Rebellion, Reformism, and Reaction in Latin America - An Interview

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From Chile to Ecuador, a wave of revolts against neoliberal austerity has swept through Latin America. Elections have brought the Peronists back to office in Argentina, and political crisis to Bolivia under Evo Morales. Brazil remains under the shadow of Jair Bolsonaro, but how enduring is his far-right politics, and what lessons does it signal for the rise of the right elsewhere in the region? Ashley Smith talked with Jeffrey R. Webber about the roots, politics, and trajectory of these struggles.

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Ashley Smith - The world has been rocked by a new round of mass revolts. In Latin America and the Caribbean, protests have exploded in Haiti, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, and Chile to name only a few. What are the economic and political roots of these risings?

Jeffrey R. Webber - Each instance has particular political dynamics which need to be studied closely, but they all share roots in the regional reverberations of the global crisis of capitalism that began in 2008. While Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean were immediately hit by that crisis, given their deep integration into the US market in various ways, the impact on South America was delayed.

In the latter sub-region of Latin America, growth was maintained through deeper ties to the new centre of global accumulation, China, which helped maintain high commodity prices for key South American export goods – especially mining minerals, agro-industrial products, and natural gas and oil – at least until the Chinese economy also began to falter. Because there was still no real recovery in the United States or the Eurozone at that time, there was no new source of dynamism in the world market to pick up the slack introduced by China's relative deceleration.

Thus, by 2012, most of South America was deeply mired in the crisis, and oil-dependent economies like Venezuela and Ecuador were then sharply struck by the slump in oil prices mid-way through 2014. The annual growth rate for all of Latin America and the Caribbean (which obviously disguises important unevenness across countries and sub-regions) between 2009 and 2018 was as follows: -1.8

(2009), 6.2 (2010), 4.5 (2011), 2.8 (2012), 2.9 (2013), 1.2 (2014), -0.2 (2015), -1.0 (2016), 1.3 (2017), 0.9 (2018).

So, from 2012 forward, in uneven ways, there has been a sustained downturn – with two years of outright contraction – and a new era of generalized austerity has accompanied this state of affairs, whether administered by ostensibly left-wing governments or avowedly right-wing administrations. This is the material backdrop to the "end of the cycle" of the pink tide, growing instability, right-wing insurgency, and new protest waves.

Even mainstream economists now recognize we are in the midst of a new period of secular stagnation on a world scale, traversed by heightening geopolitical conflict between China and the United States and literal fires across the globe associated with the unfolding ecological disaster. The present Latin American scenario needs to be understood in that wider context.

Just as each global economic forecast for 2019 issued by the International Monetary Fund has had to downgrade its expectations for the world economy compared to previous forecasts, the last outlook report from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean predicts an annual aggregate growth rate for 2019 for all of Latin America and the Caribbean of just 0.5 percent, down from 0.9 percent in 2018. Investment, exports, public spending, and private consumption are all falling. And the phenomenon is much more all-encompassing across the region than in the recent past, with 21 of 33 countries slowing down (if one excludes the Caribbean, 17 of 20 Latin American countries are projected to lose steam this year).

Obviously, it's difficult to talk about all these struggles that have emerged out of this economic slowdown at the same time. But what are some of their common features? What is their class and social composition?

Perhaps the best thing to do is to try to provide relatively detailed and contextualized comments on just three of the cases you mentioned – Argentina, Ecuador, and Chile. Each has its particular dynamics but there are also some features of generalizable significance.

In Argentina, unlike Ecuador and Chile, the temporality of elections has been dominant of late rather than the rhythms of street contention. The first thing to note, of course, is the victory of Alberto Fernández in the elections last month. He ran for the Peronists, together with former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), as his vice-presidential running mate.

Fernández, known as a moderate, centrist Peronist, was a high-level functionary behind-the-scenes in Néstor Kirchner's government (2003-2007) – Néstor Kirchner being CFK's late husband. CFK anointed Fernández as the presidential candidate for Peronism earlier this year, instead of running herself, as a way of unifying what had become a fragmented Peronist field. The move also signalled a centrist turn away from the kind of left-populist Peronism that CFK would have represented had she run herself.

Fernández won the election with 48 percent of the popular vote, with Mauricio Macri, the incumbent candidate for the centre-right ruling party Cambiemos, sustaining 40 percent of the electorate's support – a not inconsiderable political achievement, given the context of unmitigated socio-economic disaster over which Macri presided as president.

What do you think of the international left's response to the Peronist victory? Is it right to see it as a reversal, as some have argued, of the decline of the pink tide?

Parts of the international left have greeted the return of Peronism to government in Argentina as evidence that there never really was any end to the cycle of the pink tide as a number of us had contended. They claim that happy times have assuredly returned after what they deem a brief lapse.

The reality, of course, is much more ambiguous, both because of the limits to the original Kirchnerist project that this celebratory response obscures, and, especially, because of the tensions that will wrack the new government as it navigates the treacherous waters of a ferocious economic meltdown, opposition from a discontented domestic capitalist class, and discipline from the International Monetary Fund.

The electoral defeat of Macri was absolutely necessary, and the Fernández-CFK ticket was the only viable path to that defeat on offer. In the immediate present, at least, the downfall of Macri means a setback for the myriad forces of the right operating in the region – the IMF, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Sebastián Piñera in Chile, and so on.

This is all to the good. It is also, in a sense, a popular victory insofar as the Argentine working class is likely to come out of these elections with more elevated social expectations and confidence than it would have had should Macri have endured in office. He has now been made accountable for his role in the socio-economic crisis.

Thus, as Martín Mosquera has argued, the election of Fernández is a refracted expression of the cycle of social mobilizations that built up through much of Macri's period of rule. But it is a highly contradictory and ambiguous popular victory which could very quickly be transformed into popular defeat if there is no widescale and immediate return to social struggle from below.

In what sense is Fernández's victory double-sided?

If the Fernández victory is an expression of the anti-Macri cycle of mobilizations, it is also, as Mosquera points out, indicative of the weaknesses of that cycle. In the absence of significant social victories in the form of defeating Macri's austerity programme through extra-parliamentary contestation, and in the absence of an independent political project of the popular classes with a radical programme (the Trotskyist FIT-Unidad was electorally marginalized and weakened both by sectarianism and the internal controversies of some of its constitutive organizations), widespread anti-Macri sentiment was eventually channelled, in a distorted sense, into an electoral agenda defined by centrist Peronism.

So, while it is true that the popular consciousness of the working class is likely to be more heavily inflected with more confidence following the Fernández victory than if Macri had stayed in office, working class consciousness is always mixed, never moving only in one direction. It is also true, therefore, that that consciousness has also already been contained to a certain degree by what Mosquera calls the "minimalist realism" of the Fernández programme.

Important, too, is the fact that Macri's party Cambiemos, with 40 percent of the vote, retained its key petty bourgeois, middle class base, so the electoral fall of the man himself should not be equated to the defeat of the wider grassroots phenomenon of Macrism and the reactionary sentiments it increasingly congeals. Macri's followers have not lost their faith and persist in calling for responding to the crisis with a restoration of order through state repression of crime and social protest.

This is quite distinct from the immediate post-2001 scenario – the last explosive period of economic crisis and popular mobilization in Argentina – when the middle class was radicalized and moved left, abandoning its traditional political home in the Radical Civic Union Party (UCR). So, the right remains an immediate and present danger.

