

Scott  
Mainwaring in  
conversation  
with Carlo  
Dignola



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## Back Steps

# The Stagnation of Democracy in Latin America

***A continent of deep contradictions with a non-linear history regarding its democratic experience. Today, its reference countries, and Brazil most of all, are crossed by a wind of populism and by illiberal models in a political and non-economic sense. To a different extent and with all the specific and heterogeneous scenarios, in general, there is a widespread territorial irregularity in the disparate forms of democracy. In such fragmented contexts, where countries are ambiguous and lack control, criminal organizations play an important, and “political”, role. An overview of the worrying situation and its social consequences, revealed in the fast and steady increase in inequalities, as well as in distrust.***

Once the authoritarian regimes of the second half of the 20th century fell, is democracy really advancing in Latin America or are we observing the return of reactionary forces?

For Scott Mainwaring, one of the most influential and documented American political analysts, we are not going back to the Argentina, Brazil and Chile when they were governed by military generals. The hands of the clock of History are not turning backwards. But the populist profiles of some leaders, such as Bolsonaro, risk undermining much of the democratic achievements of the last 35 years. And, on closer inspection—warns Mainwaring, data at hand—democracy is falling behind even in the United States. Or rather: the country, in which the Republican Party is changing its skin and becoming a partially anti-system force, is stratifying in different—geographical, demographic, ethnic—areas. In some of them, the historical values of the America we know still govern the games; in others, the law is the same for everyone in theory, but in practice, the rights of most citizens are not respected, and a profound social inequality is advancing.

### **Latin American countries have often suffered a lack of democracy.**

Latin America is very heterogeneous in almost every important dimension, including democracy. Few countries have clearly authoritarian regimes—that would be Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba. Then, at the other end of the spectrum, we can observe countries with quite a high-level of democracy—that is Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay. And you have everything in between those two poles. Probably, towards the higher end of that spectrum, there would be a case like Argentina, and towards the lower end, what I would call semi-democracies, like Honduras, Paraguay and Guatemala. But even in some countries where you might say that the national level regime is a democracy, there are large territories which are ruled by subnational authoritarian regimes. In many countries, malicious and criminal organizations control meaningful parts of the national territory, like for example in Brazil. I think Brazil has a democratic regime on a national level, but, on a local level, some States have an important presence of criminal organizations in politics. For example, the last two governors of the Rio de Janeiro State have both been investigated for complicity with malicious and organized crime. The Favelas, the poor neighborhoods of that city, are frequently governed by organized criminal groups. Hence, one cannot speak

of democracy in these places in any meaningful way. This is also a huge problem in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Columbia and Venezuela. Latin America is maybe the region of the world with the highest homicide rates. Therefore, it comes to no surprise that some of these massive criminal organizations now essentially control large territories. There is no free and fair vote in these places. There is no protection of democratic rights. I think democracy has two main dimensions: one is the electoral one, the other one is a liberal dimension. This second one consists of democratic rights in checks and balances. Both of these dimensions are very frequently violated if criminals control the territory. This is a much bigger problem in Latin America: the territorial unevenness of democracy is bigger than in any other region of the world. Even where criminal organizations have less of an imprint, the problem of territorial unevenness of democracy is much greater than in most places. It comes to no surprise. In Peru the territorial unevenness of democracy is linked to the territorial unevenness of the local government presence. Peru is the country with a huge gap in social indicators between the coast, which is wealthier, and the Sierra, which has a large indigenous population: the protection of democratic rights is much weaker in the Sierra than it is on the coast.

**We have similar problems with non-homogeneous parts of Italy.**

Yes. This unevenness of democracy across territories is far evident also in India, which is another interesting case. Right now, there is no democracy in Kashmir. That is somewhat for different reasons, but it is another case in which from the outside you just have to say that some parts of this country are democratic, but other parts clearly are not.

