Third World Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 707–723, 1996

CARFAX

Democratic institutions in South America: comparative and historical perspectives

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If there is a Bolivarian curse upon South America, it is that it seems to be condemned permanently to be viewed through expectations derived from outside the region. It is not only foreign observers who 'compare' South America in this way. Latin American intellectuals have, notoriously, been keen to import ideas and concepts from parts of the world which seemed (at the time) more advanced and progressive. In the 1820s, inappropriate US-style constitutions were imposed across Spanish South America. Today, through an opposite process of comparison, experts on the region's politics have concluded that South American democracy is 'low intensity'[1] and 'delegative' rather than authentic,[2] that its political institutions are over-presidentialised and likely not to work well,[3] and that its economic problems are unlikely to be soluble in the light of its political organisation.[4] Furthermore, scholars who have examined the Asian success stories conclude that South American states on the whole lack the 'embedded autonomy'[5] which enabled Asian countries to enjoy their economic miracles, and that South American institutions and organisations, and the way in which they interact, are not conducive to protected property rights or confident investors.[6] One wonders whether the region might not be in need of psychotherapy.

Yet when we look at the reality of contemporary South America, a far less pessimistic picture is warranted. The points made by the 'pessimistic' authors mentioned above, while by no means wholly false and misleading in themselves, do give an overall impression which is unbalanced. During the past decade the region has enjoyed significant (though not especially rapid) economic growth in a (mostly) democratic climate. There have been significant constitutional changes and developments (including the previously unheard-of impeachment of two different presidents for corruption). There has been considerable regional economic integration. While the distribution of income remains very unequal, there have at least been some significant policy innovations attempting to deal with this.

Much of the pessimism in the literature results from the assumption that nothing has really changed in the region. This assumption seems quite unwarranted. The argument here, in contrast, is that there has been a major change in the whole character of South American politics since the early 1980s. South

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0143-6597/96/040707-17 $6.00 © 1996 Third World Quarterly

America has until recently lacked a consensus on the key issue of legitimacy. This has inhibited both democracy and, to some extent at least, economic development. It is now possible to believe that this fundamental problem may have been resolved. If this is true, the consequences for both democracy and development are significant indeed.

The question of legitimacy is not primarily a matter of political culture, important though this can sometimes be. There is also a politics of structural conflict which has shaped the politics and (to some extent) economics of the region. A key argument here is that the structures have changed. As a result, democracy is much more robust in most of South America than it has ever been, for reasons which go far beyond short-term macro-economics or detailed constitutional design.

While the theme of this piece is primarily democracy, this approach has implications for economic performance as well. South American history does show a clear relationship between economics and politics. This relationship is not static, but neither is it a simple matter of 'modernisation'. Many of the region's economic problems came from the unforeseen side-effects of attempts to tackle earlier difficulties. The disadvantages of over-dependence on primary commodity exports led to the adoption of import-substitution-industrialisation (ISI): problems with ISI, in turn, led to the excessive import of capital which culminated in the debt crisis of 1982. The market-orientated reforms currently being undertaken throughout South America have to do with previous crises brought on by debt and capital mobility. However, these policy adjustments did not simply come from exercises in technical economics. Economic policy is a key element of political contestation, and the policy choices adopted within the region had much to do with the political conflicts discussed below.

The most outstanding existing historical–structural treatment of democratisation in Latin America (and elsewhere) is that of Rueschemeyer *et al.*[7] This work focuses principally on the role of class conflict, the nature of the state and the role of foreign powers. These factors are clearly important and the work itself is very enlightening. However a more complete account of the transformation in South America would need to take account of a broader set of factors, including changes to internationally accepted ideas about politics. Above all, a complete account would give due weight to the role of 'non-democracy' as well as democracy in the history of the region. The strengthening of democracy in South America has much to do with the weakening of 'non-democracy'.[8]

Democracy and development in South American history: some preliminary observations

When looking at the historical record, it may seem more natural to start by asking about the previous failures of democracy in South America rather than about its more recent apparent success. South America seems to have many of the structural conditions necessary for successful democratisation. The region suffers from few of the ethnic or religious conflicts which have created such problems in other parts of the Third World. The vast majority of South

Americans define themselves as Catholics. Recent progress by evangelical Protestants does not pose any evident problem for either democratic stability or economic performance. Linguistically, too, South America is largely homogenous. Only in Peru and Bolivia are there large numbers of indigenous inhabitants who do not speak Spanish. It is true that there is a significant mix of races in South America, but it is not obvious that this should create problems for either democracy or development. Racial consciousness (and prejudice) are not unknown in the region but they are not entrenched in any form of ideology with mass appeal, actual or potential. Sendero Luminoso, which has sometimes been characterised inaccurately as an indigenous movement, appears upon investigation to have more of the characteristics of a 'classic' revolutionary insurgency.[9]

It is also true that foreign intervention, south of the Panama Canal, has generally been indirect only and the region's history has been relatively peaceful. Very few South American governments have themselves adopted aggressive ideologies of military conquest. War between South American countries has been rare—though sometimes very bloody when it did occur. Thus, whereas war and empire were key influences on the development of European institutions during the past two centuries or more, this is much less true of South America. It is more than a minor irony that South American military institutions have tended to play more of a military than a political role, whereas the fighting military establishments of early twentieth century Europe have only rarely sought state power.