Given all this, what are your predictions about the immediate future for Argentine politics?

To understand the possible directions that Argentine politics might take in the post-election scenario, it makes sense to reflect briefly on the patterns of social mobilization that developed under Macri. As Adrián Piva and Martín Mosquera have argued, Macri came to office in a context which was not obviously favourable to a capitalist offensive against labour.

The outgoing Kirchnerist project had not imploded in any deep sense, nor had there been a large-scale social defeat of the popular classes and their organizational capacities. The reigning balance of social forces was still heavily determined by the outcome of the post-2001 social insurrections and their partial containment and institutionalization in the Kirchner model of Peronism.

Thus, Macri was met from the outset of his administration in 2015 with large and militant mobilizations against austerity. This explains the so-called gradualist approach to economic restructuring that the regime adopted over the 2016-2017 interval. Following mid-term elections in October 2017, in which Cambiemos obtained victory with 40 percent of the vote due in part to a hyper-fragmented Peronism, the government attempted a shift to a programme of permanent austerity and a legislative offensive against the working class.

But enormous levels of resistance helped delay the proposed labour reform and, particularly, the pension reform, which was met with overflowing protests in the plaza outside the Congress and running battles with the security forces in the streets in December 2017. This resistance led to a sustained loss of support for Macri, the president's growing isolation, and the partial paralysation of reform measures.

Still, there was a relative downturn in social movements in 2018, a pattern that continued into 2019, as partially indicated in the fall of days lost to strikes compared to 2017, even as real incomes fell, more workers lost their jobs in the private sector, and cuts to public spending accelerated. Indeed, those features of the economic crisis, combined with rapidly rising inflation, actually had heightened disciplining effects on working class resistance, as Piva and Mosquera suggest.

These economic elements functioned in concert with an increasing turn of politics toward the electoral terrain, and a call by the Kirchnerists for their bases in the social movements and trade unions to demobilize so as not to jeopardize Peronist success in the October 2019 elections. In a potential signal of what is to become of movement behaviour under the Fernández administration, that call for quiescence was answered for the most part by Peronist social organizations and unions.

Were there any countertendencies to social demobilization?

Yes, the Argentine feminist movement. It defied the pattern of relative social demobilization that had set in by 2018. It is far and away the most important element of popular struggle in the country since 2015, when the initial mass mobilizations of the Ni Una Menos (Not One Woman Fewer) movement against gender-based violence erupted.

In 2018, the feminist movement was responsible for one of the biggest mobilizations in Argentine history (roughly two million in Buenos Aires alone) on the occasion of the congressional discussion of a law concerning legal, secure, and free abortion. This year, despite a wider decline in social struggle in the run-up to elections, the Argentine contingent of the International Feminist Strike on March 8 was massive, as was the fifth march of Ni Una Menos on June 3.

A forum called the National Gathering of Women has been held in Buenos Aires since 1986. Another sign of the depth and radicalization of the feminist movement in recent years has been the fact that these gatherings now bring together 50,000 women, lesbians, transvestites, trans, and non-binary people annually. There has also been a change in the name of these national encounters reflecting an embrace of more feminist identities, links to indigenous struggles, and internationalism. It is now called the Plurinational Gathering of Women, Lesbians, Transvestites, and Trans.

As Gabi Mitidieri and Cami Baron have stressed, this is a transversal feminist movement, bringing together myriad elements of struggle and posing a foreboding resistance obstacle to the implementation of Macri's economic programme. By transversal they mean that this is a feminism bringing together trade unions, student activism, informal workers, and partisan and non-partisan activist collectives of innumerable variety.

Ideologically and politically the movement has linked together different components of the multidimensional crisis facing Argentine society: economic, ecological, political, cultural, sexual, and affective. Mobilizing masses, its organizing cadre include Trotskyists from the FIT-U, Kirchnerist activists working within and outside state institutions, and autonomist anti-capitalists.

The resurgent feminist movement has made visible workers long absent from traditional workerist conceptions of the labouring class – women, trans, queers, unpaid domestic workers, informal workers, and racialized and feminized precarious workers. With all of the alliances and networks embedded in its struggles, Mitidieri and Baron argue, the new Argentine feminism is the central connecting thread of class struggle in the country today.

It is the most likely vector through which a consolidation of an anti-capitalist consciousness could occur, a consciousness sufficiently capacious to face the multidimensional crisis of society, ecology, and politics. Of the mass movements active in the country today, the feminist movement is both the most plural, horizontal, participatory, and democratic, and the most radical and far-reaching in its challenge to traditional political systems of representation, the official trade union movement, the stigmatization of certain jobs performed by feminized workers, and the power of the Catholic Church in the Argentine state and society, among other issues and areas.

With Fernández formally assuming power in early December, what are the prospects for the Argentinian popular movement in the coming period?

The economic context is important. Unemployment is running in double digits. Inflation is at the highest level in almost 30 years. After a contraction of the GDP by 2.1 percent in 2016, a weak recovery of positive 2.7 percent growth in 2.7, 2018 witnessed an even sharper contraction of 2.5 percent.

In 2018, Macri accepted a loan from the IMF of $57 billion, the biggest loan issued to any country in the institution's history. The IMF and the Trump administration bet heavily on maintaining the right in office, and they have lost dearly in this sense. But as a recent opinion piece in the Financial Times suggests, "Alberto Fernández has already promised to respect all contracts and to make an effort to pay all Argentina's obligations. Any characterisation of the new government as irresponsible appears to be inaccurate." By some accounts, Argentina is due to pay $30 billion of its debt by the end of this year, that is, only one month into the Fernández administration, and an additional $50 billion is due over the course of 2020.

The clearest feature of Fernández's intentionally opaque campaign programme was a proposed "social pact," according to which each side in the capital-labour relation is asked to be reasonable. The unions should not demand more than is possible, and the capitalists should not expect more than can be reasonably delivered given the taxing political-economic setting facing the new administration. Fernández seems to want to wait out the immediate future as smoothly as possible, containing popular expectations while renegotiating the debt with the IMF, with the hope that a new cycle of expansion might arrive soon – a dim prospect.

What are the possible trajectories for the social movements and the left in this situation?

Piva and Mosquera suggest two, each with a reasonable chance of happening. In the first and worst hypothetical scenario, the incoming Peronist government would introduce a modified and negotiated version of the structural reforms that Macri was unable to introduce through a process of social pacification, above all relying on traditional Peronist integration and cooperation of the union bureaucracy. If the economic crisis were to deepen, particularly its hyperinflationary component, the chances of such a "minimally realist" path out of the present crisis would improve.

In a second, preferable scenario, the new Peronist government would prove incapable of containing social discontent due to some combination of excessively austere demands from the dominant classes and the IMF which could not win political legitimacy, and/or because the defeat of Macri would have generated a new political climate in which the socio-economic and political expectations of the popular classes became sufficiently elevated so as to militate against tendencies toward integration and pacification, and instead push toward renewed social mobilization. Again, the fact that the feminist movement has become a transversal vector of class struggle against austerity, and that it remains mobilized and relatively free of traditional institutionalization, means that it will be a crucial component of all efforts to make the second scenario a reality in coming months.

Big crises in the recent history of the Argentine economy – 1975, 1981-82, 1989, and 2001-02, and the present – have all exhibited to one degree or another common features of extreme devaluations, high inflation, collapse in workers' salaries, and a deterioration in working conditions. Each one was also characterized by highly fluid and unstable situations of political crisis in which the ultimate outcome was anything but decided in advance.

