

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## Precarity and Hope in Contemporary Latin America

Jennifer N. Collins

Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, Stevens Point, Wisconsin, US  
Email: [jecollin@uwsp.edu](mailto:jecollin@uwsp.edu)

This essay reviews the following works:

**The Civil Sphere in Latin America.** Edited by Jeffery C. Alexander and Carlo Tognato. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp xvi + 261. \$99.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781108426831.

**Youth Power in Precarious Times: Reimagining Civic Participation.** By Melissa Brough. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp x + 206. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478008071.

**The New Latin America.** By Fernando Calderón and Manuel Castells. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020. Pp xx + 250. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781509540020.

**The Volatility Curse: Exogenous Shocks and Representation in Resource-Rich Democracies.** By Daniela Campello and Cesar Zucco. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp xx + 239. \$39.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108795357.

**Memorias de nuestra democracia: Los 40 años del 10 de Octubre.** By Colectivo Fogoneros. La Paz: Editorial 3600, 2022. Pp. 275. paperback. ISBN: 9789917612292.

**Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies.** By Verónica Gago. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 277. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822369127.

**Social Movements in Latin America: Mapping the Mosaic.** By Ronaldo Munck. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2020. Pp xvi + 175. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781788212434.

**Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War.** By Jennifer Ponce de León. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp xii + 315. \$104.95 paper. ISBN: 9781478011255.

**Ephemeral Histories: Public Art, Politics, and the Struggle for the Streets in Chile.** By Camilo D. Trumper. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 276. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520289918.

---

Since the democratic transitions of the 1980s, Latin America has experienced pendulum swings from neoliberalism to the New Left and back. The optimism that accompanied the New Left, at least in its early years, today feels muted, if not snuffed out, and confidence in state actors' ability to construct just and equitable societies has faded significantly. And yet

people on the ground continue to struggle, survive, and carve out victories and spaces of hope amid a bleak landscape and insurmountable odds.

The collection of books reviewed here explores society and politics in Latin America at the current uncertain juncture from several angles. The books include studies of civil society and social movements; analyses of the impact of economic systems on society and democracy; and explorations of the ways art, social media, music, and other public and artistic forms have been used to expose systems of oppression, empower the powerless, and engage in political struggle. Several of the works draw attention to the importance of neoliberal globalization in constraining the region's economic options and corrupting its politics and argue persuasively that this structural factor is central to understanding the persistence of economic and political dysfunction in the region. Other books focus on grassroots resistance, providing diverse perspectives on the nature of the relationship between state and society. Most of the authors are social scientists, including sociologists and political scientists. However, the authors of the books on art and public culture come from communications, English, and history. Finally, a book commemorating forty years of democracy in Bolivia combines perspectives from Bolivian journalists, analysts, and political activists.

This collection succeeds in its diversity in reflecting and illuminating various aspects of the multifaceted landscape that is twenty-first-century Latin America in both its disillusionment and hope. Amid a diversity of subjects and analytical approaches there are brightly colored common threads. Society, not the state, is the focus of most of the studies, and there is a shared feeling that emerges: the current moment is one of divergent and sometimes discordant struggles and strivings without a unified chorus. *Mosaic, palimpsest, baroque, precarious, ephemeral, volatile*—all are words that come up repeatedly in this collection and reflect a sensation of fragmentation and dispersion. And yet what also comes through is the survival, persistence, and striving of Latin American society.

### Latin American states and societies in the age of neoliberal globalization

In *The New Latin America*, the distinguished sociologists Fernando Calderón and Manuel Castells offer a sobering panorama of Latin American politics and society today. They begin from the premise that Latin America has been fully integrated into the globalized economy, a process that has resulted in profound transformations not only in production and economics but also in society and politics. They contend that the region has transitioned to a new political-economic model they call “informational extractivism” and that globalization and technological modernization have reshaped societies and identities in profound ways. Chapters analyze everything from drug trafficking and the criminal economy to changing conceptions of gender, the decline of the Catholic Church, social movements, multiculturalism, and urbanization, among others. The book's scope is sweeping.