South America does, however, have historical experience of reactionary elites. The existence of a class of large landowners has generally, and rightly, been seen as negative from the viewpoint of democratic stability.[10] The Catholic Church was, until the 1960s, both very powerful and no friend to democracy. And there is certainly a tradition of militarism in the region, even though this has not usually extended either to full-scale Fascism at home or adventure abroad.

South America's economic performance over the past century has been mixed. However, the region has avoided catastrophic economic failure on the pattern of some African states. The trend over the last century has been for longer life expectancy, slowly improving educational levels and (recently) significantly reducing birth rates. Most South Americans now live in urban areas, are literate and have near-'first world' life expectancies. Some South American countries, notably Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, have some claim to be considered developed countries—somewhat poorer, but not in essence essentially different from the European Mediterranean. Other countries such as Bolivia and Peru retain structural similarities with other parts of the Third World.

What makes the region's economic performance appear worse than it actually is has been the apparent failure of some of its 'early developers' to sustain their original promise. As long ago as 1914 Argentina and Uruguay had, by contemporary standards, first world levels of development—with Chile not too far behind. However, a pervasive tendency within the region has been for the wealthiest countries (Argentina and Uruguay early in the century, Venezuela since 1980) to fall back in economic terms rather than to break through to fully first world conditions. The most successful economy in the region today is Chile which, alone in South America, has a recent record which can be compared to

that of the Asian tigers.[11] Conversely there are other countries in the region—such as Peru—whose level of GDP per capita has not fully recovered to the levels reached before the 'debt crisis' which hit the region in 1982. It may well be that frustrated expectations of more rapid economic progress have been politically more destabilising than the persistence of absolute poverty.

The historical picture, then, is mixed. Democratic rule has been precarious and subject to frequent breakdowns: economic progress has been uneven and subject to sharp cyclical change. The alternative to democracy, when this has broken down, has been military rule. There have been occasions when Washington helped the military to power, but the immediate sources of military intervention have almost invariably been domestic. The role of the military will be discussed further below. Briefly, however, it can be said that military intervention has almost always involved significant civilian as well as military support, and it cannot therefore be treated as independent of class conflict or party disputation within the civilian population. An Argentinean sociologist in the early 1960s referred to a regional reality when he referred to civilians 'knocking on the doors of the barracks' when dissatisfied with a particular government.[12] Military intervention, then, has both reflected conflicts over legitimate authority and helped to perpetuate them.

Democracy and its downfall: abortive democratic experiments up to 1930

South American independence movements espoused ideals of republican and representative government. However, the reality of early independence was one of political conflict and turmoil. The first impressive period of constitutional reform occurred essentially between 1889 and 1910. During this period personalist military rule was ended in several Spanish American countries, while in others efforts were made to develop political institutions by making the suffrage more effective. The monarchy was also overthrown in Brazil and replaced by a constitutional republic. By 1914 a number of South American republics enjoyed some recognisable form of representative government although the exclusion from voting of illiterates, recent migrants and (usually) women was often a limiting factor, as was also in some cases straightforward electoral fraud. The only non-elite class enfranchised to any significant degree was the urban middle class, and the middle class electorate was far more significant in Argentina and Uruguay than elsewhere. These two countries therefore enjoyed the most democratic of the various elective systems in place.[13]

It is striking that electoral politics broke down in every country in South America bar Colombia between 1924 and 1933. There was little difference in the fate of countries which Rueschemeyer *et al* (rather generously) term 'full democracies' (Argentina and Uruguay), 'restricted democracies' (Chile) and 'constitutional oligarchic' systems (Brazil, Bolivia and Ecuador). In 1920 there were seven South American republics which enjoyed some kind of elective system: only the Colombian system survived the next 14 years uninterrupted by military intervention. An eighth country, Peru, had elected governments (from a narrow suffrage) from 1904 until 1919, when the system was overthrown by coup. In 1930 the Peruvian dictatorship collapsed and elections were held in

1931, though these did not lead to democratic stability. The Peruvian case contributes to the impression that the key factor during 1930–31 was a collapse of incumbent systems under the impact of the Depression rather than the near simultaneous emergence of internal problems across virtually all the countries of the region.

In fact it seems reasonable to attribute the breakdown of elective systems during this period significantly to international influences—political as well as economic. Explanations based on social class, on which the Rueschemeyer *et al* account mainly focuses, certainly help us to understand the 'how' but may not have been so important in determining the 'whether' of constitutional breakdown during this period.