As Mosquera recalls, popular struggles in 1975 defeated a programme of reaction only to be felled a year later by the installation of a murderous military dictatorship. Similarly, 2001 opened up a new cycle of struggle in which the realization of the interests and agendas of the dominant classes were partially stymied. By contrast, the crisis of 1989-1991 ushered in a decade of neoliberal counter-reformation in the form of Carlos Menem's right-wing Peronism.

As in these earlier moments, the present crisis is rich in fluctuation and radical political and economic uncertainty. For the second hypothetical exit to the crisis to come to fruition, social movements and unions will need to protect their class independence and autonomy and resist Fernández's predictable calls that social pacification and union cooperation with austere reforms are necessary to ensure the "governability" of a "popular government" in a context of economic turmoil. Argentines could do worse than to steal a few pages from the Ecuadorian and Chilean play books of late should Fernández attempt an austerity programme of his own, however diluted in comparison to that of Macri's.

What is the situation in Ecuador and Chile?

Let's start with Ecuador. In March of this year, the International Monetary Fund agreed to lend Ecuador $4.2 billion as part of an expansive $10.2 billion package in which the Latin American Development Bank (CAF) also coughed up $1.8 billion, the World Bank $1.7 billion, and the Inter-American Development Bank $1.7 billion, with the remainder covered by a collection of smaller multilateral organizations.

As is usual in these arrangements, the loans came attached to conditional "structural reforms," focused mainly on reducing the fiscal deficit, labour reform, increasing foreign reserves, and making conditions for transnational corporate investment in the extractive sectors of Ecuador's economy even more attractive. While the IMF has fixated on the deficit, in the most immediate sense the real problem is the dollarization of Ecuador's economy, which has deprived the country of any normal monetary policy capacity, and which has made imports exaggeratedly cheap and the production of industrial goods for export impossibly expensive to sustain.

While Ecuador only accounts for 0.5 percent of global oil production, the country's economy nonetheless depends heavily on this export commodity for foreign exchange. The crash of the oil price in mid-2014 was the key mechanism through which the global economic crisis was transmitted to Ecuador. GDP grew by relatively high regional standards at 3.5, 7.9, 5.6, and 4.9 percent in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, respectively, before decelerating quite dramatically to 3.8 (2014), 0.1 (2015), -1.2 (2016), 2.4 (2017), and 1.4 (2018). Alongside oil, export revenues from the banana, shrimp, and cacao sectors also suffered from the end of the commodities boom.

The first half of Rafael Correa's decade in office (2007-2017) was characterized therefore by almost frenetic growth by Ecuadorian standards, with oil rents allowing for important increases in public and social spending. At the same time, the intensification of extractive capitalism in the mining and oil sectors, under the control of multinational capital, meant growing confrontation between Correa and the indigenous and socio-ecological movements. Simultaneously, Correa was viciously opposed to trade unions, ferociously combatting the public sector labour movement throughout his two administrations.

The Correa era was characterized, therefore, by an extractive project of capitalist modernization, an exaggerated orientation toward top-down technocratic governance, targeted distribution of some of the oil rent to layers of the popular classes, and a demobilizing, and increasingly repressive and criminalizing attitude toward socio-ecological struggles, the organized labour movement, and the indigenous movement, especially its peak organization, the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE). Once the distributive component of Correa's developmental matrix began to wane in the context of economic stagnation, the always present reactionary elements of his regime hardened further, and Correa's popularity began to suffer.

Lenín Moreno, who had been Correa's vice president between 2007 and 2013, was his successor as candidate for the PAIS Alliance party in the 2017 elections. Moreno won the second round of those elections in April and assumed office in May. Almost immediately, Moreno turned sharply against his predecessor, opening up corruption investigations against Correa related to the Car Wash (Lava Jato) judicial proceedings in Brazil, and the infamous scandals associated with the Brazilian engineering and construction company Odebrecht in various countries of the region, including Ecuador.

The anti-corruption proceedings also quickly enveloped Jorge Glas, Moreno's vice president, who had also been Correa's vice president between 2013 and 2017. Moreno suspended Glas from the vice presidency in August 2017, and he was subsequently sentenced to six years in prison for accepting $13.5 million in bribes connected to the Odebrecht scandal.

With the elevated geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, Moreno also departed from Correa's relatively close ties with the former power, signalling his allegiance to the United States. He cut short Julian Assange's asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, reopened Ecuador to US troops (in the north and the Galapagos islands), and supported the US backed regional integration initiative—Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (Prosur)—that has been designed to replace the more independent Union of South American Nations (Unasur), from which Canada and the United States are excluded.

In short, Moreno's regime can be resolutely and unambiguously defined as right-wing, whatever his role in the first Correa administration, and however we ultimately characterize the more complicated Correa period. A somewhat comparable presidential figure to Moreno would be that of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

Unlike Correa, Moreno enjoys the unconditional approval of the mainstream private television and print media. Official government and private media circles alike had so effectively insulated themselves from any awareness of the quotidian realities and sentiments of the majority of the population that they came to confuse their own unanimity around the necessity of neoliberal restructuring and an IMF agreement with a wider societal consensus. When there was an instantaneous popular uprising in response to Moreno's adjustment package, announced on October 1, they were genuinely mystified and caught on the back foot.

What measures set off this revolt?

The immediate catalyst was a reduction to subsidies of gasoline and diesel, leading to a sharp rise in gasoline prices and a doubling of diesel prices overnight. This triggered the highest levels of social unrest in the country since the late-1990s and early 2000s (a period in which a series of governments were overthrown).

As is so often the case regarding the political and economic affairs of Ecuador, the finest grained analysis of the conjuncture thus far has been that of sociologist Pablo Ospina Peralta. He notes that the government's own data claims that the cuts to subsidies to gasoline and oil will generate $1.5 billion of the overall $2 billion in annual savings it hopes to achieve in the restructuring package as a whole. Diesel is used by heavy transport vehicles responsible for getting goods to markets, as well as for public transit vehicles.

According to the government's programme, cuts to subsidies for diesel will generate $1.17 billion of the $1.5 billion in savings in the subsidized energy sector. In contrast to diesel, gasoline in the country is used by private automobile owners – about 25 percent of the population. Cuts to gasoline subsidies will generate the remaining $330 million in savings.

As Peralta notes, given that the hike in diesel will express itself both in a spike in fares for public transit and a spike in prices of basic commodities in markets due to transfers of the rise in transport costs to consumers, the poorest 75 percent of the population will shoulder 78 percent of the cost of the cut to subsidies, while the richest 25 percent of car owners will carry the remaining burden of 22 percent. Quite apart from the issue of the rationality of the cuts themselves, the specific policy formulation for their execution constitutes open class warfare against the poor.

Beginning on October 3, 11 days of nation-wide protests exposed the repressive, weak, and inept character of the Moreno regime. While transport drivers led the initial call, the leading edge of the protests has been assumed by the rejuvenated CONAIE. This is an exciting development for the prospects of left-indigenous struggles elsewhere in the region, too, given CONAIE's exemplary position within that sphere since the 1960s.

