

The Rise and Fall of the Latin American Left

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A thoughtful essay on Latin left politics from a social democratic perspective

Conservatives now control Latin America's leading economies, but the region's leftists can still look to Uruguay for direction.

Last December's election of Sebastián Piñera, of the National Renewal party, to the Chilean presidency was doubly significant for Latin American politics. Coming on the heels of the rise of right-wing governments in Argentina in 2015 and Brazil in 2016, Piñera's victory signaled an unmistakable right-wing turn for the region. For the first time since the 1980s, when much of South America was governed by military dictatorship, the continent's three leading economies are in the hands of right-wing leaders.

Piñera's election also dealt a blow to the resurrection of the Latin American left in the post-Cold War era. In the mid-2000s, at the peak of the so-called [Pink Tide](#) (a phrase meant to suggest the surge of leftist, noncommunist governments), Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia, or three-quarters of South America's population (some 350 million people), were under left-wing rule. By the time the Pink Tide reached the mini-state of Mexico City, in 2006, and Nicaragua, a year later (culminating in the election of Daniel Ortega as president there), it was a region-wide phenomenon.

It's no mystery why the Pink Tide ran out of steam; even before the Chilean election, Mexican political scientist Jorge Castañeda had already declared it [dead](#) in *The New York Times*. Left-wing fatigue is an obvious factor. It has been two decades since the late Hugo Chávez launched the Pink Tide by toppling the political establishment in the 1998 Venezuelan presidential election. His Bolivarian revolution lives on in the hands of his handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro, but few Latin American governments regard Venezuela's ravaged economy and diminished democratic institutions as an inspiring model. In Brazil, the Workers' Party, or PT, was in power for 14 years, from 2002 through 2016, first under its founder, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, between 2003 and 2011, and then under his successor and protégée, Dilma Rousseff, from 2011 to 2016. The husband-and-wife team of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of the Peronist Party governed Argentina from 2003 to 2015. Socialist Michelle Bachelet had two nonconsecutive terms in office in Chile, from 2006 to 2010 and from 2014 to 2018.

Economic turmoil and discontent is another culprit. As fate would have it, the Pink Tide coincided with one of the biggest economic expansions in Latin American history. Its engine was one of the largest commodities booms in modern times. Once the boom ended, in 2012—largely a consequence of a slowdown in China's economy—economic growth in Latin America screeched to a halt. According to the International Monetary Fund, since 2012 every major Latin American economy has [underperformed](#) relative to the previous 10 years, with some economies, including that of Brazil, the region's powerhouse, experiencing their worst recession in decades. The downturn reined in public spending and sent the masses into the streets, making it very difficult for governments to hang on to power.

Meanwhile, as the commodity boom filled states' coffers, leftist politicians became enmeshed in the same sorts of corrupt practices as their conservative predecessors. In April, Lula began serving a 12-year prison sentence for having accepted bribes in exchange for government contracts while in office. His prosecution, which in principle guarantees that he will not be a candidate in this year's presidential race, was the high point of Operation Car Wash, the biggest anti-corruption dragnet in Brazilian history. Just after leaving office, in 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was indicted for fraud for conspiring with her former public-works secretary, José López, to steal millions of federal dollars intended for roadwork in Argentina. The "[nuns and guns](#)" scandal riveted the country, with the arrest of a gun-toting López as he hurled bags stuffed with millions of dollars over the walls of a Catholic convent in a suburb of Buenos Aires. In Chile, Bachelet left office under a cloud of suspicion. Her family, and by extension Bachelet herself, is accused of illegal real-estate transactions that netted millions of dollars.

All this said, largely overlooked in obituaries of the Pink Tide is the right-wing backlash that it provoked. This backlash aimed to reverse the shift in power brought on by the Pink Tide—a shift away from the power brokers that have historically controlled Latin America, such as the military, the Catholic Church, and the oligarchy, and toward those sectors of society that have been marginalized: women, the poor, sexual minorities, and indigenous peoples. Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 perfectly exemplifies the retaliation organized by the country's traditional elites. Engineered by members of the Brazilian Congress, a body that is only 11 percent female and has deep ties to industrial barons, rural oligarchs, and powerful evangelical pastors, the impeachment process was nothing short of a [patriarchal coup](#).

In a 2017 [interview](#), Rousseff made note of the "very misogynist element in the coup against me.... They accused me of being overly tough and harsh, while a man would have been considered firm, strong. Or they would say I was too emotional and fragile, when a man would have been considered sensitive." In support of her case, Rousseff pointed out that previous Brazilian presidents committed the same "crime" she was accused of (fudging the national budget to hide deficits at reelection time), without any political consequence. As if to underscore the misogyny, Rousseff's successor, Michel Temer, came into office with an all-male cabinet.