Much the same can be said about explanations based on the nature of the political institutions themselves. The Chilean system pre-1924 was semi-parliamentary while the Argentinean system was purely presidentialist. Neither worked particularly well, and some observers of the time did blame the workings of particular political institutions for the downfall of constitutional government. A case in point was the analysis of the 1930 coup in Argentina by the British Ambassador. His account is worth quoting at some length in view of its resonance with later academic analyses of South American institutions.

> I suppose that the ejection of President Irigoyen…will come rather as a shock to public opinion in Europe which had been led to believe that the Argentine had made great progress in the last twenty years on the road of political stability…{but} when one takes into account the fact that in all these South American countries there are no carefully devised checks and balances between the Executive Power and the Legislature such as exist in countries with fully developed constitutional systems…the country was faced with the choice of having to endure another four years of misgovernment till the expiration of the presidential term or of putting an end to it by force.[14]

There is something in this analysis. Irigoyen was indeed an overbearing and incompetent figure in 1930, perhaps already suffering from senility. However, there is also something lacking from it. The British government itself, like the governments of the USA and those in continental Europe, did not oppose the coup in any way and quickly accepted the new regime.

Furthermore Argentina had no presidential elections between 1928 and 1945. Had the military and the conservative politicians who supported them simply wanted the removal of Irigoyen, they could have achieved this simply enough. In fact, however, the supporters of the 1930 coup were in some cases pro-fascist and, in others, aristocratic conservatives who did not see the point of universal suffrage.[15] Having overthrown Argentine democracy, they saw no need to put it back in place. Irigoyen's unpopularity and failing powers were the excuse for the overthrow of democracy rather than the whole story.

When we look for common factors across the whole region, it is not hard to find one in the shape of the Great Depression. The Depression did not have a uniform effect across the region, but the protectionism adopted in the industrialised countries after 1930 did have a profound effect upon South America. Until then many of the region's economies benefited enormously from their com-

modity abundance and the international regime of free trade. There can be little doubt that South America progressed materially during 1870–1930, and that that this material progress underpinned such constitutional development as took place. The discrediting of economic liberalism after 1930 certainly had its effect on political liberalism as well.

It is also the case that the association of liberal democracy with progress was already under attack from the various ideological forces unleashed by the First World War. New authoritarian political ideas were in the process of arriving from Europe. The prestige of leaders, notably Mussolini and Prima de Rivera, encouraged South American middle class and elite actors to define themselves as anti-democratic. There was also some communist influence on the Left of the political spectrum by the end of the 1920s.

The British and US governments, meanwhile, were no particular supporters of constitutional rule in South America. The British ministers reported supportively on most of the military interventions, and there was certainly no suggestion that British trade policy should be influenced by the character of the South American regimes. There is a consistent pattern in British diplomatic reports of authoritarians being praised more highly than the democratic leaders whom they replaced. Vargas was preferred to Washington Luis in Brazil, Uriburu and Justo to Irigoyen in Argentina, and Ibanez to Alessandri in Chile. Washington, while less supportive of autocratic government in principle, did not wish to create problems for itself by intervening in what it saw as the internal affairs of particular Latin American countries. Even before the election of Franklin Roosevelt, Washington was already in retreat from the period of 'dollar diplomacy' which was, indeed, an attempt to engineer political change—mainly in Central America. Subsequently Washington's policy was to accept the local status quo.[16]

This is not to say that the only common factors in the downfall of these constitutional systems were international in character. A key internal factor was the development during the early part of the twentieth century of military institutions which were by the 1930s in most cases disciplined enough to intervene and impose order. The *caudillismo* and civil wars of the 19th century had been replaced by the 1920s by military organisations capable of monopolising force within a territorial unit. There were some NCO revolts and cases of intra-military conflict and disorder even after 1920, but military discipline mostly held. Moreover the officer corps, which was largely a bureaucracy in contrast to the clientelist pattern of civilian public administration, took great pride in its own institution. What this meant was that military rule was a realistic option by 1930, as it was not in 1890, for South Americans who did not want democracy.

Conservative modernisation

It should be noted that the military regimes which replaced elective systems in South America had a broader basis of legitimation than pure reaction. Some of the incoming authoritarian leaders, notably Vargas in Brazil and Ibanez in Chile, regarded themselves as modernisers. They were well regarded internationally and to some extent domestically. Ibanez later in his life was elected president of

Chile on a loosely defined socialist platform, while Vargas became Brazil's foremost populist politician between 1945 and his dramatic suicide in 1954. The concept of authoritarian modernisation with populist overtones, as distinct from both fascist mobilisation and pure social reaction, is a key feature of anti-democratic political appeals in the region.