Militant indigenous marches converged on Quito from some of the – not coincidentally – most impoverished and most indigenous provinces, such as Esmeraldas, Napo, Chimborazo, and Morona. Like feminists in Argentina, indigenous militants adorned in ponchos have once again become the transversal connecting thread of class struggle in Ecuador. This was nicely captured in one of the popular banners of the indigenous marches: "IMF Out of Ecuador."

Complex capillaries of indigenous protests making their way to the capital, Quito, from different parts of the country were joined by students, the unemployed, precarious workers, and labour activists in running clashes with the armed forces and police. In the coming days, Quito was riddled with barricades and burnt-out cars. The seat of government had to be temporarily moved to the coastal city of Guayaquil. Moreno declared a state of emergency, suspending constitutional rights to mobility and association, and a curfew was declared at 3pm in Quito with 30 minutes notice. At least five people were killed, and 2,000 arrested.

Negotiations between indigenous leaders and the government were brokered by the United Nations and the Catholic Church, ending in a reversal of the cuts to subsidies of diesel and gas. Most importantly, the militancy of the indigenous movements and its popular-sector allies has revealed itself powerfully once more as an enemy of austerity, class rule, ecological devastation, racism, and the imperial arrogance of the IMF. Ecuador, alongside Bolivia, had in the 1990s and early 2000s assumed a vanguard position Latin America in terms of the depth and spread of its variegated forms of self-organized, densely networked, and radical movements from below. The plebeians of Ecuador have assumed the mantle once again.

What about the rising in Chile, which is perhaps the most important development? What set it off and what's developing now?

The history and dynamics of the rebellion in Chile are different than in the other countries. Chile was out of step with regional trends of popular radicalization, which developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This has to do with the fact that the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990 annihilated much of the organized left, and so the elite faced little opposition to their managed transition to liberal democracy, which maintained the neoliberal basis of the economy first introduced by Pinochet with the help of the Chicago Boys in the mid-1970s.

From 1990 to 2010, a centre-left coalition called Concertación – including the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Christian Democratic Party – formed every government. Concertación's reign was ended by the formation of the government of Sebastián Piñera of Chile Vamos, a coalition of centre-right and right-wing parties, in 2010. Concertación's successor coalition, New Majority, then came back to office with the second presidency of Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018), followed by Piñera's return to the presidency for a second term in March this year.

Throughout the post-dictatorship period, Chile has been held up as a model of neoliberal growth and political stability. Despite various amendments, the constitution inaugurated under the dictatorship in 1980 remains in place. Gross domestic product grew at reasonably high levels by regional standards in the years immediately following the 2008 global crisis – 5.8 (2010), 6.1 (2011), 5.3 (2012), 4.0 (2013) – before slowing in the wake of the end of the commodities boom, with 1.8, 2.3, 1.7, and 1.3 percent growth rates between 2014 and 2017. Accumulation picked up in 2018, however, with 4.0 percent GDP growth, although it's slowing again in 2019 as the world economy sours.

The dominant ideology, shared by the centre-left and centre-right alike, has been premised on technocratic isolation of policy makers and the depoliticization of society, such that the impersonal tyranny of the market can freely act as the ultimate arbiter of social conflict. While growth has been comparably steady, Chilean inequality is obscene. Ten Chilean billionaires boast combined assets worth 16 percent of GDP.

The Bello columnist for the British conservative magazine The Economist offered a telling observation this week: "Some years ago your columnist attended a drinks party of about 60 people in Santiago. A friend whispered in his ear: 'You realise that half of Chile's GDP is in this room'."

Meanwhile, the working and middle classes live off credit, indebting themselves to pay for the enormous costs of living associated with privatized education, health, pensions, highway, and water services, and hidden draconian taxes on the poor, such as high fares on public transit. Household debt in Chile is the highest in Latin America at 45.4 percent of GDP – as we know, personal indebtedness of the working classes is an enormous disciplinary whip in the hands of capital, one which keeps workers treading ever harder with the aim of staying above water. One of the bitter ironies of the present scenario is that Piñera made much of his estimated wealth of $2.8 billion by introducing credit card debt to the Chilean popular classes.

Inequality extends to the juridical system, where it is an open secret that all of the mainstream political parties have engaged in illegal collusions with the country's great oligopolies. Even in the rare instances of full exposure and legal findings of guilt, corporate bigwigs are not sent to jail but given small fines that don't even pretend to cover the profits made from their corrupt transactions in the first place.

Meanwhile, private security guards – and in the poorest neighbourhoods, armed police – monitor working class users of the major cities' microbus routes in an attempt to apprehend fare evaders. Fines can be enormous, reaching the equivalent of hundreds of US dollars, and even jail time. As we will undoubtedly see as we continue our discussion, solidaristic class feelings mean widespread sympathy for fare evaders and equally developed antipathy for corporate tax evaders and their political allies.

How has this neoliberal austerity been called into question in recent weeks?

In an interview that would come to haunt him, published in the Financial Times on October 17, Piñera captured the ethos of the Chilean model as seen from the perspective of the ruling class: "Look at Latin America," Piñera said. "Argentina and Paraguay are in recession, Mexico and Brazil in stagnation, Peru and Ecuador in deep political crisis and in this context Chile looks like an oasis because we have stable democracy, the economy is growing, we are creating jobs, we are improving salaries and we are keeping macroeconomic balance . . . Is it easy? No, it's not. But it's worth fighting for."

The next day the country exploded, with "oasis" becoming a popular meme ridiculing Piñera. If in Ecuador the spark had been diesel and gasoline price hikes, in Chile it was a fare increase on Santiago's public subway system. Santiago has one of the most expensive public transit systems in the world, with an accumulated 40 percent increase in fares between 2010 and 2015 in real terms.

The first actor to move was the student movement which organized a "mass evasion" demonstration in the subway, in which demonstrators would not pay the fare in a collective act of resistance. The police responded with gratuitous state repression, stoking popular anger and support for the evasive action.

State security forces unleashed still more violence, with the president quickly declaring a state of emergency, suspending various constitutional rights, a curfew first in Santiago and then later throughout many of the country's cities, and sending the military into the streets with heavily armoured vehicles for the first time since 1990. In a further gesture to the dark era of Pinochet, Piñera announced that the regime was "at war" with a powerful internal enemy.

Majoritarian anti-dictatorial sentiment was galvanized, and the population came alive, violating the curfew and the draconian state-of-emergency attempts to squash assembly and mobility rights. A motley amalgam of popular classes and the massively indebted and downwardly mobile middle class erupted in unison. A dialectic of movement massification/state repression swept the country over a two-week period. A movement was mounted that far transcended a 30-peso fare increase. As one viral slogan has it: It's not about 30 pesos, it's about 30 years!

The entirety of the post-dictatorship model of neoliberal oppression had been called into question. Virtually no political or state institution in the country retains any credibility among the population. The curtain has been drawn back on the actually existing socio-economic order of Chilean neoliberalism – the whole edifice now openly rests on military and police coercion of the vast majority.

Those reading polls conducted by the United Nations Development Program on citizen feelings toward state institutions in recent years should have had some sense that an implosion was imminent. At various points between 2017 and 2019, 80 to 95 percent of respondents suggested they had no confidence in the state, political parties, or politicians. A representational crisis had reached absolute zero.

Mass marches and pot-banging ran alongside riotous insurrection of a scale unprecedented in recent Chilean history. A class logic targeted subway stations, supermarkets, malls, high-end retail outlets, and energy company headquarters for looting and burning, while small stores were protected.

