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# Introduction

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# **SUBSTANTIVE SELF- DETERMINATION: DEMOCRACY, COMMUNICATIVE POWER AND INTER/NATIONAL LABOR RIGHTS**

## **Democracy in Anti-Subordination Perspective: Local/Global Intersections An Introduction**

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Democracy is *the* anti-subordination perspective. Understood as procedural *and* substantive, properly restored from the various reductions, qualifications and distortions introduced by theorists to cut down the concept to dimensions functional to capitalism, democracy is a horizon not yet reached anywhere and a powerful idea to be deployed in the anti-subordination struggles of the coming century.<sup>1</sup>

The shortcomings and limitations of democracy in nations recently emerged from authoritarian rule, such as those of Latin America, are evident in the very language used to describe the new regimes: “fragile, hybrid regimes, unsettling, delegative, debilitating, illiberal, in crisis, in need of deepening and consolidation, inchoate, . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Using a geological metaphor, Agüero has identified the principal “fault lines” in Latin American democracy: incompleteness of civilian supremacy over the military; the weakness of the party system; the exclusion of new actors by established elites; poverty and inequality; crime, official abuse of citizens and impunity; and an excessively powerful bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet systematic insults against basic democratic principles, such as incredible and increasing levels of economic inequality, which can and

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1. For an analysis of how limited version of democracy has been deployed to promote conservative forces, see WILLIAM I. ROBINSON, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (1996).

2. Felipe Agüero, *Conflicting Assessments of Democratization: Exploring the Fault Lines*, in *FAULT LINES OF DEMOCRACY IN POST-TRANSITION LATIN AMERICA* 2, 1-20 (Felipe Agüero & Jeffrey Stark eds., 1998).

3. Felipe Agüero, *Democratic Governance in Latin America: Thinking About Fault Lines* 5-7 (1994) (unpublished manuscript, on file with North-South Center at the University of Miami).

are translated routinely into political inequality through various institutional mechanisms, are also endemic in developed Western nations, especially the very country which is advanced as paradigmatic of democracy. Some of the most important limits to democracy are not incidental or accidental: they are critical, systemic, structural, and deliberate. The Federal Reserve, for example, makes decisions crucial to the lives of nearly all Americans. Yet this most powerful institution is by design almost completely insulated from democratic control, responding instead to the outlook and interests of certain miniscule economic elites.<sup>4</sup>

“Really existing socialism” or “real socialism” is a term coined in the 1970s by the East German political thinker Rudolf Bahro.<sup>5</sup> The concept signals the distance between the theoretical socialism that can be inferred from the classical texts of Marx and Engels and the reality of the system then in existence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the legitimacy chasm created by the contrast between an ideology that foresaw the withering away of the state and a practice that gave birth to a pervasive state resulting in the horrors of the Gulag and the Stasi, could not be breached, despite glasnost and perestroika.

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the extinction of real socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe. Together with the end of many authoritarian regimes in Latin America and elsewhere, the end of the Soviet bloc did result in significant advances toward political democracy in a large number of countries. But the distance that still remains between democratic ideals and the actual politico-economic system in existence not only in the new democracies but in the established ones as well is large enough that to a significant albeit varying degree we can speak of them all as “really existing democracies.”<sup>7</sup> While not ignoring important differences between established and emerging “real existing democracies,” this formulation relativizes them, undermining the tendency toward the exercise of arrogance abroad and of conservatism and complacency at home.

Three of the papers in this cluster deal precisely with serious democratic faults in countries or areas that for much of their history have suffered under colonial and/or authoritarian rule, namely the Caribbean, Haiti and Nicaragua. Ivelaw L. Griffith’s paper covering “Drugs and Democracy in the Caribbean, identifies two important ways in which the drug trade threatens Caribbean democracy, namely through the corrup-

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4. WILLIAM GREIDER, *SECRETS OF THE TEMPLE: HOW THE FEDERAL RESERVE RUNS THE COUNTRY* (1987).

5. RUDOLF BAHRO, *THE ALTERNATIVE IN EASTERN EUROPE* (1978).

6. See JÁNOS KORNAI, *THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMMUNISM* (1992).

7. See Atilio A. Borón, *CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA* 189 (1995).

tion of institutions and interference with the contestation for power. These problems are aggravated by a trend stressed by Griffith: the deportation of felons from the United States back to the various states of the Caribbean.

However, the problem of the influence of "dirty drug money" on the democratic process is but a special case of the distorting power of money vis-à-vis the political system. This is a familiar problem in the United States, and it would be interesting to expand the analysis in Griffith's paper to examine the differences and similarities between "clean money" and "dirty money" in terms of consequences for the political process and the public interest. How does legitimate campaign finance money originating in the U.S. tobacco, liquor and firearms industries compare with the drug money used to buy political influence in the Caribbean, Mexico or Colombia in terms of its consequences and social costs?

In Irwin P. Stotzky's *Suppressing the Beast*, the threat to democracy comes from a different source. Stotzky focuses on the undue and in some cases grotesque degree of influence exercised in Latin America in general and Haiti in particular by what in a United States contest would be called "special interest groups."

Although forms of corporatism are present under different names and guises in such advanced nations as Japan and even the United States, the problems presented by corporatism are of a especially critical nature in underdeveloped countries and in those undergoing political transitions. Haiti fits on both counts, and Stotzky describes how the military, economic elites and even the Catholic Church have wrought devastation on that country through corporatist practices that have guaranteed these groups special benefits amidst a panorama of economic misery for the vast majority of the population.