The regimes which ruled over most of South America during the 1930s were not as repressive as their European counterparts or, indeed, as much as their counterparts in the region would become a generation later. They were not unconditionally anti-electoral, and sometimes looked for understandings with political parties of the moderate Left. However there was little commitment to social reform beyond a kind of corporatist protection of labour which was essentially a matter of control.[17] None of these regimes attempted to reform patterns of land tenure and the landlord class continued to enjoy real influence on local, if less often on national, politics. The Catholic Church remained content. Limited efforts were sometimes made to industrialise, often initiated by lobbies connected to the military, and a degree of industrial growth was sometimes achieved—most notably in the case of Brazil. Nonetheless, as a 'modernising' alternative to democracy, authoritarian military (or quasi-military) rule was essentially a sham. The rulers neither sought nor enjoyed the kind of state autonomy necessary to adopt radical politics of reform from above on the 'tiger' pattern. But they were less brutal, militaristic and dangerous than their contemporary European counterparts and they emerged from the Second World War less discredited.

Democratic reconstruction and renewed breakdown, 1945–73

The second democratic wave across South America was essentially the result of the Allied victory in the Second World War. Even during the 1930s there had been a return to (somewhat limited) democracy in Chile, Uruguay and, even more restrictively, Peru. Immediately after the Second World War these countries were joined by Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela. Electoral politics also became more open in Peru after 1945 and suffrage also expanded in Colombia. A transition to elective government in Ecuador occurred in 1948 and there was also a limited and abortive democratic opening in postwar Bolivia.

The post-1945 elective systems were, on the whole, more democratic than those which operated before 1930. No post-1945 system had a franchise which was more restrictive than the one which operated pre-1930, while Brazil and Argentina had significantly expanded suffrages. Suffrage was still not always universal, since literacy qualifications tended to disenfranchise the rural poor. However, there was by now a rapidly increasing urban electorate in most countries. Political leaders such as Vargas and Peron were able to make the transition from authoritarian to democratic patterns of politics, but some other countries saw the emergence of genuinely new and less corporatist and controlling political forces.

Once more, however, all these new elective systems eventually broke down. Not one South American country has enjoyed uninterrupted democracy since 1945. There was no single 'fall of the democracies' as there had been during

1924–33, but rather a series of setbacks. As a result of these every South American country has since 1945 endured a period of authoritarian rule amounting to at least 10 years. Sometimes the pattern was straightforward—democracy overthrown by military coup leading to a decade of dictatorship (as in Venezuela during 1948–58 or Chile after 1973). More often, however, the pattern was tortuous and included an element of what Huntington evocatively described as 'political decay'.[18] Under such circumstances, elections continued to be held, but with important parties banned. Military intervention began again, at first on a limited scale and for limited objectives. However, increasing military involvement first decisively weakened civilian institutions and then enabled them to be replaced with straightforward dictatorship.

How do we account for the post-1945 democratic breakdowns? And to what extent were the factors similar to those which brought about the downfall of constitutional government between 1924 and 1933? There is no single answer and scholars disagree on how much weight to give each factor. However, there is broad agreement on which factors make up the list.[19] Allowing for differences in the cases studied and in the emphases of the scholars themselves, four principal problems were identified.

Factors inimical to democracy

Anti-communism and the Cold War. The main impact of the Cold War in Latin America was felt after 1947 and, even more so, after 1959 when the success of Castro's Revolution pushed the region into the forefront of geopolitics. There was some fear of communism within the region even in an earlier period. The Brazilian Communist Party attempted an outright revolt in 1935, while Chile saw a brief period of communist participation in government as part of the Popular Front of 1939. In both countries the authorities responded to the Cold War environment by banning the Communist Party in 1947.

The impact of the Cold War upon democracy was negative for a variety of reasons. On some occasions the USA, frightened by left-wing movements in South America, actively encouraged military intervention. However, even when it did so (Chile in 1973, Brazil in 1964), the US role has generally been accounted secondary to domestic issues as an explanation for what happened. It is certainly true that the Cold War for many years prevented the USA from acting as a pro-democratic force, as it did to some extent during 1945–47 and has in some respects since the late 1980s. There was a brief experiment with 'democratic anti-communism' during the Kennedy administration (1961–63), but the general trend of Washington's policy during the Cold War was to accept and sometimes encourage military intervention as a preferable alternative to 'subversion'.

In general, however, it was the domestic consequences of the Cold War which were the most serious. The problem (for the region's democrats) was that the 'conservative modernisers' of the 1930s were able to reconstitute themselves after 1947 as an anti-communist coalition. Cold War authoritarianism, like the semi-fascist authoritarianism of the 1930s, was a basis for a reactionary coalition under modernistic disguise. Anti-communism tended to legitimate authoritarian

rule by helping to rally moderate and conservative political forces and push them to the Right. The result was not always support for outright dictatorship—in Chile the Communist Party was banned, but otherwise competitive elections continued—but there was often precisely such an affinity.