Barricades were erected in cities and running battles with the security forces displayed a ferocity of anger from below militantly at odds with Chile's officialist self-image. By some estimates 1.2 million marched in Santiago in perhaps the largest demonstration in the country's history, and across the national territory an incredible two million joined in marches out of a total population of 18 million.

Approximately 3,000 people were arrested – with widespread reports of torture, rape, and sexual assault of those detained by police and military. State officials say the number of dead is 20, but based on videos shared over social media networks capturing images of intense and far-reaching state repression and murder, social movement activists estimate the actual dead count to be in the multiple dozens, and the number of serious injuries due to indiscriminate use of rubber bullets to be very high.

The Christian Democratic director of the INDH, the state institution responsible for monitoring the human rights commitments of the state, has been criticized for purposefully neglecting his duties. Coercive state violence seems to have been most extensive and fierce in peripheral urban neighbourhoods of the poor, such as the Santiago working-class neighbourhoods of Puente Alto and La Florida, where a million workers live, as well as Maipú, to the west of the city, where another 500,000 live.

Where do things stand now in the wake of this wave of protest and repression?

Dust seems to be settling, at least on this round of revolt. Piñera – whose approval rating is now 14 percent, the lowest of any president since liberal democracy was restored – has suspended the state of emergency and curfews and has withdrawn the fare hike. In embarrassing contradiction with the president's international projection of Chile as a neoliberal haven, the government has been forced to cancel the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, which had been scheduled for November, and the United Nations climate change conference, COP25, which was set to take place in December.

Piñera has sacrificed two of his closest allies in cabinet, finance minister Felipe Larraín and interior minister Andrés Chadwick, whose public displays of contempt for ordinary Chilean people in the past two weeks made it untenable for them to remain. They have been replaced by Ignacio Briones and Gonzalo Blumel, respectively, more centrist and moderate faces of the regime.

The president has also announced a social package of $1.2 billion, to be directed toward assuaging popular discontent. Congress will also discuss progressive reform to pensions and salaries, and the president has promised higher taxes will be introduced on the rich, and that prices for myriad private social services will be fixed at more affordable rates. It should also be noted that Communist Party-backed legislation to reduce the Chilean work week to 40 hours passed the lower chamber of congress on October 24 – clearly an expression of popular power in the streets.

What organizations were involved in the uprising? How much was spontaneous? Which political ideas and demands held sway above others in these days of rage?

A precise accounting will require much more thoroughgoing study in coming months. But a preliminary stock-taking can be hazarded. First, the built-up infrastructures of the student movement over the last number of years was obviously key to kicking things off. As far back as 2001 there were initial stirrings, with 50,000 Santiago high school students taking to the streets.

In 2006, the so-called revolt of the Penguins – referring to the black and white uniforms of high-school students – involved 1.4 million students across the country and constituted the biggest demonstrations since the pro-democracy mobilizations in the last years of the dictatorship. In 2011, the university student mobilizations became even larger, and linked up in different ways with incipient workers' actions, the Mapuche and other indigenous liberation struggles, and socio-ecological movements.

Assemblyist forms of mass democracy were reintroduced into Chilean political culture, and women and youth were on the leading edge of a mass movement that had enormous popular support in wider society. It should be remembered that Piñera was in office at the time. His approval rating at the height of protests dipped to 26 percent – almost twice what it is now – and marked a low since the dictatorship.

When he was leaving office in 2014 members of his cabinet gifted him Charles Tilly's book, Social Movements, 1768-2012 so he could understand why his time in office had been so miserable. To date, it would appear he hasn't had a chance to read the book. Students organized the initial evasion action and the Federation of Students building in Santiago became one of the headquarters of coordinating mobilizations in the capital in the days and weeks that followed.

Second, as in Argentina, a militant, massive, heterogeneous, left-wing feminist movement has recently emerged in Chile. And there are clearly overlaps with student radicalization and organizational infrastructures in recent years. Inspired by events in neighbouring Argentina in 2016 and 2017, toward the end of 2017 Chilean student militants began organizing with others for their country's contingent of the planned March 8th International Feminist Strike in 2018. Feminist activists involved in agro-ecology, housing, territorial, education, health, labour, pension, anti-gender-violence, and abortion movements converged in the organization of the feminist strike of March 8, 2018, ensuring the participation of 28 Chilean cities, and a gathering of 100,000 in Santiago's main thoroughfare.

In the wake of that success they immediately began to organize for the March 8, 2019 strike. In the words of Alondra Carrillo Vidal, "We resolved to give ourselves a year to work on it, and that in the process we would develop three objectives: to transversalize feminism within the social movement, that is, to expand a feminist perspective onto the activity of social organizations and thus expand the very meaning of the feminist movement; to dynamize the articulations between distinct organizations, and to raise a common agenda of mobilizations against the precarization of life. We resolved, so that nobody could tell us what we were fighting for, to draft a programme, and that we would do it at a Plurinational Meeing of Women in Struggle."

By May 2018, the 8M Feminist Coordinator umbrella organization had been formed. In the event, the May 8, 2019 feminist strike in Chile was one of the biggest demonstrations in Chilean history, at least until the wave of quasi-insurrectionary activity in the last few weeks.

In the midst of the latest struggles, the 8M Feminist Coordinator was the first organization to call for a general strike. This was seconded by militant dock workers' unions, along with some copper mine unions. The dock workers just came out of a successful sectional strike of Chilean ports in November-December 2018. The dock workers could ensure that 20 ports would be shut down.

The student federations at all levels would ensure the schools and universities would be shuttered. Under pressure, the more moderate central labour confederations, led predominantly by the Communist Party, were drawn into endorsing the strike. On October 23, then, banks and businesses were closed, classes suspended, 20 ports paralyzed, 75 percent of the industrial sector shut down, and further sections of industry running only at half capacity.

The 8M Feminist Coordinator, according to one of its leaders Karina Nohales, has also established a commission of investigation in an attempt to uncover the real number of dead, disappeared, and injured, as well as to expose the extent of rape and sexual assault of women detainees by military and police officials, about which the media has been quiet.

Third, political parties were marginal to the unfolding of Chile's quasi-insurrection this October, including those parties on the left. The only two left parties with any credibility among the popular classes are the traditional Communist Party and the much newer Broad Front coalition of various currents of Chile's new left, the front itself an outcome of the 2011 process of mobilization initiated by university students. While militants from these parties were heavily involved in the unrest itself, the anti-party sentiment of the masses seemed to extend to them as well, albeit to a lesser degree, making it impossible for either one to provide leadership and coordination.

The myth of Chile's neoliberal oasis has been ruptured. While the mobilizations seem to be quietening down for the moment, huge layers of popular society have lost their fear of state violence along with any respect they had for state authority. The violence behind the technocratic market-speak of Chilean mainstream politicians has been exposed. There is a disposition for militant class struggle on the part of the heterogenous Chilean working class, and the precariously indebted middle classes have been radicalized and are moving left.

But the politics in the streets lack clarity and are massively in flux. Street politics in a multiclass atmosphere of indiscriminate "anti-politics" sentiment can quickly turn. While working class precarious labourers with a left-wing politics against fare hikes dominated the streets in June 2013 in Brazil, two years later a far-right petty-bourgeois politics of anti-corruption, security, and the restoration of order took control of the streets and became the dominant extra-parliamentary mass base of Bolsonaro.