The authors point out that despite past efforts to industrialize and diversify, Latin American economies remain highly reliant on extractive industries.<sup>1</sup> Informational extractivism is but the latest stage in the region's long history as a supplier of raw materials and commodities to the global market. It is described as “a new capitalist

<sup>1</sup> In the postwar era, import substitution industrialization was the dominant model. In the 2000s, the Chávez, Morales, and Correa governments all argued they were attempting, as Chávez put it, “to sow the oil.” In other words, to harness the revenue from oil, gas, and mineral exports to develop new more developed economies that were weaned off commodities exports. None of them succeeded. Indeed, in Ecuador and Bolivia the doubling down on extraction by the Correa and Morales governments was a central cause of the clashes and conflicts between these leftist governments and social movements. See Jennifer Collins, *Social Movements and Radical Populism in the Andes: Ecuador and Bolivia in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

dynamic sustained by a techno-economy that operates both on the web and in global centers for the production, marketing, and management of extracted products” (26). Crucial to the new mode of capitalist production is the way it relies on “systems of innovation that depend on scientific and technological research” and global networks. Though intriguing, the qualitative difference between “informational extractivism” and older forms remains fuzzy; it appears to relate to the ways global information systems and technologies have become central to the extractive economy.

The authors trace the birth of Latin America’s new form of insertion into the global economy through two contradictory processes: neoliberalism and then “neo-developmentalism,” used to describe the model pursued by New Left administrations. Under the neo-developmental model, states intervened in the economy, invested in productive infrastructure, and used state revenues to pursue redistributive and antipoverty policies. However, New Left governments did not fundamentally alter the export-oriented informational extractivism model. Furthermore, according to the authors, neither neoliberalism nor neo-developmentalism produced effective governance or more equitable societies with both ultimately devolving into crisis.

Interestingly, the authors trace the root of the crises of both neoliberalism and neo-developmentalism to a single source: state corruption. For Calderón and Castells, corruption is so pervasive in Latin America that it constitutes a structural variable. They see corruption growing exponentially with the acceleration of globalization. Although the authors do not provide a definition of state corruption, it is clear they are referring to the use of state authority to privatize rents for personal gain. With the Latin American state sitting at the nexus between valuable resources and global capital, it is a prime site for corruption. Intense competition for commodities in global markets has increased the amount of money dedicated to subverting laws and regulations. Given the state’s historical role in the region as the “structuring nucleus of society” (167), such high levels of corruption are especially damaging because they fray the link between society and the state and erode democratic legitimacy. Calderón and Castells suggest that state corruption is endemic to both the neoliberal and the neo-developmental periods, but there is some confusion here. At one point, they contend that rapid state expansion during the ascendancy of New Left governments exacerbated corruption, but they later suggest that corruption is a product of weak states and strong oligarchies (181).

While the authors’ discussion of corruption, both its intensification in the context of globalization and its nefarious impact on democracy, makes intuitive sense, they fail to provide much evidence or data to illustrate or back up their claims, citing only minimal data on perceptions from Transparency International and discussing notorious cases such as the “Operation Car Wash” scandal. Interestingly, they do not address arguments about the use of lawfare as a new mechanism to destabilize progressive governments by weaponizing accusations of corruption.<sup>2</sup> The authors point to corruption as a significant public issue but do not bring us any closer to knowing whether corruption has increased or whether it is just becoming a more public or even political issue.

In chapters 3 through 11, the authors paint a multifaceted portrait of contemporary Latin American society, focusing on changing identities. A central theme is the atomization of society stemming from a profound institutional crisis. This crisis of legitimacy involves not only state institutions—police, representative institutions, and so on—but financial institutions, mass media, and even the Catholic Church. Large majorities report distrust of myriad institutions. This legitimacy crisis has left the populace rudderless in a turbulent globalized sea. For the authors, the crisis is rooted in the pervasive problem of corruption.

<sup>2</sup> V. Vegh Weis, “What Does Lawfare Mean in Latin America? A New Framework for Understanding the Criminalization of Progressive Political Leaders,” *Punishment & Society* 25, no. 4 (2023): 909–933, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745221116348>.

The rise of the criminal economy is another fueler of this pernicious cycle and one that the authors dedicate a chapter to analyzing.

The overall portrait is a dark and despairing one. The region's old ills persist, including an economic model based on extractivism and high levels of social inequality and poverty, and to make matters worse, Latin American society today is bereft of legitimate social institutions. The authors see some hope in the region's many vibrant social movements, but they also point to obstacles to social change and question whether these movements have the capacity to succeed against the destructive global forces that rule so much of the world, presumably global capitalism.

*The Volatility Curse: Exogenous Shocks and Representation in Resource-Rich Democracies* by Brazilian political scientists Daniela Campello and Cesar Zucco offers a compelling explanation for the crisis of state legitimacy discussed in *The New Latin America*. The authors begin with the puzzle of why vertical accountability between voters and elected representatives has not been more efficacious in producing effective governance in the region's democracies. Economic voting theory, which serves as their theoretical frame, posits that voters reward or punish representatives on the basis of economic performance. According to the theory, this produces vertical accountability as politicians who fail to produce economic outcomes that benefit the population are voted out. The authors note that the theory has been tested mostly in developed countries, and they set out to see how it holds up in developing democracies. They find that, as in developed countries, voters in developing countries engage in economic voting; however, unlike in wealthier countries, economic voting in Latin America does not produce the good governance outcomes predicted by the theory.

