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Democracy and Civil Society in Latin America and the Caribbean in a Time of Change

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Democracy and Civil Society in Latin America and the Caribbean in a Time of Change[*]

Susan Appe, Daniel Barragán & Anabel Cruz

Historically, countries in Latin America have been noted for political and economic instability and numerous expressions of violence and inequality. This has created concerns about weak democratic governance. These realities exist alongside a great capacity for social innovation, various forms of solidarity, rich natural resources and vast cultural diversity. The region is witnessing a change in models and paradigms related to democratic governance that are undoubtedly influencing and are influenced by civil society action. In this context, various forms of civil society (civil society organizations [CSOs], nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], labor unions and social movements, among others) are actively responding. Civil society actors are mobilized and connected through new and diverse forms with private sector groups, the media, political parties, government entities, and local, national and international networks.

Civil society action has allowed for advances in the region in terms of rights, access to public goods and services, and decentralization of state power, with varying levels of intensity across countries. Nevertheless, overall political and economic power continues to be concentrated among just a few groups, at times marginalizing civil society actors and generating a profound social instability. The relationship between citizens and state bureaucracies still displays technocratic, elitist and autocratic characteristics. Growth in urban areas aggravates problems such as violence, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate solutions for mobility, environmental degradation and declining service quality. Internationally linked crime and corruption are increasing in complexity, thus requiring more sophisticated mechanisms of prevention, investigation and sanctioning.

Additionally, and consistent with world trends, polarizing political and ideological debates in the region are evermore present. There is a crisis of legitimacy in terms of traditional politics and more distrust is felt, leading to suspicion among individuals and towards institutions. Walls of discrimination are being built and existing bridges destroyed, giving way to sectarianism and authoritarian ideas and promoting violence in speech and action, while democratic advances are threatened.

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In this context, scholarship about civil society in the region becomes even more relevant. In this special issue, we ask broadly: **How does civil society action contribute to or deter democratic governance in the region?** What are advances and where do we see setbacks? What are the forms of coordination or confrontation among governments, civil society and the private sector? How can our research better contribute to positive social change in the region? These are the questions being raised by civil society and third sector researchers, practitioners and activists and those addressed in the following special issue. As an introduction to the special issue, we outline some of the literature about civil society, its relationship to democracy, and current debates in the field. The articles in Special Issue intend to contribute to these debates in the context of Latin America.

What is civil society? What is civil society action in democracy?

Civil society as a concept has a rich history of scholarship despite little consensus of its meaning across disciplines. Classically, civil society represented a social order of citizenship (Kumar, 1993). Since the 1990s, we have seen a revitalization of the term civil society that was spurred by research communities and international institutions. In this context, some consensus around the term developed. Civil society became understood as a space where social and economic life is forged, discussed and contested. It was often described as an "arena for argument and deliberation as well for association and institutional collaboration" (Edwards, 2009, p. 4). However, Edwards (2009) noted even with this basic understanding, that civil society was quickly conflated with everything from individual freedom to expanding free markets; from a viable alternative to the state to the key to good governance and poverty reduction, among many others.

The term "civil society" and related terms used in this special issue do not only have conceptual value but they also have practical and policy-related applications, as the included articles demonstrate. To skirt around some of the on-going, larger debates about the question *what is civil society?* (see Appe, 2013; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2016; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016 for more on these definitional tensions), we under understand civil society and civil society action in democratic contexts, in theory, separate from state institutions and for-profit entities, while in practice the boundaries between the three sectors that organize society –state, market and civil society– are often blurred and fuzzy (Bebbington et al., 2008; Edwards, 2009; Foley & Edwards, 1996; Kopecky & Mudde, 2003; Putnam, 1995; Salamon, 1994). Civil society conceptually and in practice is fluid but often takes shape through associations and organizational structures –whether formal or informal. These organizations serve diverse functions which include the delivery of social services and goods, advocacy and democracy promotion and response to humanitarian needs.