It remains to be seen if the best currents within the Broad Front will be able to pull the party as a whole away from an emphasis on parliamentary politics and into a radical realignment with the anti-system sentiments of the street. There is the possibility of the front, together with key social organizations like 8M Feminist Coordinator, becoming one laboratory through which a radical, more systematized, and more coherent anti-capitalist politics might cohere, a kind of Gramscian "good sense" among working class layers working class who participated in this quasi-insurrectional cycle.

As Noal Titelman has noted, few of those in the streets over the last few weeks are members of unions, much less political parties. Many of the activists are very young, and many are women. It would be an enormous opportunity to miss for the future of the Chilean left, and dangerous in a political scenario whose outcome is still incredibly indeterminate.

The last round of revolts in the 1990s and early 2000s brought a wave of reformist governments to power throughout the region from Venezuela to Bolivia. What did these so-called Pink Tide governments actually do in office and what are the lessons of this experience?

Of course, there are many important differences across cases, so there are strict limits to any general statement. But I think the notion of a "compensatory state" developed by the Uruguayan political ecologist Eduardo Gudynas is suggestive of many countries' experiences of the pink tide and its broad political-economic parameters.

Massive social movements erupted in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the midst of a very sharp regional economic crisis of neoliberalism in much of South America. By contrast, by the time the centre-left and left-parties of what came to be known as the pink tide came to office around 2003 on the back of those social movements, capitalist dynamism had been restored in most of South America through a Chinese-driven commodities boom.

Important class contradictions underlying the new governments were temporarily concealed, only to erupt later. Resource rents made available by the commodities bonanza provided the material foundations for "compensatory states," which won political legitimacy by lubricating targeted redistributive programmes with part of the rents captured by the state through higher taxation and royalties, together with infrastructural projects, credit-extension to the popular classes, and job-creation schemes. Relatively higher levels of social spending, together with commodity-induced economic growth helped to reduce poverty in a number of countries, sometimes dramatically, as was temporarily the case in Venezuela, and is still the case (for now) in Bolivia.

However, the overarching political-economic programmes of these compensatory states did not challenge social property relations or the productive matrices of the economies they inherited from their orthodox neoliberal predecessors. No transition was initiated away from these countries' subordinate insertion into the international division of labour as sources of raw materials and cheap labour. The structural bases of the neoliberal economy were kept intact, in many ways, but they were growing faster.

The ecological premises of development programmes aligned with multinational capital and rooted in the intensified extraction of minerals, agro-industrial mono-crop production, and natural gas and oil exploitation are obviously unsustainable – to put it extremely lightly. The extraordinary fires of the Amazon this summer are but one eloquent expression of this fact. Extractivist logics also tended to put states governed by left and centre-left parties on a collision course with indigenous, peasant, and ecological movements who had placed themselves between their territories and multinational extractive capital.

In political and ideological terms, in case after case there was an excessive statism – an idolatry of the developmentalist state and its magical powers. This was encouraged by the new ruling parties, which tended to fuse their own parties with the state apparatuses they came to occupy. The parties tended to see independent and autonomous activities of social movements and trade unions as suspicious – even criminal, or functional to right-wing and imperialist interests when the interests of social movements and trade unions conflicted with the interests of state-led capitalist development as defined by state managers.

When the global crisis made its postponed arrival into South America by way of the commodity slump, the class contradictions of centre-left and left governments that had been partially concealed rose to the surface. These governments tended to move rightward, enforcing disguised mechanisms of austerity to various degrees and in so doing undermined their support bases in the popular classes. At the same time, capital that had learned to live with these regimes in times of net profitability returned to its natural political home in old or newly configured expressly right-wing political movements.

The unstable and fluctuating impasse which resulted from that exhaustion of pink tide projects and simultaneous resurgence of confident but ultimately rudderless right-wing initiatives, continues to define the present moment. All of this, recall, in the midst of a new age of secular stagnation in the world market and precipitously rising ecological crises.

Evo Morales' government in Bolivia was perhaps the paradigmatic example of the pink tide. But it too has gone into a political crisis. What is happening and why?

The recent presidential elections are a symptom of the impasse Morales's government is in. Bolivians went to the polls on Sunday, October 20, 2019. According to the country's electoral system, in order to avoid a second round in presidential elections the leading candidate must secure more than 50 percent of the vote, or more than 40 percent of the vote and a lead of 10 percent over the second-place candidate.

With 83.8 percent of the quick-count votes tallied, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal's website indicated that Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism was leading with 45.3 percent, with centre-right Carlos Mesa of Citizen Community in second place with 38.2 percent. It appeared as though there would be a second round. At this point, the TSE inexplicably shut down the live transmission of the quick-count tabulation of ballots after the 83 percent of votes had been counted – in coming days, there would be four distinct and contradictory explanations for the shutdown from TSE representatives, and to make matters worse Antonio Costas, TSE vice president resigned, saying he hadn't been consulted before the transmission was shut down and that it was a bad decision, even while stressing that he believed no fraudulent count had occurred.

Twenty-two hours later, on Monday evening, the transmission of quick-count results was restarted, with the website now indicating 95.63 percent of votes counted. The distance between Morales, the front runner, and Mesa, the runner up, had grown significantly over the intervening period. The difference separating the two candidates was now said to be 10.12 percent according to the quick-count, and this after Morales had announced that once the rural votes were counted, he was sure there would be no need for a run-off.

Oppositional protests contesting the results kicked off that Monday evening throughout the country, including the torching of several departmental offices of the electoral tribunal, just as MAS supporters simultaneously took to the streets in celebration. The official vote count was concluded several days later, with the results being Morales at 47.08 percent and Carlos Mesa at 36.51% - that is, a difference of 10.54 percent, making it a first-round victory for Morales.

The opposition, which immediately called fraud rather than for a recount to determine whether or not fraud had occurred, has not accepted the results and has called for an intensified campaign of its supporters in the streets to unseat Morales from the presidency. The Morales government has offered to allow the Organization of the American States to conduct an audit and recount, to which the OAS has agreed, but the opposition has rejected this. An audit is clearly a possibility as the votes exist with accompanying photos on the internet archive. And the OAS can hardly be framed as an institution likely to be partial to Morales over the opposition.

Morales's situation, however, is not helped by the fact that he lost considerable legitimacy in February 2016 when he simply ignored the negative results of a referendum on whether or not he should be able to run for another term. Nor is the situation helped by the bizarre behaviour of TSE officials, even if fraud has not been proven. A radicalization of the right, and a hardening turn of state authority under Morales are the likely developments in the near future.

Given this experience, how should we assess Morales' government?

Beneath this procedural and institutional drama, what has been lost in debates on the international left is any sustained reflection or evaluation of the project of Morales's Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) since 2006. Especially since 2010, it has been more and more apparent that this is a state-directed project of capitalist modernization from above – notions of "socialist success" circulating in parts of the anglophone left are unadulterated fantasy.

Its economic strategy has been reliant on agreements with multinational hydrocarbon capital and foreign and domestic agro-industrial capital in the eastern lowlands. And its core social base over time has become an indigenous petty bourgeois layer of street vendors, petty extractivists, small-scale industrial producers, and medium-scale producers involved in commercial agriculture for export – a layer which grew expansively over the first term of Morales in the context of the commodities boom, and thus modified the class composition of his core popular base.