The authors develop and then test a theory that explains why economic voting fails to produce good governance outcomes in developing countries. Their argument focuses on the structural vulnerability of resource-rich economies to global markets that are dependent on commodity exports and inflows of foreign capital. Economic performance in such economies is largely determined by conditions in the international market that are highly volatile. Under those conditions, state policies have limited ability to shape economic outcomes. Nevertheless, voters continue to engage in economic voting despite the reality that politicians have little ability to alter macroeconomic conditions. The authors opine that economic performance does a poor job in Latin America of signaling government competence (11). They go on to explain that the mismatch undermines politicians' incentives to engage in welfare-maximizing policies, thus breaking the vertical accountability link. Politicians anticipate economic downturns and are cognizant of their inability to change economic circumstances. As such, they do not have strong incentives to maximize voter welfare, as it will have only a marginal impact on their reelection prospects. This lowers the barriers to corruption and poor policymaking.

The authors bring a wealth of empirical data and methodological skill to testing their hypothesis. They develop an index that captures whether international conditions are favorable or not for Latin American economies. Their "good economic times" (GET) index is a composite measure of two exogenous factors: fluctuations in commodity prices and international interest rates, both of which are beyond the control of Latin American governments. The authors then analyze how the GET index affects the likelihood of presidential reelection and popularity. Their findings are based on a data set spanning more than thirty years of presidential elections, which provides strong evidence that economic conditions are a major determinant of the likelihood that a president or their designee will be reelected and their level of popularity. Instead of trying to determine whether Latin American voters are engaging in retrospective or prospective voting, the authors examine the correlation between economic conditions and support for the incumbent government and find that the GET index has a "strong and consistent impact on presidential success" (122).

The data support both that Latin American voters are engaging in economic voting and that they are doing so without considering the exogenous international factors that have such a strong impact on their economies. Instead, voters punish all politicians during economic downturns, attributing negative or positive economic conditions to the incumbent. Indeed, their model accurately predicts not only when presidents lose popular support but also major regional trends away from and toward democracy.

In the final chapters, the authors report results from survey experiments in Brazil and Ecuador aimed at determining why voters are engaging in what they call misattribution bias—that is, placing all the blame or credit for economic conditions on the incumbent. Is it due to a lack of information, cognition about how to use information to determine incumbent competence, or the result of affect, which can be affected by economic swings and not based on information or cognition? They found that prior affect played a significant role in voter choice, impeding the likelihood that voters would update their assessment of candidates with new information or cognition. Having demonstrated that Latin American voters engage in economic voting but fail to discount the impact of exogenous forces when they assess incumbents, the authors discuss the impact of this behavior on politicians, arguing that politicians are aware of the dynamic and therefore have less incentive to engage in welfare-enhancing action because they know it ultimately will not make a difference to their reelection chances.

This important and impressive study helps explain the electoral losses of New Left governments after more than a decade of, in many cases, impressive economic performance and declines in poverty and inequality. The abrupt shift to the right in several countries fits the pattern that Campello and Zucco describe of voters blaming the party in power when international economic conditions take a turn for the worse. The study also offers a parsimonious explanation for the pervasiveness of corruption in politics that Calderón and Castells identify as so pernicious and pervasive. Calderón and Castells focus on the intense pressures stemming from savage competition for resources in the globalized marketplace and Campello and Zucco explain why there are so few incentives for Latin American politicians to resist these pressures and the temptation of corruption. Both studies share another thing in common: they point to Latin America's structural position in the international economy as the explanation for the region's democratic deficits. Not only is Latin America fully integrated into the global economy; its mode of insertion continues to be driven largely by commodity exports, thus making it vulnerable to exogenous shocks, which Campello and Zucco demonstrate have a highly deleterious impact on democratic representation and accountability.

*Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* offers another window into how globalized neoliberal capitalism has shaped contemporary Latin America. The Argentine social scientist Verónica Gago analyzes the persistence of neoliberalism despite the crisis of its political legitimacy. For Gago, neoliberalism is not just a set of state economic policies that can be easily uprooted. Instead, neoliberalism has infiltrated popular economies at the grassroots of society, a phenomenon she refers to as “neoliberalism from below.” Provocatively, she suggests that to properly understand contemporary neoliberalism, we must contend with its “capacity for mutation” and, I would add, penetration of all aspects of life (5).