These associations and organizations have proliferated and are "where public and private concerns meet and where individual and social efforts are united" (Frumkin, 2002, first chapter). They generally are considered self-governing entities that do not distribute the excess of their revenues over expenditures among stakeholders and are assumed to have a purpose for the public benefit that is agreed upon by associates of the organization (Boris, 2006; Vakil, 1997). Civil society organizations are also sometimes called NGOs, "third sector organizations," "voluntary organizations," "voluntary associations" or, depending on the context, terms such as "community-based organizations," "social organizations," "grassroots organizations" and "nongovernmental organizations" are used, just to name a few. Many scholars have noted that certain labels of these organizations have gone in and out of fashion and all have specific origins,

often rooted in policy contexts, academic tradition, and/or geographic contexts (Frumkin, 2002; Lewis, 1998).

Challenges for civil society in democracies

Civil society is often linked to democratic governance systems. For example, as part of the efforts to democratize in Latin America, governments have and continually look to local civil society and nonprofit organizations for service provision. This became business as usual for governments and multinational institutions during neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. Under a neoliberal framework, civil society participation was often limited to the more instrumental functions of service delivery; rather than expressive functions, such as policy advocacy. Dagnino's (2003; 2008) work focused on the perverse confluence between civil society's launch into neoliberal and participatory democratic governance projects. Both projects use the same language such as citizenship, participation and civil society and this served to hide the "divergences and contradictions" (Dagnino, 2008, p. 56).

This enabled civil society action to shift into professional spheres and processes of NGO-ization which "depoliticized sectors of the population" (Petras, 1997, p. 3). In Latin America, for many years scholars criticized the pressures that the NGO sector faced through neoliberal decentralization. For some this perpetuated the fragmentation of civil society making radical social movements weaker and launching vulnerable populations into the market place in the hopes of development (see Schild, 2000).

With civil society action having a greater presence in democratization and neoliberal reforms, we also saw it under greater scrutiny. Civil society in the NGO form began to see public scandals, demands for more answerability to (institutional and individual) donors, questionable financial management practice, and security issues. These concerns account for the growing attention to civil society and NGOs in public administration, public governance and policy scholarship. We see greater interest, by donors, the public, government and organizations themselves to use terms like "accountability", "self-regulation" and "transparent management" in various contexts. Accountability has come to encompass not only external accountability (nonprofits are held responsible for their actions), but also internal accountability (nonprofits must hold themselves to higher standards, open themselves up to critiques from the public and the state, and be true to their objectives) (Ebrahim, 2003; see also, Jordan & van Tuijl, 2006; Kaldor, 2003; Najam, 1996).

Moreover, whether international funding is actually decreasing in some regions or is only perceived to be decreasing, it is understood that aid flows are changing (see Appe and Pallas 2018). Foreign aid funding –both official development assistance and via international NGOs– is restricted or is under heightened scrutiny by governments. This, coupled with evidence that official development assistance (ODA) in particular is indeed decreasing in some regions, has produced tangible concerns for organized civil society (Pallas, Anderson and Sidel, 2018; Hayman 2016; Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, 2014; Pousadela and Cruz, 2016). These shifts in aid, referred to as "post-aid world" conditions (Appe 2017; 2018, Banks, Hulme and Edwards 2015, see also Puppim de Oliveira, Jing and Collins 2015), are woven into accountability concerns and tend to affect both formal domestic and international NGOs as international donors have the propensity to work with more professionalized organizations (Appe and Pallas 2018).

Another relevant factor in the region is the political pendulum. In the last decade, several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have served as laboratories for progressive

governments that have sought to re-institutionalize and strengthen the state, limit the power of the market and respond to the demands of society through social policies. This has resulted in a break with organized civil society in its various expressions. The pendulum shifts have caused tensions and conflicts which influence the extent to which organized civil society can effectively respond to the many challenges that have been presented by democracy. The generation of quality public goods and services, a vibrant civic space and enabling conditions for CSOs are some of the challenges faced by organized civil society in Latin America today.

Re-thinking civil society action in democratic governance?

Accountability concerns, post-aid world conditions, and the shifting political environments bring about several challenges for civil society action. However, these conditions also bring potential opportunities (see Appe and Pallas, 2018; Appe, 2017; Banks et al. 2015). There has been a re-examination of the so-called NGO-ization of civil society action that experienced a clear "boom" in the 1990s. Alvarez (2009) re-examined the pattern and argued that it was more an effect of neoliberal institutions favoring certain organizational configurations of civil society action. However, some NGOs have recognized the limitations to the professionalized, organizational "NGO" form, stepping away from short-term policy debates in the halls of United Nations buildings, for example, to reconnecting to the mass movements that NGOs claim or intend to represent (Alvarez, 2009), and those links which they have been accused of abandoning (Dagnino, 2003, among others). As a result, NGOs can realign themselves to process-oriented positive social change objectives (Alvarez, 2009). Related to this is an observed shift back to models of social movements. What has been called, in contrast to the NGO-ization of civil society, the SMO-ization (social movement organization-ization) of civil society. SMO-ization relies more on decentralized networks, not shying from the political and using protest tactics (della Porta, 2018).