This is not to characterise South American anti-communism as being entirely a reaction to smoke without fire. In some places, the Marxist Left played a direct part in bringing about democratic breakdowns. Orthodox (Cold War) Marxism was dismissive of 'bourgeois democracy' and the militant Left could often see no value in democratic institutions as such. There were times when the Left either actively polarised a situation to the advantage of the military or even encouraged military intervention in the belief that democratic institutions were of little value *per se*. Local communist parties welcomed General Velasco's military government in Peru and, disastrously for themselves, the military intervention in Uruguay in 1973. The role of the far-Left in polarising the situation in Chile under Allende and thereby precipitating military intervention in 1973 is too well known to require further elaboration.

The key point is that the Cold War did not just have an impact on South America from outside, any more than the Great Depression did. Both reinforced tendencies towards dominant class solidarity, corporatist control of the lower classes and a 'military' view of political conflict which already existed in the region and were conducive to authoritarian government. It was this reinforcement which, more than anything else, made it so difficult for South American democracies to establish themselves fully after 1945.

There is no simple connection between the ending of the Cold War and the return to democracy in South America. This is evident from the fact that the most recent 'wave' of democratisation began in the late 1970s (with Ecuador) before taking in Peru (in 1980), Bolivia (in 1982), Argentina (in 1983), Uruguay (in 1984), Brazil (in 1985) and Chile and Paraguay only at the end of the 1980s. It is clear that the ending of the Cold War has contributed to the reduced level of ideological conflict within South America (particular influences such as Sendero Luminoso excepted). However, the gradual breaking up of the reactionary 'Cold War coalition' predates the ending of the Cold War itself, in most countries at least.

An important reason for this change has to do with the unprecedented degree of state autonomy and also state brutality of the most recent military dictatorships. The autonomy threatened some powerful civilian interests, and ultimately led some members of the business elite in several countries of the region to find that they had more to fear from an overbearing state than from disaffected lower classes.[20] They stopped reading Ortega y Gasset and took up Adam Smith instead. The brutality of many of the military regimes also destroyed the illusion, too often held on the Left before 1973, that democratic freedoms and human rights did not much matter in the context of the political struggle for radical change. Too many people discovered the hard way that these things do indeed matter.

Anti-mobilisation explanations. While anti-democrats have, until recently, been able to find some kind of international legitimation for their political stance,

there were also internal factors which increased the risk of democratic breakdown. There is a strand in the literature which reflects this and considers military intervention to be a reaction against popular mobilisation. In this explanation, military officers do not have to be seen simply as instruments of the established order (a perception which was never easy to substantiate). Rather military establishments have good independent reasons for disliking popular mobilisation—it tends to undermine military discipline—and this anti-mobilising reflex met with the whole-hearted support and approval of the domestic elite. The South American military was especially intolerant of mobilisation because it was far more bureaucratised than it had been in the past, and far more so than its counterparts in Africa and parts of Asia.[21] Clearly military authoritarianism cannot be seen in a vacuum or as a reaction to 'purely' political conflicts. The Church, large landowners and their client politicians, and some broader propertied interests had, in addition, a potential for anti-democratic reaction which they were prepared to exercise if democratically elected governments went beyond the most limited policies of social reform. Figures such as Allende in Chile, Goulart in Brazil, Peron in Argentina and the first AD government in Venezuela aroused too many elite fears and ultimately provoked their own overthrow. This was not simply a matter of personalities or the bad judgement of particular individuals (though this was sometimes bad). It was primarily a matter of elite reaction to radical politics at a time of rapid social change. It was also to be expected that, because social and political change was so rapid, reformist or radical urban-based politicians would at some point seek to try conclusions with existing elites, under conditions generally unfavourable to themselves.

The hypothesis being considered here is a specifically South American variant of a theory which has also sought to explain political reaction in Europe before 1945. It relates to the once and for all transition by which predominantly rural societies become mainly urban ones. Most South American countries were, as recently as 1950, predominantly rural. The pattern of land tenure was, in most of South America, extremely concentrated and the landlord class exercised real social power. Despite the often extreme inequalities which existed, social control in rural areas was generally effective if often lawless. By 1970, however, the population of South America had become predominantly urban. This transition was accomplished at a time of rapid population growth, and particularly rapid expansion of the young population of the region.

This explanation, like the more economic one considered below, is rooted in a particular set of circumstances. However, like the Cold War explanation, it relates to a transition which has now largely run its course. Today the traditional agrarian elite has either been reformed out of existence (as in Peru, Bolivia and Chile) or else has largely given way, in terms of influence, to technocrats, financiers and (in some cases) industrialists. Urban capitalism is still in many ways conservative, but it is less likely to be outright anti-democratic than landed power. There is also today less threat from below than previously, thanks to the consolidation of urban societies. The speed of social change in South America has significantly diminished. Urbanisation is still occurring, but not at the earlier pace. Meanwhile the birth rate has dropped, literacy rates have risen and electorates contain a smaller number of first time voters. When electorates do

show marked disaffection, they have tended to vote for charismatic individuals who, once elected, have tended to pursue market-orientated policies with considerable vigour.