Neoliberalism persists despite explicit efforts to eradicate it because, according to Gago, it is not solely a set of policies but a new set of subjectivities, culture, and ways of acting in the world. Her argument is based on an anthropological study of La Salada, a huge informal market on the outskirts of Buenos Aires considered the largest illegal market in Latin America (29).<sup>3</sup> Founded by Bolivians at the beginning of the 1990s, La Salada grew

<sup>3</sup> This book, a product of Gago's doctoral dissertation, was first published in Spanish in 2014. While not specified, it appears likely that she conducted her field research in La Salada during the 2010s.

exponentially during Argentina's 2001 economic crisis and has continued to expand ever since. While Bolivians make up most vendors, Argentines, Paraguayans, Peruvians, and even Senegalese participate (30). Gago describes how the logic of neoliberal calculation has penetrated the market and the web of businesses surrounding it. La Salada is largely run by women, many of them Bolivian immigrants who combine in complex ways neoliberal logics and practices of calculation and exploitation with communitarian practices and rationalities. Gago's use of the term *baroque economies* refers to the process in which popular classes negotiate the dynamics of neoliberalism from above and from below.

Gago asserts not only that neoliberalism persists in informal economies but also that it survived and mutated into the very political projects that sought to fight against and undo it, namely New Left political projects. She focuses on the same variable central to the previous two works reviewed: the continued reliance of New Left governments on rents derived from commodity exports, or what she refers to as "the extractive-dispossessive form" and the power of global finance. While the authors of *The New Latin America* and *The Volatility Curse* examine how the international economic system shapes Latin American politics and society, Gago demonstrates how the neoliberal logic of global capitalism has penetrated and been incorporated into popular economies and cultures, thereby shaping the New Left neo-developmental model.

Gago agrees with Calderón and Castells that New Left governments did not fundamentally alter their countries' insertion into the global economy, instead relying on rents from commodities exports to finance social welfare programs. While New Left leaders heralded the rebuilding of the state as essential to "ending the long neoliberal night," Gago argues these projects were neoliberal in nature.<sup>4</sup> In making the redistribution of state rents their main policy innovation and the basis of their legitimacy, New Left governments limited their conception of citizenship to the right to consume, which represents a neoliberal social contract. The deal the New Left offered its citizens was the construction of citizenship not through their incorporation into the formal economy but through the redistribution of rents that allowed citizens to increase consumption. Gago points to the fact that the population of the villas (the Argentine term for shantytown) increased by 52 percent between 2001 and 2020, precisely the years of economic growth under Néstor Kirchner's New Left government.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, Gago concludes, "the Villa is the effect not of crisis but of progress" (191). Gago may be painting with too broad a brush here, as the example of Bolivia under Morales and increases in formal employment during Lula's first two terms appear to offer examples of real economic incorporation during New Left governments. Nevertheless, her critiques are insightful and thought provoking.

### Civil society, social movements, and the state

The 1980s and 1990s saw the blossoming of Latin American social movements, and scholars followed suit with a burgeoning literature on them. The books reviewed in this section make important contributions to this vast literature and attest to the fact that social movements in the region continue to serve as an important leaven for democratic deepening and expansion. They also coincide with Calderón and Castells's suggestion that Latin American social movements and civil society are a source of hope in today's rather bleak landscape.

In *Social Movements in Latin America: Mapping the Mosaic*, Ronaldo Munck sets out to develop a theory of Latin American social movements that is not simply derivative of

<sup>4</sup> This was a phrase that Rafael Correa used repeatedly to describe the neoliberal period and neoliberal governments that his Citizens' Revolution aimed to end.

<sup>5</sup> Gago cites a figure from Argentina's 2010 census of 163,000 for the number of people living in the Buenos Aires villas. For reference, Argentina's total population in 2010 was 40.79 million (191).

North American and European social movement studies. He points to dependency theory, the Zapatista notion of autonomy, and national populism as examples of Latin American contributions to social theory, and he sets out to do something similar for social movement theory. After an insightful discussion of social movement theory, he concludes that the debate between resource mobilization theory and political opportunity structure on the one hand and new social movement theory on the other are insufficient to adequately understand and analyze Latin American social movements. Instead, he proposes what he calls a “cultural political economy approach” that weaves together attention to the political and economic structures in which movements are embedded and the way movements tap into and create new identities. Echoing earlier work, Munck stresses that “collective action is always dependent on a process of cultural identity formation” (27).<sup>6</sup> His argument about Latin America’s contributions to social movement theory dovetails nicely with Krausova, who highlights that Latin American scholarship of social movements excels at studying strategy as well as claiming and framing, all things influenced by identity formation.<sup>7</sup>