The logic of large-scale, foreign capital in the extractive sectors runs alongside the legitimating power of an indigenous petty bourgeois layer. In addition to this nucleus, of course, there is a wider layer of passive electoral supporters from the dominated classes. Down from a recent high of 6.8 percent GDP in 2013, the economy has nonetheless ticked over at an average of 4.2 percent growth in the last three years. The subsidizing effects of extractive rent distributed to different circuits of capital in other sectors of the economy, relatively low unemployment, and targeted cash transfers to the poorest has meant very significant improvements in poverty levels. All of this is important to explaining the enduring popularity of Morales, as is the fact he is the first indigenous president in a majoritarian indigenous country since the founding of the republic in 1825.

At the same time, the Bolivian economy is hardly immune from the wider trends of the world market and has been drying up its foreign exchange savings and acquiring debt in an effort to sustain public spending and disguise this reality in the last year or so of pre-electoral preparation. It is quite likely that Morales himself, should he survive the present turmoil in office as I suspect will be the case, will implement an austerity package of his own.

Politically and ideologically, it is crucial to note that independent social movements and trade unions have been decapitated and absorbed into the state apparatus, or maligned as agents of the right, under Morales – they are consequently incredibly weak at present. For an ever-more extractive economy, declining market conditions do not mean a slowdown of extractive activity, but rather a race to improve profitable conditions for extractive multinational capital, as indicated in the Morales government's railroading of the right to meaningful prior consultation for indigenous communities prior to extractive development projects in their territories.

Likewise, the socio-ecological devastation with the current drive of capitalist modernization will intensify. The tropical fires this summer were not restricted to Bolsonaro's Brazil but included 500,000 hectares of Bolivian territory. So long as the government's ties to agribusiness in the east remain unbroken, the flames will continue to spread.

In immediate electoral terms, a Morales victory was the most attractive of the possible unattractive outcomes, but restricting politics to this institutional terrain of the state is a recipe for conservative Realpolitik, not socialist and indigenous emancipation. There should be no illusions entertained as to the depth of the contradictions to come under Morales's rule in a new era of austerity and stagnation, and the necessity of rebuilding independent popular movements and their radical political articulations in the coming years is a priority – especially considering the distance they have regressed since the heights of the 2000-2005 epoch of the so-called Water Wars and Gas Wars. We should also keep our eyes on the growth of a far-right evangelical movement which expressed itself seriously for the first time in the electoral arena with almost 9 percent of the electorate backing Korean-Bolivian doctor Chi Hyun Chung of the Christian Democratic Party. In a contest that ultimately polarized around Morales and Mesa, that 9 percent probably underestimates the growing socio-political force of right-wing evangelism in the country. Brazilian politics under Bolsonaro is one good reminder why we should fear its further ascent.

On the other side of the political spectrum, how has the right taken advantage of the impasse hit by these reformist governments and what have they done in power? How have the region's political establishment and its traditional parties reacted to this polarization?

The implosion of the 14-year experimentation of centrist neo-developmentalism under the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil and the rise of far-right extremist Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency is surely the most frightening and dangerous development.

The Brazilian dynamics reflects much of what I have said above. After years of growth and reduction of poverty – alongside unprecedented profits for the financial sector – the global crisis reverberated back onto Brazil with a vengeance. Consider the pattern of high acceleration, through stagnation and outright contraction, and then back to stagnation in the country's rate of GDP for the years over the last period: 7.5 (2010), 4.0 (2011), 1.9 (2012), 3.0 (2013), 0.5 (2014), -3.5 (2015), -3.3 (2016), 1.1 (2017), 1.1 (2018).

In street politics, the promise of left-social movement rebellion in the June 2013 revolts, which like Chile last month erupted over transit fare hikes, was eclipsed for a number of years, as the sociological make-up and ideological leadership of street protests changed in 2015, 2016, and 2017, forming a militant petty-bourgeois foundation for Bolsonaro's rise and consolidation. Dilma Rousseff's PT government responded to the 2013 protests with disdain, even as they forced her to run a left-wing presidential campaign at the end of that year. Then, upon assuming office in 2014 for her second term, Rousseff introduced an austerity package and attempted to signal credibility to finance capital by appointing neoliberal economist Joaquim Levy, until then president of a division of Bradesco, Brazil's second largest private bank, as head of the ministry of finance.

Over the coming years, under an ideological banner of anti-corruption, and utilizing forces within the judiciary which it still controlled, the Brazilian right illegally impeached Rousseff in 2016 through a parliamentary coup, installing a lame-duck interim presidency of Michel Temer until 2018, when Bolsonaro was elected, following the imprisonment of Lula, who had been leading the polls decisively as presidential candidate for the PT. No one remotely serious can regard Lula as something other than a political prisoner.

Without going into the details, Boslsonaro sits atop a weak and internally divided far-right regime, split between what I have called cultural authoritarians, militarists, and neoliberal technocrats. He has had steadily declining approval ratings since assuming office in January this year. While capital backed Bolsonaro as an outside candidate at the last minute as a way out of crisis and to avoid a victory for the PT, until very recently the regime had not delivered on its promises for deep economic restructuring, and the markets were losing faith. But congress did just pass a much-hated pension reform, which was seen as critical by international and domestic capital as the wedge through which a much wider marketization of society could be initiated.

Nonetheless, the government remains rudderless and unpopular. A general strike was pulled off a few months ago, and major demonstrations in the response to the government's role in the Amazon tragedy this summer (winter in Brazil).

Which isn't to say the regime isn't dangerous. Quite the contrary. If the most promising force on the Latin American left in the last few years has been the emergence of mass-based, left-wing feminism, Bolsonaro's furious war on "gender ideology" has given the greenlight to extant strains of gendered violence in Brazilian society, with around 175 rapes per day, double the figure five years ago.

Relatedly, the country maintains its stature as the most lethal locale for queer people anywhere in the globe, with 455 reported hate murders of this kind in 2017, and 50 attacks during the presidential election directly tied to Bolsonaro supporters. Two murders of trans women among these 50 attacks were carried out by men who invoked Bolsonaro's name.

Long-standing racist brutality by the police has been made even worse under Bolsonaro. According to the Brazilian Annual Public Security Report, in 2017, Brazilian police forces killed 14 people per day, 5,144 over the course of the year. In 2018, with Rio de Janeiro's favelas under military intervention at the behest of Temer, there were 1,532 officially registered killings by police. In 2019, the numbers have been equally impressive: 170 dead in January alone. This constitutes racialized state and para-military execution of mainly Afro-Brazilians of a spectacular intensity.

One could easily go on.

I think there are a few generalizable features of the Brazilian right despite its particularities. The first is that the Latin American right has no positive ideological programme as it did in the 1990s – neoliberalism, globalization, etc. – around which its bases could enthusiastically cohere, with a confidence of hope in the future. This is because the right does not know how to exit locally from the present stagnation of neoliberal capitalism on a world scale. Latin American conservatives are hardly unique in this regard.

Second, and a result of the first factor, where it does come to office the right has to administer stagnant economies and introduces unpopular austerity, quickly haemorrhaging support among the population, while relying increasingly on repression. We can see this in the ferocity of Piñera's reactions to the recent uprisings, the worst repression since Pinochet in that country. We can see that in Moreno's state of emergency and curfews in Ecuador. We can see that in the drift away from the peace agreement in Colombia, in the dictatorship under a guise of democracy in Honduras, in what some Argentines called the "Bolsonarization" of Macri's team in the last months of the electoral campaign this year, and so on and so forth.