Economic difficulties. No fully convincing explanation of political change in South America (or elsewhere) can leave out of account the specific economic realities of the region. There are at least two ways in which economic change can have an impact. One is the classical Marxist concept of 'capitalist crisis'. Weaknesses immanent in any system of capital accumulation suddenly become manifest at a moment of crisis, and disappointed expectations are converted into political action. A second way is via the more general process of 'interest definition'. Marx was perhaps right to believe that the bourgeoisie defines its interests more instrumentally and calculatedly than other classes. A key question following on from the second point is whether the bourgeoisie believed, and/or believes, that democracy is likely to be an asset to the pursuit of economic development.

The 'crisis' explanation certainly works when one looks at the timing of military intervention. We have already noted that 1930 was an ominous year in South America, with the overthrow of governments in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. Between 1945 and 1973 there is a similar logic to the military coup, in the sense that military interventions often followed on from economic downturns or from sharp accelerations in the rate of inflation. This was clearly the case in Brazil in 1954 and in 1964, in Chile in 1973 and in Uruguay in the same year. However a pure 'crisis' explanation risks vacuity. Apart from the fact that several military interventions do not seem to have had any obvious economic trigger, it is also true that the coups occurred in a context where the possibility of military intervention was already structured in. There were several cases in which only the president himself was surprised by the intervention and in several Argentinean cases the military effectively gave advance notice of its intention to take over.

By the same token, there have been some very serious economic crises in post-1980 South America which did not lead to successful military coups. Crises have included hyperinflation in Peru, Bolivia and Argentina at various dates since 1984, and severe economic problems in Venezuela and Brazil. The fact that crises of considerable magnitude have not led the military to overthrow civilian rule in any South American country since 1980 is a fact of considerable significance.

If we want to understand why this is so, then the argument of economic interest should carry more weight than the notion of crisis response. It is certainly clear that there was an ideological belief among (mainly) conservative forces—no less powerful for being rarely expressed with much intellectual rigour—that authoritarian governments could solve outstanding problems better than democratic ones. This belief enabled some conservatives to argue that military rule, despite being socially reactionary in most cases, could also be economically modernising. The parallels with 1930s-style authoritarianism are, again, evident.

The key problem which underlay this belief in authoritarian solutions can be explained (with some simplification) as follows. Most South American countries were integrated into the world economy, between 1870 and 1925, through the rapid development of raw material products for export. Brazilian coffee, Argentine beef, Uruguayan wool, Chilean nitrates and copper, Bolivian tin, Colombian coffee and Venezuelan oil transformed the economies of their respective countries. Without doubt, much material progress resulted. However, there were also some negative implications. South American economies tended to become export specialists dependent upon a narrow range of export commodities (sometimes a single one) to such an extent that possibilities of more diversified patterns of growth were inhibited—either through the 'Dutch disease' effect or through more complicated structural or psychological mechanisms. Export dependence made these economies vulnerable to severe economic fluctuations: the heady experience of the occasional boom raised popular (and government) expectations and so added to the sense of crisis when the downturn came. We have already noted the politically devastating effect of the Great Depression of 1929.

Post-1945 governments did seek to industrialise, but did so by adopting policies of state promotion and protectionism. Instead of the aggressive, Asian-style conquest of foreign markets, Latin American policy-makers preferred to look inward at their home market, which they tended to treat as captive for the purposes of industrial promotion. There was little or no effort to promote non-traditional exports, and emphasis was instead placed on the search for foreign sources of finance for industrialisation. This strategy was not entirely disastrous, for the larger countries at least, because manufacturing enterprises were able to use their home markets to acquire the initial experience and scale of operation which helped them to become internationally competitive later on. However, the policy did lead to chronic shortages of foreign exchange and a dangerous build-up of debt. It also meant that there was a direct conflict between some key electoral interests, primarily the urban middle and working classes and small businesses, and the logic of capital accumulation and long-term development. The urban classes wanted high real wages, high public spending, controls on the cost of credit and public sector subsidies. Economic orthodoxy required devaluation, less protectionism, fewer state subsidies and an end to deficit spending. Exporting interests who might, under other circumstances, have supported orthodox policies were politically weak because they were either foreign or numerically few because of the concentrated pattern of land and commodity ownership.

As a result of this structural difficulty, many South American economies were by the early 1960s growing only slowly, suffering increasingly intense cyclical crises, and producing a sense of frustration all round. Faced with the belief that development frustration had its roots in the policies of protectionist industrialisation, right-wingers sometimes supported military intervention in the hope that market-orientated economic reform could be achieved by authoritarian means. The Chilean Chicago Boys were the best-known, but by no means the only, supporters of authoritarian rule in the belief that this was the best way of re-establishing the long-forgotten principles of market economics.

Why did these beliefs not generally prove well founded? The military regimes which seized power in South America in the 1960s and 1970s were far more autonomous of civil society than their 1930s predecessors. Most of them did, at least initially, carry through substantial economic reforms. Ongania in Argentina (after 1966), Castelo Branco in Brazil (after 1964) and Pinochet in Chile (after 1973) imposed market-orientated policies while Velasco in Peru (after 1968) adopted a vigorous radical nationalism. However, only Pinochet has any real claim to have brought about decisive economic transformation (at a horrendous social cost), though Castelo Branco perhaps has a more limited one.