The book is organized into nine chapters, with introductory, theory, and concluding chapters framing topical chapters that examine various types of social movements: workers, peasants, community, women, indigenous, and environmental. Through a discussion of key cases, Munck attempts to offer a synthesis of the shared characteristics and trends characterizing the movements. In his concluding chapter, he develops a framework for seeing this diverse mosaic of social movements as “a holistic and integrated social counter-movement”, and he imagines how in their diversity these movements might “become the harbingers of a new social order” (113). One wonders whether this may be somewhat Pollyannaish. Bevin’s new book, for example, argues that leaderless movements and the absence of ideology doomed the great popular protests of the new millennium.<sup>8</sup>

Munck situates his analysis of social movements in a post–New Left moment. Utilizing Laclau’s theory of populist identity formation in a similar way to my own, he argues that when social movements transcend their specific sectoral domains, they offer the possibility of the creation of a counterhegemonic force for broad social change.<sup>9</sup> And he sees many social movements today as engaging this process of articulating disparate democratic demands into an overarching popular identity that can contest the social order.<sup>10</sup>

In his conclusion, Munck spotlights the concept of *buen vivir*, which emerged out of the synergy of Andean indigenous and environmental movements. Munck characterizes this cosmology as potentially one of the most significant Latin American contributions to a new global social movement theory. For Munck it offers a “utopian horizon” or vision toward which social movements can move. Although the intent is admirable, recent scholarship suggests the concept has been neutered and exhausted and requires major retheorizing if it is to serve as a viable political project.<sup>11</sup> While Munck does not fully succeed in building a new Latin American theory of social movements, he lays a foundation for doing so by identifying the unique contours of the region’s movements and their significant contributions to social change and social movement theorizing.

<sup>6</sup> See Sonia E. Álvarez, Evelyn Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Culture: Revisioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Krausova, “Latin American Social Movements: Bringing Strategy Back In,” *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 4 (2020): 839–849.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Bevin, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Collins, *Social Movements and Radical Populism*; Jennifer Collins, “New Left Experiences in Bolivia and Ecuador and the Challenge to Theories of Populism,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 1 (2014): 59–86.

<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Carlos E. Gallegos-Anda, *Ecuador’s Good-Living: Crises, Discourse and Law* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2021).

The edited volume *The Civil Sphere in Latin America* applies Jeffrey Alexander's civil sphere theory (CST) to Latin America through a series of case studies.<sup>12</sup> CST argues that society is not solely driven by power seeking and pursuit of self-interest, but that strong societies are knit together by a sense of mutual identity and solidarity. CST seeks to understand how solidarity is constructed, negotiated, and repaired. It views politics as defined by actors' ability to tap into shared cultural constructs that provide meaning for citizens and define boundaries for what is acceptable and that which is viewed as immoral or uncivil. Solidarity, civility, and tolerance characterize the civil sphere and are essential to democracy, and social movements contribute to building the values and culture of the civil sphere. Like Munck, Alexander rejects the idea that social movements can be reduced to resource mobilization or pursuit of narrow self-interest. Instead, social movements rely on symbols and idealistic discourses and appeal to people's sense of a common good. Social movements are both rooted in the civil sphere and rejuvenators of it.

Among the volume's eight case studies, there are chapters on the movement against femicide in Argentina, blogging in Cuba, and student organizing in Colombia. Each examines how movements and actors create meanings that shape politics. For example, the chapter on the feminist movement in Argentina demonstrates how the movement succeeded in reconceptualizing violations in the private sphere against individual women and their abusive perpetrators into a broader threat to democratic society. In so doing, the movement tapped into Argentina's rich history of human rights advocacy and utilized frames developed by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Although the editors and contributors to this volume do not explicitly acknowledge framing theory, their approach seems to build on it.

The editors conclude that the chapters demonstrate that, even in such an unequal continent as Latin America, universal ideals are a powerful motivator of social change, and when those ideals are harnessed, they can transform societies for the better. With its focus on discourse and culture, the volume sidesteps structural and international factors in its analysis.

One of those universal ideals—democracy—is the focus of *40 años del 10 de Octubre: Memorias de nuestra democracia*, an edited volume of essays, interviews, and testimonies marking the fortieth anniversary of Bolivia's 1982 transition to democracy. The authors, all Bolivian nationals, include journalists, social scientists, consultants, and political commentators. The book is divided into five sections that reflect on various aspects of Bolivia's democratic trajectory from 1982 through what the contributors call the first crisis of the plurinational state when Evo Morales was ousted in 2019. There is analysis of the democratic transition, personal reflections from political actors on constructing democracy, essays on women and education, and the plurinational state. The book concludes with two essays on the events of 2019.