**As a competent observer, do you think that, in the last ten years, the spirit of people's participation in political decisions has increased, or some new phenomena, like populism, can undermine the real situation in those countries?**

This is a great question. I think, if we use the expression 'crisis of democracy' for Latin America, in general we don't see a severe degradation, a return to authoritarianism. The problem at present is more the failure to deepen democracy. The typical pattern, again with a lot of heterogeneity, is democratic stagnation with great unevenness across groups and across territories. That is the real problem. The question about populism, however, is enormously relevant: when we look at cases where democracy has eroded, and not merely failed to advance, Brazil stands out. Brazil is, of course, by far the biggest country in Latin America, in terms of population, economy and influence. The current leader, Jair Bolsonaro, is an authoritarian populist, Jair Bolsonaro. Brazil was the most important example in Latin America, and one of the most important ones in the world, of progressive democratic deepening after the transition to democracy in 1985. There were many important successes for the first quarter of the century after that: a lot of democratic deepening, a lot of penetration of democratic forces in former authoritarian strong holes. But in the last decade, and especially since the election of Bolsonaro, in 2018, there is no question that democracy has reversed. The national level is still a democracy, but half of the cabinet of Bolsonaro consists of former military generals. His attitude towards rights is terrible. His attitude towards the press is terrible. By a huge margin, Brazil has the most lethal police force in the world. The number of police killings has increased under Bolsonaro. This is an example of a kind of infringement of democratic rights. It doesn't necessarily get world attention, but it certainly means that there is a very meaningful erosion of rights in the country.

**Can you calculate, with a scientific method, the degree of democracy in different countries? Can you explain how science will help us in accurately analyzing political systems?**

The best worldwide measure of democracy was developed by a research called 'The Varieties of Democracy Project' (you can see it on their website). Every year, they hire approximately

3,200 coders in every independent country in the world (and some territories) who answer something like 150 questions about democracy.

**A very accurate test.**

Some questions are about the freedom and fairness of elections, to check on possible electoral intimidations or irregularities. Others are about the protection of rights, or the functions of the judiciary and legislature systems, to assess whether they effectively serve as checks and balances. They issue a report every year, but what is really interesting is to look at the several aggregate indexes they created. I find two of them the most relevant: the first is called the “Liberal Democracy Index”. I think it is a quite good measurement of the level of democracy in different countries. It ranges from 0 to 1 and countries like Norway and Denmark are at the top of the scale: they don’t score 1, but they do score very high. Countries like China and North Korea are examples of the lowest scores. As for the United States, I think this project correctly registers many democratic deficits. I don’t think this measurement is perfect, but it is a very sophisticated way of trying to assess cross-national variances of the levels of democracy.

**You said some territories in Latin America are not controlled by the government, hence they remain in the hands of organized crime. In the United States the problem with democracy seems to be different.**

Yes, I think we do not have much of the problem that Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras have. However, the United States does have more unevenness of the rule of law than most western European countries. Italy is an interesting comparison, because your country has always had a gap in the rule of law between the North and the South: the South has always had more democratic deficits. In the US as well, I think the big problem is unevenness of the rule of law. There are multiple problems: one of them is about the disparity between poor areas inhabited by Blacks and wealthy neighborhoods inhabited by Whites. To give just one example of this: every year a report is published of the 50 most lethal cities in the world: the United States always has about 5 cities on that list. This year I believe that Saint Louis is the worst, with about 65 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. To give you a benchmark comparison, Singapore and Japan had 0.2 per 100,000. So, as a city, Saint Louis is about 325 times more dangerous than those two countries: the differences are huge. And not coincidentally, Saint Louis was one of the cities where the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement was launched: it is the place where police brutality against black citizens has been rampant forever. This is not a new phenomenon. The protests against it are a new phenomenon. This is just one example of the ways in which there is great unevenness in the rules of law in the country, and this is the reason why, in my opinion, the United States deservedly scored lower than a variety of democracies in the ‘Liberal Democracy Index’ than cases like Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland.

**It depends on what city you were born in.**

If you look at a more granular level, data would show that within Saint Louis some neighborhoods are safe and some are tremendously violent. In Chicago, for example, there are neighborhoods where the homicide rate is 100 times greater than in other parts of the city. The point is not much about homicides; the point is rather the unevenness in the rule of law, which gets reflected in police brutality, and in the state incapacity to protect people’s rights.