A full discussion of the relative economic failure of authoritarian rule in South America would require several volumes. However, three interrelated factors explain much of the outcome. One is that the South American military (with the significant exception of Chile) was no stranger to power by the 1960s. Although significantly autonomous of civil society, the military used its experience of power to build up interests of its own. Instead of relating to the local private sectors, the military tended to impose itself upon them and to pursue ambitious public investments and exercise patronage as flagrantly as clientelist civilian politicians. In the early 1980s the head of the Argentine national ballet was a military officer. Military expenditure on weapons also increased notably. Some of this 'militarisation' of the economy may have been because the military sought in most cases to rule 'institutionally' (ie the whole of the senior ranks of the armed forces involved themselves in government rather than accepting the leadership of a particular individual). Pinochet's Chile was an exception to this rule in all respects.

The second factor is that, when the military was in power during the late 1960s and 1970s, foreign credit was easier to obtain and cheaper in real terms than it had ever been. There was a corresponding tendency to ignore the trade account and to borrow heavily. The low domestic savings rate was not seen as a problem. Civilian governments in the region at this time did much the same thing. For a time indeed, this strategy appeared vindicated as Latin American growth rates paralleled and even briefly exceeded those achieved in Asia.[22] Academic observers of the day saw the military regimes as brutal but efficient and termed them 'bureaucratic–authoritarian'.[23] However, the result was excessive public indebtedness and total economic vulnerability when US interest rates rose in 1980 and international bankers cut back on their lending.

Third, the military developed a 'big project' mentality and tended to ignore key issues of detail. The Brazilian military invested billions of dollars in building the trans-Amazon highway and developing a (poorly run) nuclear power industry. However, primary education was largely neglected and many children of the poor remained illiterate. The Peruvian military government wasted the impact of some potentially positive reforms by over-committing itself to expensive and sometimes wasteful public investments.[24] In most countries ruled by the military, more-or-less inefficient state enterprises proliferated. They tended to escape serious financial and political control, and often ran up deficits which were financed by foreign borrowings. This made them particularly vulnerable when the international cost of capital rose after 1980.

Where military governments plainly failed to tackle the relevant country's

economic difficulties, the implicit alliance between the military and the private sector was broken. This has been true, most manifestly, of Argentina since 1982—where the South Atlantic adventure was an additionally alienating factor. Although there was a degree of military restiveness in Argentina at the end of the 1980s, this received no encouragement at all from conservative civilians. Restive military officers associated themselves, without much reciprocation, with the Left—and they did not succeed. In Brazil too, although the failure of the authoritarian government was less abject than in Argentina, the business–military alliance which was strong at the time of the 1964 coup did not survive a prolonged period of military rule. The dominant business class in Brazil, namely the São Paulo industrialists, played an important part in pressing for redemocratisation.[25]

The Chilean case, where the military government did indeed achieve some economic success, led to the restoration of democracy by a different route. Here the economic problems which led to social conflict and military intervention have largely been resolved. The economy has grown at over 6% on average since 1985 and the economic model set up under the military was taken over by Pinochet's civilian successors, with every sign of continuing success. Chilean public opinion is evidently willing to accept the military's economic reforms but also made it clear (in the 1988 plebiscite and subsequently) that it wants democracy as well.

The failure of democratic institutions and leadership. A final kind of explanation for authoritarian rule concerns with the general weakness of political institutions and democratic leadership in South America. Democracy, it is argued, depends upon a judicious mixture of competition and consensus. However a succession of South American presidents before 1973 sought to dramatise conflict and ignore consensus. The result of 'all or nothing' styles of political leadership adopted by figures such as Peron, Goulart and Allende was their overthrow by the military. More conciliatory, or politically competent, figures would have known when to bargain for support or to draw back rather than pushing conflict to its limits.

As we have seen, some recent scholarship has turned the spotlight explicitly on South American presidentialism and expressed the view that this is an inherently unsatisfactory form of democratic organisation. It is certainly possible to identify problems with it. The difficulties posed by an incompetent, ill or senile head of government were noted above in the context of Irigoyen in Argentina. Problems could also arise, particularly in the context of Cold War politics, when a presidential election could be won in a first-past-the-post system by a controversial figure with a minority of the vote. The election of Salvador Allende in Chile with just over 36% of the vote is a case in point.

The problems posed by these contingencies are real enough. What an excessively limited institutional focus can leave out of account, however, is the fact that seemingly rigid rules and regulations sometimes have a certain plasticity in practice. The attitudes of South Americans towards their own constitutions have rarely been regarded as inappropriately rigid. Just as many constitutions

were amended in the 1970s and 1980s to provide for run-off elections, so those of Peru and Argentina were amended in the 1990s to provide for presidential re-election.