Third, the nastiness of the right reinforces a certain nostalgia for pink tide centre-left configurations of the past. Think of the revival of popularity of Lula in Brazil, and the return of Peronism in Argentina. But, as I have suggested, this nostalgia, while understandable, tends to militate against a reckoning with the ways in which the contradictions of those reformist projects laid the bases for the right's resurgence, on the one hand, and the fact that if these political forces were to return to office, as they will in Argentina at the beginning of December, they would face enormous internal and external pressures to move right rather than left in an attempt to manage capitalist stagnation at best, or crisis at worst.

What position have the imperial powers, particularly the US, Canada and China, taken in this volatile situation?

In the interests of space, let me set aside Canada for the moment and direct readers to the book Todd Gordon and I wrote on the topic, Blood of Extraction: Canadian Imperialism in Latin America.

One of the most important features of the neoliberal phase of imperialism is the role of foreign direct investment, the agents behind such investment, multinational corporations, and the support leant to MNCs by the states that host their headquarters. As such, tracking FDI flows is a reasonable place to start for any discussion of contemporary imperialism. If mergers and acquisitions are included, the United States continues to lead FDI into Latin America, followed by the European Union treated as a bloc, with Canada in third place, and China in fourth.

The United States has greeted the "end of the cycle" of the pink tide with unabashed delight, and has utilized the emergence of new right-wing allies to try to rehabilitate regional bodies like the Organization of American States (OAS) in which it has a seat and decisive influence behind the scenes, to replace organizations formed during the pink tide era from which it was excluded, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Nations (CELAC). As mentioned above, this pattern can also be seen through the promotion of Prosur over Unasur. The reanimation of the IMF, World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank in the region is also an indirect expression of US power.

The US Drug War continues to be a flexible platform through which the US military, intelligence services, diplomatic corps, and police can project their power in Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and Colombia, especially. Military bases and the presence of troops continue to expand wherever possible.

On the front of migration, Trump has managed to use the tremendous asymmetry of power between the United States and Mexico to convince or compel the new centre-left populist president of that country, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, to carry out the policing of Central American migrants in Mexico on behalf of the US border regime.

Under Trump, Venezuela, in particular, has been of special importance to the American imperium's calculus in Latin America, as expressed in the US-led recognition of Juan Guaidó's self-declaration as Venezuela's "interim president" in January 2019, and direct US support for this conservative opposition politician's spectacularly ill-conceived coup attempt at the end of April 2019. US sanctions imposed on Venezuela by presidential decree in August 2017 and January 2019 remain in place, as do de facto economic constraints confronting the administration of Nicolás Maduro in the wake of US recognition of a parallel government led by Guaidó.

The US has also seized billions-of-dollars-worth of Venezuela's foreign assets, such as the majority state-owned oil refinery and transport company CITGO which is based in the United States. With the help of allied institutions like the Bank of England, the US initiative has also frozen much of Venezuela's $9 billion in foreign reserves, a significant portion of which are held in gold.

Now China. Chinese FDI between 2005 and 2016 reached the modest figure of $90 billion, representing approximately 5 percent of inwardly flowing FDI in the region over that period. There was an uptick in 2017, however, with the estimated figures for that year reaching $25 billion, or about 15 percent of the total. Chinese FDI is concentrated in natural resources and in a a few countries, with 81 percent of the country's investment flowing to Brazil, Peru, and Argentina, with Brazil leading by a wide margin at 55 percent of the total.

Alongside FDI, China's emerging imperial power in the region is based on its role as creditor. Total loan commitments to the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean between 2005 and 2016 exceeded $141 billion, more than the total loan figures from any of the major financial institutions of the United States in the same period. Most of these loans are linked to the hydrocarbons (natural gas and oil sector), with a heavy concentration in Venezuela, but with important loans of this kind in Brazil, Ecuador, and Argentina as well.

Some are special “loans for oil” are designed to be paid in-kind, that is through guaranteed direct shipments of oil to China. Many Chinese loans are linked to infrastructure projects, which are in turn linked to construction contracts. So Chinese development banks borrow money for infrastructure projects which are recycled through construction contracts granted to Chinese firms, typically utilizing Chinese labour forces which are easier for these firms to control. These construction contracts tend to be located in the energy sector, especially hydroelectricity, as well as transport.

It does not yet make sense to speak of China as a political-military rival to the United States in Latin America. However, in terms of FDI, loan agreements, infrastructure projects, and guaranteed energy flows to China, there is obviously an upward trajectory to the other elements of its imperial power in the region. At the first Forum of CELAC and China in 2015, China projected that trade with the region would reach $500 billion by 2025, while Chinese FDI flows would amount to $250 billion the same year. These are obviously projections, and Chinese projections of the kind have often not been realized. Still, it indicates a vision.

Any concluding remarks?

Just to reiterate that we should position the recent conjunctural elements of the present moment within the longer patterns of contradictory capitalist development in the region over the past decades, and how this has interacted with rhythms of the world market. In particular, the region’s specific relationship to the global crisis that began in 2008 has still been only superficially grasped in many accounts.

Against and within that overarching backdrop we’ve covered some core political dynamics of the region’s impasse: an exhausted, conservatizing, official pink tide which, even where in office or returning to office, is now primed to administer austerity, albeit with negotiation and social pacification rather than unmitigated, brutal state force.

Centre-rights and far-rights are in power or coming to power in other countries, but they have no north star, as they did have in the neoliberal 1990s, and generally lose popular support quickly once in office as capitalist dynamism fails to return under their watch. They are reduced more and more to rule through aggressive state repression – witness Chile, Brazil, Honduras, and so on. Far-right movements – linked and inspired to the international alt-right, and powerfully protagonized by ideological pastiches of gender and race-hate, antipathy to “cultural Marxism,” and the culturally conservative threads and organizational infrastructures of a growing right-wing evangelism in the region – are phenomena to be tracked closely and resisted.

New forms of popular struggle are crystallizing – the left-wing, popular feminist movement above all, which includes significant anti-capitalist currents. The indigenous movement is regaining coherence and militancy in different parts of the region. And anti-capitalist, ecological resistance to extractive capital will continue to be a frontline of class struggle and socio-political antagonism.

More explosive moments, such as the ones we’ve discussed, are likely forthcoming elsewhere, though it would be foolhardy to predict exactly where. Sparks like the diesel/gasoline hike in Ecuador and the subway fare hike in Chile are likely to set more societies alight as governments introduce austerity packages in the midst of secular stagnation of global capitalism. The dynamics in Ecuador and Chile, as I have tried to argued, are full of potential even if their outcomes remain wildly indeterminate. The importance of open and audacious intervention in the growth and political development of these uprisings by the radical social-movement and party left cannot be overestimated. While elections are certainly moments of class struggle in which interventions must be made, the decisive determination of emancipatory possibilities in the near- to medium-term will be the balance of forces which settles in the wake of pitched extra-parliamentary battles like those underway in Chile and Ecuador in the last few weeks.

* * *

Comment: Nadeem Mahjoub
An excellent account. Correction: Tilly's book is Social Movements 1768-2004.

P.S.

• Verso Books, 06 November 2019:
https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4477-rebellion-reformism-and-reaction-in-latin-america-an-interview-with-jeffery-r-webber