**What are the factors we have to pay attention to in order to preserve our level of democracy? As a data analyst, when do you begin to be worried, while observing a Country and noticing that something is going wrong in its political system? What kind of signs are revealing a real danger?**

The most immediate warning sign is the growth of anti-liberal parties. I don't mean 'liberal' in the economic sense; I mean 'liberal' in the political sense. There are now two very interesting data projects that look at how liberal or authoritarian parties are across the world. The primary research for that is in Göteborg, Sweden: they started this 'Varieties of Parties Project' and they calculate what they call the 'Illiberalism Index'. If you see the electoral growth of illiberal parties, it's a serious warning sign. For example, I think that project correctly shows that the Republican Party in the United States is nowadays profoundly illiberal. In my opinion, it is no longer a democratic party: the insurrection at the Capitol, in January 2021, was the clearest manifestation of this. The 'Illiberal Index' for the Republicans increased steadily in this century and it increased in an alarming way when Trump was elected. If there is a sudden rise of a populist authoritarian party, everyone has the right to be very worried about it. I think this is the most immediate warning sign. But there are more causally distant warning signs, such as a decreasing trust in institutions or voters becoming indifferent to democracy.

**Unfortunately, we can see some of these signals in Italy as well, a very broad distrust of our political system and a kind of lingering anger against politicians. How can this have changed so much in a few years? You were talking about the Republicans in the United States, which used to be a very different party: what is happening in the right-wing population?**

A lot of experts on US politics argued that Newt Gingrich, who was a Republican speaker of the House in the 1990s, represented the changing point. Gingrich believed that Republicans should never cooperate with Democrats. The idea behind that was to make sure that the Democrats, without the Republicans' support, couldn't do anything. Of course, this coincides with something that also cannot be ignored: since the 1970s, income inequalities have increased in the United States. We are one of the most unequal ones among the advanced industrial democracies. I am not making a comparison with South Africa or Brazil: we are unequal compared to our past, and to the other advanced industrial democracies. High inequality can breed mistrust. On top of high inequality, although economists and sociologists debate this, we see the stagnation of wages and opportunities. The US used to be a country of high social mobility and opportunities. One of my grandfathers grew up in the most abject poverty imaginable. His father died when my grandfather was 5 and his mother raised four boys, as a single woman; then his two girl cousins lived with them: so, he lived in a family of six with a single mother, and in the most extreme poverty. The story of the United States in most of the 20th century is a story, at least for the white population, of remarkable social mobility. For half a century now, this opportunity is no longer available, therefore you see an increasing deal of mistrust and resentment in people, both in the US and in much of Europe, as well. And the last half century had also seen a transition from a predominantly white society to a multi-ethnic one, and this is not an easy transition to live through. Add to this declining mobilization also declining opportunities and stagnant wages and you will witness to the white working-class resentment. This is what Donald Trump's agenda was.

**When you begin to think that you don't have the living space to develop your professional career and your humanity, this can become dangerous. In China, on the contrary, you can still feel this dynamic moving. And the strong economic growth helps to hold off the big political problems they have.**

Certainly. Another topic we have to mention in the context of growing polarization and growing mistrust is social media. It is essential for understanding mistrust, certainly in the United States, certainly in Brazil, but I suspect in much of the world. I don't know if this is the direct responsibility of these huge companies, but social media make it possible to live in echo chambers of lies.

### Has Covid-19 worsened the status of democracy?

In the United States, the pandemic has exacerbated the already existing great inequalities. Jeff Bezos has now 195 billion dollars of net assets. People who own stocks and real estate did extremely well during this period. The increase of wealth among the rich is shocking, but the exacerbation of inequalities is also shocking. That is the worry and the potential good that could come out of this situation: crises sometimes generate democratic invention. If we look at Europe and the United States in the 1930s, in a lot of European countries Fascism took over. In the United States there was a fascist threat. This, however, was also a time for the deepest democratic inventions in the history of our Country. I think there is a potential for democratic invention and innovation coming out of this present crisis. Right now, the downside potentials are greater than the upside ones, but both exist. Democratic activists and leaders have to be creative right now, and recreate politics in society.



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