gathered with thousands of supporters in the city of Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo, in what became the conclusion of a months-long legal and political standoff between him and judge Sergio Moro who had successfully pressed charges against the former president as part of his anti-corruption initiative, known as operation Lava Jato (car wash). The gathering was a sendoff for Lula who had agreed to surrender to authorities later that evening to begin serving his jail sentence. The gathering featured Lula speaking on a scaffold stage in front of a microphone for about an hour, delivering a historic speech to dozens of his close allies immediately around him, thousands of his supporters below him and millions of petistas throughout the country. If one wanted to understand what Lula, and the PT stand for, there’s hardly a better synthesis than what is presented in this speech. The events of April 7 also serve as a microcosm for the crisis of the left turn more broadly.

The event could hardly have been more contradictory. On the one hand, people were gathered to say goodbye to what remains to this day Brazil’s most popular politician. After all, Lula was voluntarily surrendering, defeated by Moro and the right-wing political forces that supported his prosecution. Then age 72 and set to serve a nine-year jail sentence, Lula’s future certainly appeared grim. Yet, the mood of the event appeared to be one of defiance and even celebration. Supporters around Lula often enthusiastically smiled and waved at the crowd below them. Lula himself in his remarks often mixed humor with fiery political rhetoric, adding to the event’s emotional ambiguity and slight dissonance.
Introduction

Tellingly, immediately to the left of Lula on the stage stood Guilherme Boulos, then presidential candidate for the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), a socialist party born out of an ugly split within the PT in 2004. The relatively small socialist party has since built its political identity in no small measure by developing an almost unwavering left critique of the PT. To the right of Lula stood Manuela d’Ávila, then presidential pre-candidate for the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), historically much more friendly to the PT, but nevertheless a political rival. Next to d’Ávila stood Fernando Haddad, the PT’s presidential candidate, struggling in the polls against a surging Bolsonaro campaign. Was the PT using d’Ávila and Boulos in an attempt to give itself a badly needed credibility boost from the left in the run-up to the elections? Or, were d’Ávila and Boulos using the PT to gain the national visibility they lack? Or, was this the emergence of a new political alliance in the country? These questions and ambiguities have indeed become the hallmark of the left in Brazil.

After a long preamble, Lula began his now famous speech. Three themes are at the forefront. The first fits neatly within the history of Latin American populism, that is, that of the fatherland, which in the context of the speech appears as the image Lula builds of himself as a father figure and teacher using the nation-state for the purpose of citizenship building. Recalling his experience from the 1970s, Lula describes his role as a union leader as that of a “school principal with 1800 students”. He specifically points to the 1980 strike that he leads as a moment that expresses this role of principle. During this crucial moment in Brazilian labor relations history, he recalls standing by the rank-and-file who had chosen to go on strike despite some of his own skepticism about their strength. The union lost, capitulating after 41 days and the imprisonment of Lula after 17, he recalls. Importantly, the defeat is framed by Lula as an ideological win for the union, but also as evidence that his skepticism of the union’s strike capacities was accurate. Father knows best, one might say.

This teacher/father figure role continues in a new form during his time as president of the country. As Lula recalls, during this period of time his role became one of allowing poor people to eat meat, buy cars, travel by plane, become small land holders, micro-entrepreneurs and homeowners. He also speaks of his pride in being the only president without a university degree, but one that nevertheless built the most universities in the history of Brazil. The father figure role is capped off in his speech as he emphasizes the role he played in expanding citizenship, which he frames in terms of the state’s greater degree of control over the oil industry, as well as a number of public banking initiatives under the PT. In other words, as president of the country, Lula sees himself as presiding over the fatherland, which has the responsibility to materially provide for its citizens. His demeanor and mannerisms are just as revealing of this paternalist posture, at one point referring to Boulos, then 35 years of age, as a “boy”, while cradling his face. Soon after, referring to d’Ávila as a “pretty girl”; adding “militant” perhaps after noticing the words on her T-shirt (fight like a girl).

The second theme is that of Lula’s working-class roots, which he ties to his project of social mobility and a new more representative public administration for
Brazil. For example, when speaking of his “true friends”, particularly in the testing times he found himself in at the time, he notes how it is the people wearing ties that have left him behind or went after him, while it is those with whom he shared typical working-class dishes, including rabada (beef tail), and calf’s foot broth, or those that had the courage to organize strikes and occupy land, that are still with him. When giving thanks to his supporters and colleagues, he highlights, among others, Luiz Marinho, then President of the PT and former president of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), noting that he began as cotton, coffee and peanut picker in the province of Santa Fé, going on to become what according to Lula was “the best minister of Social Security” in the country.

The example Lula gives of Marinho can be interpreted as the essence of the image he has of himself as a “dream builder”, one who creates the possibility of social mobility and a new public administration. In Lula’s words:

I long ago dreamed that it was possible to govern this country by involving millions and millions of poor people in the economy, involving millions of people in the universities, creating millions and millions of jobs in this country. I dreamed that it was possible for a metallurgist without a university degree to take better care of education than the graduates and those civil servants...who governed this country. I dreamed that it was possible for us to reduce child mortality by giving milk, beans and rice so that children could eat every day. I dreamed that it was possible to take the students from the underprivileged areas and put them in the best universities in this country so that...we do not have judges and prosecutors only from the elite. Soon we will have judges and prosecutors born in the favela of Heliópolis, born in Itaquera, born in the underprivileged areas.

In other words, this is the classic liberal dream of social mobility through opportunity, combined with the belief that this can be accomplished by populating the state not by members of the elite, but rather with the poor, marginalized and working class. His image of Brazil is indeed built on his own experience, going from an uneducated metallurgist to the highest seat of political power in the country. As he makes clear throughout the speech, this is his image of a Brazilian revolution, no more, no less.

The third and final theme evident in Lula’s historic speech is the matter of his prosecution, conviction and imminent surrender, a topic that reveals as much about his emotional state, in light of the events, as about his personal understanding of the institutions of democracy, the state and political strategy for his progressive vision. It is clear from his words, tone and demeanor that he interprets the case made against him by Moro as a political witch-hunt. “I am the only human being sued for an apartment that is not mine...the federal Lava Jato police lied that it was mine”, Lula tells us with a defiant tone. Lula seems to be particularly concerned with his personal image: “…but I do not forgive them for having passed on to society the idea that I am a thief”. He further accuses the media of playing a decisive role in what he ultimately refers to as a coup