This volume deliberately identifies 1982 as the birth of democracy in Bolivia. The contributors argue that while the 1952 revolution led by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) instituted universal suffrage, the period of MNR rule (1952–1964) cannot be considered democratic because the MNR ran a one-party state, actively suppressing and disallowing political competition, thus constituting an elective as opposed to a truly liberal democracy.

Although the book attempts to take the long view, Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) clearly lie at the center of this collective reflection. While it is not explicit in every essay, the book overall assumes a stance highly critical of Morales and the MAS, which is reflected in the authors' refusal to recognize Morales's ouster in 2019 as a coup. Instead, the contributors portray the protests that forced Morales to flee the country

---

<sup>12</sup> For the core book that lays out the civil sphere theory, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).



and cut short his presidency as a legitimate popular uprising that forms part of Bolivia's long tradition of popular collective struggle. Building on O'Donnell's concept of delegative democracy, the authors maintain that while Morales was elected democratically, he was not committed to pluralism and attempted to hold onto power in undemocratic ways.<sup>13</sup> Through that lens, the uprising of 2019 was a legitimate democratic act, not a rupture in Bolivian democracy. The authors situate themselves not on the far right but within Bolivia's democratic and even popular traditions. The 2009 Constitution drafted and approved during Morales's tenure as president is viewed by contributors as part of Bolivia's long struggle for democracy. Similarly, the authors embrace the notion of plurinationalism. But the contributors see MAS's subsequent attempts to monopolize power as turning on that democratic legacy.

Largely absent from the book is any criticism or condemnation of the right-wing government that took over after Morales's ouster. This is even though Añez assumed the presidency through constitutionally questionable means and her government carried out a campaign of violence against MAS supporters. One of the contributors criticizes Añez and those around her for thinking they could create a completely new political cycle without MAS. But there is no mention of the very real repression and even criminal activity that her government engaged in.<sup>14</sup> This lacuna weakens the book's authority as an arbiter of Bolivian democracy. Nevertheless, there are interesting and worthwhile chapters that examine the role of women, plurinationalism, and the 1982 democratic transition.

### Art, resistance, and power

The final set of books focuses on art, communication, and public spaces as sites of resistance and power. They all center the role of culture in Latin American politics and efforts at social change. While Munck and the *Civil Sphere* volume talk about culture in terms of identity formation and universalizing discourses, these books look specifically at how cultural and artistic expressions become sites of resistance, political struggle, participation, and empowerment.

In his fascinating book *Ephemeral Histories: Public Art, Politics, and the Struggle for the Streets in Chile*, Trumper tells the story of how the consequential political battles between the Left and the Right in 1970s Chile were fought in the streets, not only through protest but also through public art and attempts to shape and define urban spaces. He analyzes how during the Allende years those on both sides fought their battles and constructed political discourse in the physical and material spaces of the city. Political struggle was waged even in industrial design and cinema. Trumper's emphasis on the importance of occupation and control of public space is echoed in Bjork-James's work on the Bolivian social mobilizations of the early 2000s.<sup>15</sup>

After overthrowing Allende, Pinochet sought to "eradicate politics," which involved literally erasing all public evidence of the politics of the Allende years. Significantly, the book's cover is a photograph of a post-coup scene in which security forces are lined up across the street from people who are whitewashing public graffiti on a city wall. Trumper's focus on the streets and public spaces as sites of political struggle illuminates how and why Pinochet was so intent on stamping out the discourse of the Allende years.

<sup>13</sup> Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 55–69.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of Morales's ouster and the subsequent Añez administration from a perspective that is sympathetic but not uncritical of Morales and the MAS, see Linda Farthing and Thomas Becker, *Coup: A Story of Violence and Resistance in Bolivia* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> For a review of this book see, Bret Gustafson, "Indigenous and Popular Struggle for Realist Utopias in Bolivia and Ecuador," *Latin American Research Review* (2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.28>.

Despite Pinochet's attempts to erase the past, Trumper argues that the ephemeral visual practices he analyzes cannot be completely obliterated. In the epilogue he describes how history lies just beneath the surface, sometimes emerging unexpectedly. Latin America is a canvas on which the layers of past, forgotten, and erased history emerge as in a palimpsest. Trumper's insight recalls the work of Chilean documentarian Patricio Guzmán, whose films focus on collective memory, its fragility and persistence.<sup>16</sup> Like Guzmán, *Ephemeral Histories* illuminates the way Latin America's political present overlays a tumultuous past and how even the most audacious efforts to eradicate politics and history never fully succeed.