The weakness of democratic political institutions up to 1973, therefore, can perhaps best be seen as stemming from problems caused by deep-rooted disagreement over the nature of legitimate authority, rather than from difficulties arising from a particular set of rules. The key weakness has been a lack of commitment on the part of educated public opinion (of all classes) to making democracy work. One reason for this was that the democratic ideal lost much of its credibility after 1945 thanks to various military interventions and vetoes. Many politically-aware citizens could see that neither civilian elites nor the military took democratic institutions very seriously and could thus see little point in doing so themselves.[26]

The relationship hypothesised here between civilian institutional weakness and democratic breakdown gives more weight to the general issue of democratic legitimation than the specific sub-issue of presidentialism. Legitimation cannot, in this context, be divorced from the way in which institutions (including presidential institutions) actually work. Where there is a secure sense of legitimation, this helps political society to work more smoothly and may allow some problems to be resolved more easily than would otherwise be the case.[27] By the same token there is at least a theoretical risk that, if democracy works badly enough, people may no longer care whether it exists at all.

If this analysis is correct, then democratic stability has less to do with the character of constitutional rules and regulations and much more to do with the character and extent of civilian attachment to democratic principles. From this perspective, the new democracies have already shown themselves to be more authentic (and therefore at least potentially legitimate) than the elective systems prevailing in the 1950s and 1960s. Today there is no evident 'facade' element in South American democracy. (There is undoubtedly a populist element, but that is another matter.) The military retains some influence but does not in any serious sense govern. There is no established military veto on any party or candidate. This contrasts with the long-term military veto on the Apra party in Peru during 1932–68, the banning of Communist parties in many countries of the region at some points between 1945 and 1973 and the sustained military opposition to Peron in Argentina between 1955 and 1973. No peaceful political party is now illegal. Moreover the turnover of political office no longer seems to present real risks. There has already been a significant number of cases in which incumbent presidents have turned over power to victorious candidates from opposition parties. This, again, was often a sticking point in earlier times. It is a remarkable fact that the handover of power by Alfonsin to Menem in 1989 was the first Constitutional transfer in Argentina from an elected president to another from a rival party during the whole century. Finally, universal suffrage now truly exists. There are no longer any literacy qualifications, women have the vote and elections are no longer characterised to any marked degree by fraud or intimidation. Despite some undoubted flaws and irregularities, South American democracies are more broadly-based than they have ever been.

It would seem sensible to suggest that 'democratic widening' of this kind is

necessary to facilitate the building of effective institutions, which might be described as 'democratic deepening'. Clearly the 'power' implications of a democracy which is truly a democracy are quite different from those of a democracy which exists only so long as the military will tolerate it. To that extent, the presidential institutions of today's South America are significantly different from those of the pre-1980 period when a military veto was always a genuine possibility. A number of writers have wondered whether the deepening of democracy was possible under capitalism in a Third World, or more specifically Latin American, context.[28] Without such a deepening, democratic institutions are likely to remain superficial and perhaps precarious features of local societies, perhaps retained mainly for the purposes of international respectability. Yet an optimist might well suggest that the experience of South America since 1980 has shown that democratic deepening can follow widening—bearing out the Jeffersonian contention that the best answer to the shortcomings of democracy is more democracy.

A brief conclusion

Until the early 1980s, South America did not have the consensus necessary to underpin legitimate democratic government. For this consensus to emerge it was necessary for international conceptions of 'good government' to change and for local despotisms to fail. For various reasons, including the openness of South America to intellectual influences from abroad, there has never been a prolonged period of authoritarian consensus on the pattern of some Asian countries—except perhaps in the case of Chile. Elsewhere the attempted imposition of reform from above has not generally worked well. Economic policies will only work well in South America if the governments pursuing them are seen as legitimate.

Contrary to fears sometimes expressed, however, market-orientated reforms in South America are not necessarily incompatible with majoritarian government. As a consequence, most South American economies are more favourably placed in terms of both political stability and economic growth than they were in 1989. In the short-term at least, democracy and development have gone well together. The greater democratic robustness in South America has permitted elected governments more freedom of action than civilian administrations have normally enjoyed in the past.

The policy consequences of democratisation were initially variable, with some governments attempting unorthodox (and economically disastrous) fiscal policies. However, today virtually all South American economies are run on essentially free market principles. The triumph of democracy certainly did not make the triumph of free market economics inevitable, but the two have at least found ways of coexisting with each other. It may be that the prestige of 'pure market' approaches to economic issues is already starting to fall and that in future policy makers will come under pressure (possibly from the same Washington consensus) to adopt more sophisticated capitalist policies to raise local savings ratios and improve educational systems and patterns of income distribution. It would be a mistake to assume that the intellectual prestige of any particular set of policy preferences is likely to be fixed for all eternity. The point

about democratic stability is the ability of institutions to adapt to change rather than to adopt one or other blueprint for political or economic development.

Notes

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