The Contributions of the Special Issue

Debates regarding democratic governance and public policy are of central interest to Gobernar's readership, and this special issue contributes to the debates by examining those issues through the lens of civil society. Together the articles in this special issue include empirical and historical research from Ecuador, Mexico and Argentina. We have also included a case from Spain which provides insights for Latin America and a theoretical paper that has clear applications to the region.

From Ecuador, the two articles presented complement each other and give a panoramic view of the situation of civil society, and its capacity for action and re-action in order to respond to social demands and needs. Relations between the state and civil society are addressed by Juan Aúz and Sofía Jarrín during two blocks of time: 1996-2005 and 2006-2016. Although there are peculiarities in each period in Ecuador, a relationship can be observed between the regulatory role of the state to the economy and development, and the regulation of civil society, in particular the rights of association and participation. On the other hand, Eulalia Flor, Jairo Rivera and Wilson Araque address the existing challenges of sustainability for CSOs in Ecuador from an integrated perspective. They posit that the reduction of international aid flows and the lack of capacity of CSOs to innovate have caused a process of civil society weakening in Ecuador. Faced with this complex scenario, actions and experiences show also the resilience of Ecuador's organized civil society.

As noted above, organized civil society in democracy has taken on newer forms of social action and organizing. Nathalie Colasanti, Rocco Frondizi, Laura G. González-Ortiz and Marco Meneguzzo's article demonstrates how this is playing out in Argentina. The article presents evidence of new and innovative forms of civil society through a rigorous conceptual framework and empirical examination of two case studies in Argentina. The authors analyze the implications in terms of governance and management of two factories, which, after being abandoned by their owners, are occupied and managed by their employees. The article examines the bonds of solidarity among the groups and with the surrounding communities, which enables them to become a center for social activism and citizen participation. The case of Mexico presented by Paola García Escorza and Ilse María Fajardo Guerrero provides us evidence of how CSOs adjust their strategies in order to strengthen and achieve greater impact, given economic and political pressures. The authors provide rich qualitative data to examine the internal management and strategies of CSOs and the relation to their external environments.

While not in Latin America, we also include new organizing experiences from the case of Spain. Ruth Simsa and Marion Totter present empirically the Spanish movement "15M" to provide a case from which organized civil society in the Latin American context can learn. Both in Spain and in Latin America, democracy is related to the participation of civil society and in both cases social movements operate in weak and often hostile institutional environments, face criminalization and confront threats of cooptation. The authors argue that internal organizing practices of social movements contribute to their sustainability, especially by designing organizations in what they define as a prefigurative way, as partial organizations. And finally, we have included a theoretical paper about how political and ideological changes affect public bureaucracy and its relationship with civil society. Grazielli Faria Zimmer Santos and Paula Chies Schommer situate their conceptual exercise in the context of Latin America. They illuminate two trends in the state-civil society relationship: the technocrat and the popular, which outline the two main ideologies affecting the behavior of public bureaucrats around participation. They argue for the need to build a new ideological approach about how public bureaucracies are attentive to organized civil society.

As a special issue, the compiled articles collectively seek three overarching objectives. First, the issue is made up of contributions by diverse and international researchers who are focused on Latin America. All of the authors see to develop knowledge and insights relevant to the region's civil society and the non-profit/third sector. Second, we also hope this issue fosters interest among more researchers of the region about issues related to civil society action and democratic governance –particularly the Gobernar's readership of public administration and policy researchers as well as emergent scholars and doctoral students exploring topics of study. And third, we seek to promote the dissemination of research findings in an effort to further engage CSOs and practitioners themselves in research and activities that support democratic governance. We welcome your interest as we build the knowledge and dialogue among scholars, practitioners and students alike about these important issues.

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