Like Trumper, in *Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War*, Ponce de León explores the ways art forms part of the collective struggle to create a new social reality. Employing a Marxist framework, she argues that art has the power to help social movements understand the oppressive nature of the dominant system, whether that be authoritarian or liberal, and develop counterhegemonic visions of a new world. She develops the concept of stereoscopic aesthetics to describe the way art can empower social change by revealing the oppressive nature of the hegemonic reality and simultaneously envisioning revolutionary alternatives effaced by the dominant system.

Ponce de León vividly describes and analyzes four artistic collectives and artists, one in Mexico, another in Los Angeles, and two in Argentina, that engage in revolutionary, anticapitalist art. The artists see themselves and their work as part of broader popular movements, and Ponce de León characterizes them as playing a critical role in the struggle against capitalism and toward the building of a new world. The title of her book is a direct reference to the Zapatista phrase, "another world is possible," with "Fourth World War" referencing the Zapatista assertion that global capitalism's inexorable advance into every aspect of life on the planet constitutes a war. Ponce de León expressively conveys the artists' innovative practices and offers a rich analysis of how their works pierce the armor of capitalism's invincibility.

She begins with a Mexican artist collective and its heterodox alternate reality game (ARG). The objective of the *Raiders* ARG was to repatriate the Penacho or Mexica (Aztec) headdress believed to have belonged to Montezuma that is currently housed in an Austrian museum. The game took place over five months integrating players through online and in-person activities. The game drew attention to and challenged narratives of colonialism and appropriation and created a new reality through its reimagining of museums, gaming, and online activism. Not only did it serve to critique European colonialism but it also denounced the Mexican state's hypocrisy in appropriating *indigenismo* while ignoring demands of contemporary indigenous Mexicans.

The second project analyzed is that of the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History (PRS), a meta-artwork by Sandra de la Loza and others in Los Angeles. Like *Raiders*, this guerilla art project combined multiple forms, including "visual art, public history, and literary production" (81). The centerpiece consisted of the creation and placing of historical plaques in public places commemorating Mexican and Central American history and peoples. The project sought to draw attention to the way public memorials shape our understanding of history and define what and who is to be celebrated. By bypassing official agencies and processes that serve as gatekeepers for public remembrance, the guerrilla artistic creation is a counterhegemonic act that demands the inclusion of other voices and challenges the control of the powerful over public narratives and spaces.

The final chapters focus on Buenos Aires-based collectives whose guerrilla theater aims to hold accountable the military leaders who orchestrated and participated in the heinous

---

<sup>16</sup> Guzmán first rose to prominence as a documentary filmmaker with his groundbreaking trilogy *Battle of Chile*, which chronicled Allende's overthrow and the repression and attempts at resistance that followed. Many of his films made since 1989 deal with collective memory, including *Chile: Obstinate Memory* and *Nostalgia for the Light*.

human rights violations committed during the dictatorship. They do this through a practice known as *escrache*, or “exposure protests,” which consist of actions that call attention to human rights violators in direct and confrontational ways, such as protesting in front of a violator’s home, publicly denouncing them, creating signs indicating where they live, and so on. In addition to denouncing and shaming the generals, they were also critical of the Kirchner government, who they accused of appropriating the human rights discourse and co-opting the movement to enhance its legitimacy and diffuse social movements’ counterhegemonic power. The artists interpreted the state’s embrace of the human rights movement as an attempt to channel the movement energy into “the politics of representation,” thereby forestalling radical demands and ensuring the continuity of the bourgeoisie state.

In an interesting verbal parallel with Trumper, Ponce de León uses the metaphor of whitewashing to describe how the Kirchner administration strategically utilized the human rights discourse to portray itself as progressive while simultaneously repressing and undermining social movements and the popular classes. For Ponce de León and the artists she analyzes, the state is the enemy, as it cannot be separated from the capitalist system in which it is embedded.<sup>17</sup> The logical conclusion would seem to be that any form of state power needs to be resisted.

Where Ponce de León embraces a radical Marxist approach to the state and those who wield state power, Melissa Brough suggests that there may be emancipatory possibilities in accessing state power. In *Youth Power in Precarious Times: Reimagining Civic Participation*, she explores how young hip-hop artists from one of the poorest neighborhoods of Medellín emerged as political and cultural protagonists contributing to a dramatic transformation of the city from a violent place associated with drug trafficking into a model of urban renewal. The story she tells is one of young, marginalized artists and a progressive local government that embraced and incorporated them into a process of change. Of all the books reviewed here, this one is the most hopeful. It is inspiring to read about Medellín’s transformation and the role youth played in it.