The recent Latin American experience has shown the extent to which corporatism can wreak havoc with democracy not only in a very poor country with an uninterrupted history of tyranny like Haiti but also in a relatively rich one like Venezuela where democracy long appeared to be consolidated. The siphoning off and squandering of the country's vast oil revenues under the guise of democracy by the political class at the same time that the majority continued to live in poverty led the Venezuelan people to elect a candidate pledged to dismantle the country's political institutions.

Mario Martinez's contribution reads like a Nicaraguan case study in support of Michels "iron law of oligarchy"<sup>8</sup> as well an extension of

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8. ROBERT MICHELS, *POLITICAL PARTIES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE OLIGARCHICAL TENDENCIES IN MODERN DEMOCRACY* (1915).

Stotzky's analysis of corporatism to that Central American country. The concentration of property in Nicaragua under Somoza was notorious. More disheartening is the ultimate failure of the Sandinistas to permanently transform the situation. By insisting on state ownership of agricultural property rather than distributing titles to the peasants and by neglecting to create solid juridical bases for revolutionary measures, the Sandinistas ironically made it easier for property to be restored to the original owners when conservative forces regained power. That also made it possible for some Sandinistas to become part of the new economic elite in post-Sandinista Nicaragua, which also included members of the traditional elite but especially new players associated with the governments of Violeta Chamorro and Arnoldo Alemán.

The Nicaraguan case described by Martinez is yet one more instance of the failure of 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary elites to permanently transcend hierarchies of privilege and a case study of the persistence of corporatist tendencies. Although one could hardly have expected a democratic miracle in a Sandinista Nicaragua besieged by U.S. backed counterrevolutionaries, the fact that remains that authoritarian tendencies within the FSLN were strong quite apart from the war and U.S. intervention. With the coming to power of successive conservative administrations pledging a "return to democracy" some aspects of "really existing democracy" have been consolidated while poverty and economic inequality have only increased. Democracy in Nicaragua remains a distant horizon.

Julie Mertus compares "civil society transplants" and the work of "foreign intervenors" in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The paper discusses "the template for foreign intervenors today in Eastern Europe and then suggests ways in which . . . the work of foreign intervenors in Latin America differs." She states that "the main differences are informed by the nature of the relationship of dominant world powers to prior regimes, in particular the legacy of colonialism in Latin America as opposed to the afterstate of Cold War politics in Eastern Europe." A critique of the liberal and positivist assumptions deployed by foreign intervenors attempting to remake Eastern Europe on the model of Western democracies is a central feature of the paper.

The comparison is provocative but several observations need to be made immediately. The concept of foreign intervenor is broad enough to admit very different types of interlopers with competing agendas rather than one group with a single template. This is especially true in Latin America, where U.S. progressive activists have sometimes lost their lives at the hands of counterrevolutionaries trained by American military experts just across the border.

Moreover, in Latin America the template has not remained the same over time, with CIA experts on counterinsurgency and interrogation methods lately being replaced by experts on civil society and privatization. As civilian governments replaced military dictators, the U.S. agenda changed from propping up regimes that were merely authoritarian (i.e., right-wing) in order to prevent totalitarian (i.e., left-wing) revolutions to schemes for supporting the consolidation of really existing democracy in Latin America.

Mertus describes the clash between Western intervenors' notion of civil society and that of "politics of anti-politics" dissident groups in Eastern Europe. She asserts such groups, which aspire to an ethical civil society rather than one that merely reflects a clash of interests, pose a danger to the intervenors' reform agenda. She adds that such "anti-politics" groups have been much more prevalent in Eastern Europe than in Latin America. However, the clash between intervenors and "anti-politics" groups in Eastern Europe is at the core a disagreement about whether democracy is merely procedural or also substantive, in effect an argument about the adequacy of really existing democracy. That argument has its counterpart in Latin America, where surveys consistently show citizens view equality as an integral element of democracy, much to the chagrin of advocates of neoliberal policies.

At the end of the essay, Mertus raises an especially provocative question, namely the role of racism. "To what extent does the different treatment in Latin America stem from the legacy of colonialism of the South whereby Europeans established and controlled Latinos and Indians?" An answer to this question might be inferred from the work of Horsman, who has traced the relationship between race and Manifest Destiny.<sup>9</sup> A more recent analysis of U.S.-Latin American relations by Schoultz attempts to show that a constant in U.S. policy toward Latin America has been the perception of "Latin" inferiority.<sup>10</sup>

Ediberto Roman attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct the concept of self-determination of peoples in international law. A main objective of the exercise is to transcend the selective application of the principle in favor of a universal and consistent recognition of the right.

The need to deconstruct self-determination results to a considerable degree from the undemocratic character of international relations, and Roman explicitly attempts to subject decisions regarding self-determination to democratic discourse to be undertaken under the auspices of a

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9. REGINALD HORSMAN, *RACE AND MANIFEST DESTINY: ORIGINS OF AMERICAN RACIAL ANGLI-SAXONISM* (1986).

10. LARS SCHOULTZ, *BENEATH THE UNITED STATES: A HISTORY OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD LATIN AMERICA* (1998).

United Nations, itself less subject to the influence of the big powers. The different treatment of the Kosovo and East Timor crises by the central actors in the world today and the international community suggests the persistence of selective application and the distance still to be traversed for democratic aspirations to become central to international relations.

The papers in this cluster together with the introduction indicate that in the local as well as the global, in national and international arenas, in the East, the South and the West, the making of our common history and the construction of a democratic order is still an unfinished project.