In accounting for this transformation, Brough points to a dynamic she calls “polycultural participation,” which refers to complex and multilevel relationships between state and grassroots actors. She builds on and contributes to the literature on political participation and the role it can play in empowerment and democratic deepening. *Compromiso Ciudadano*, the government that held power in Medellín from 2004 to 2011, was progressive and committed to participatory democracy in the tradition of the early Brazilian Workers’ Party. The administration sought to involve all social sectors in a process to refashion Medellín as a regional hub of the new digital economy.

Brough’s analysis also addresses debates about the role social media can play in enhancing participation in political and social life. In chapter 2 she describes an initiative by the local government to expand and democratize internet access. The goal was to increase citizen participation, but providing access on its own was ineffective in promoting horizontal communication and amplifying the voices of the poor and marginalized. It would take a citizen media project based in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods to succeed in creating a model of true participatory communication. Through popular education workshops and the creation of an online newspaper and other digital media, the collective increased levels of citizen participation and empowerment. This type of synergy between the state and grassroots initiatives lies at the heart of Brough’s analysis.

The book provides hopeful examples of how citizen participation can be fostered and expanded to include marginalized sectors. Importantly, Brough stresses that participation cannot be directed from above. She identifies three factors that came together to produce

<sup>17</sup> This echoes Gaussens’s approach in *Izquierda latinoamericana contra los pueblos: El caso ecuatoriano (2007–2013)*. For a review of his book, see Gustafson, “Indigenous and Popular Struggle.”

success in Medellín: a vibrant youth movement, progressive municipal administrations that were sympathetic to community-based organizations, and institutional entities—including nongovernmental organizations—that facilitated youth participation without trying to control it. Brough rejects a binary approach to participation where “authentic” grassroots activities are seen as separate and distinct from institutionalized participation. Instead, she argues that the strongest cases involve a synergy between the two. If the state is truly committed to participation, it can play an important role in creating the infrastructure, conditions, and opening for it to happen, but ultimately it is the people at the grassroots who create the vehicles for effective amplification of citizen voices and demands. Brough’s approach contrasts with that of Ponce de León who views the state, even under progressive administrations, as being fundamentally an instrument of capitalist domination.

## Conclusion

While diverse in their subject matter and approach, this collection sheds light on the enduring impact of neoliberal globalization on the state-society relationship as well as the persistence of social movement struggle. Calderón and Castells, Campello and Zucco, and Gago help explain why, after nearly two decades of new left governance, the promises of prosperity, good governance, equity, and social justice appear more elusive than ever. While not alluded to directly by the authors, the echo of dependency theory’s central insight that Latin America is embedded in the global economy in a subordinate position that largely determines its economic, political, and even cultural destiny can be heard. Neither the New Left nor neoliberal governments have been capable of altering this structural reality.

Even as some of the books draw our attention to structural forces, specifically that of neoliberal globalization and the ways the region is caught in its tenacious grip, the books on social movements, civil society, and the arts document and attest to the persistence and creative power of resistance from below. In this post-New Left moment of curtailed expectations about state power, attention is returning to civil society, activists, artists, and local communities for solutions and the impetus for change. Munck, the edited volume on the civil sphere, and the book on Bolivia suggest that social movements harness discourse and culture to exert power and engage in democracy building. Trumper, Ponce de León, and Brough offer vivid examples of creative resistance by artists and ordinary people. However, the question about the nexus between grassroots organizing and the state remains. Where Trumper and Brough offer examples of the potential for positive synergy between the grassroots and progressive governments, Ponce de León and leftist critics of the New Left view state power as suspect. The books reviewed here draw attention to the ways global forces continue to shape politics and life in the region and simultaneously to ordinary people’s creativity and resilience under these difficult circumstances. We are reminded of Latin America’s long tradition of resistance and how it lives on in hip-hop artists, market vendors, indigenous activists, guerrilla artists, and feminists, to name a few.

**Jennifer N. Collins** is professor and chair of the Political Science Department at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. She is author of *Social Movements and Radical Populism in the Andes: Ecuador and Bolivia in Comparative Perspective* (Lexington Books, 2022) as well as other publications on Andean politics, the New Left, populism, and social and indigenous movements and parties. She is the recipient of two Fulbright research fellowships and serves as a contributing editor to the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. She earned her PhD in political science from the University of California San Diego and her bachelor’s degree in government and Third World studies from Oberlin College.

---

**Cite this article:** Collins, Jennifer N. Precarity and Hope in Contemporary Latin America. *Latin American Research Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2024.21>