In assessing the impact of the Pink Tide, there is a tendency to bemoan its [failure](#) to generate an alternative to neoliberalism. After all, the Pink Tide rose out of the discontent generated by the economic policies championed by the United States and international financial institutions during the 1990s, such as privatizations of state enterprises, austerity measures, and ending economic protectionism. Yet capitalism never retreated in most of Latin America, and US economic influence remains for the most part unabated. The only significant dent on the neoliberal international order made by the Pink Tide came in 2005, when a massive wave of political protests derailed the George W. Bush administration's plan for a Free Trade Area of the Americas, or FTAA. If enacted, this new trade pact would have extended the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to all countries in the Americas save for Cuba, or 34 nations in total.

But one shouldn't look at the legacy of the Pink Tide only through the lens of what might have been with respect to replacing neoliberalism and defeating US imperialism. For one thing, a good share of the Pink Tide was never anti-neoliberal or anti-imperialist. Left-wing rule in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile (what Castañeda called the "good left") had more in common with the social-democratic governments of Western Europe, with its blend of free-market economics and commitment to the welfare state, than with Cuba's Communist regime.

Indeed, only in the radical fringe of the Pink Tide, especially the triumvirate of Chávez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Rafael Correa of Ecuador (the "bad left," according to Castañeda), was the main thrust of governance anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist. Taking Cuba as a model, these

self-termed revolutionaries nationalized large sectors of the economy, reinvigorated the role of the state in redistributing wealth, promoted social services to the poor, and created interstate institutions, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, or ALBA, to promote inter-American collaboration and to challenge US hegemony.

Second, the focus on neoliberalism and US imperialism obscures the Pink Tide's biggest accomplishments. To be sure, the picture is far from being uniformly pretty, especially when it comes to democracy. The strong strand of populism that runs through the Pink Tide accounts for why some of its leaders have been so willing to break democratic norms. Claiming to be looking after the little guy, the likes of Chávez and Maduro have circumvented term limits and curtailed the independence of the courts and the press. But there is little doubt that the Pink Tide made Latin America more inclusive, equitable, and democratic, by, among other things, ushering in an unprecedented era of social progressivism.

Because of the Pink Tide, women in power are no longer a novelty in Latin American politics; in 2014, female presidents ruled in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Their policies leave little doubt about the transformative nature of their leadership. In 2010, Fernández boldly took on the Argentine Catholic Church (then headed by present-day Pope Francis) to enact Latin America's first ever same-sex marriage law; this was five years before same-sex marriage became the law of the land in the United States. A gender-identity law, one of the world's most liberal, followed. It allows individuals to change their sex assigned at birth without permission from either a doctor or a judge. Yet another law banned the use of "conversion therapy" to cure same-sex attraction. Argentina's gay-rights advances were quickly emulated by neighboring Uruguay and Brazil, kick-starting a "gay-rights [revolution](#)" in Latin America.

Rousseff, who famously referred to herself with the gender-specific title of *a presidenta*, instead of the gender-neutral "president," did much to advance the status of women in Brazilian society. She appointed women to the three most powerful cabinet positions, including chief of staff, and named the first female head of Petrobras, Brazil's largest business corporation; during her tenure in office, a woman became chief justice of the Federal Supreme Court. Brutally tortured by the military during the 1970s, as a university student, Rousseff put human rights at the center of Brazilian politics by enacting a law that created Brazil's first ever truth commission to investigate the abuses by the military between 1964 and 1985. She also signed laws that opened the Brazilian Army to women and that set into motion the corruption campaign that is currently roiling the Brazilian political class. These laws earned Rousseff the enmity of the military and conservatives.

Bachelet, the last woman standing, made news when she entered office, in 2006, by naming the same number of men and women to her cabinet. After being term-limited, she became the first head of the newly established UN Women (formally known as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), before returning to Chile to win a second term at the presidency in 2014. During her second term, she created the Ministry of Gender Equality to address gender disparities and discrimination, and passed a law that legalized abortion in cases of rape, when there is a threat to the life of the mother, or when the fetus has a terminal condition. Less known is Bachelet's advocacy for the environment. She [weaned](#) Chile off its dependence on hydrocarbons by building a vast network of solar- and wind-powered grids that made electricity cheaper and cleaner. She also created a vast system of national parks to protect much of the country's forestland and coastline from development.

Latin America's socioeconomic transformation under the Pink Tide is no less impressive. Just before the economic downturn of 2012, Latin America came tantalizingly close to becoming a middle-class region. According to the [World Bank](#), from 2002 to 2012, the middle class in Latin America grew every year by at least 1 percent to reach 35 percent of the population by 2013. This means that

during that time frame, some 10 million Latin Americans joined the middle class every year. A consequence of this dramatic expansion of the middle class is a significant shrinking of the poor. Between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of Latin Americans living in poverty (under \$4 per day) [shrank from 45 to 25 percent](#).

Economic growth alone does not explain this extraordinary expansion of the Latin American middle class and the massive reduction in poverty: Deliberate efforts by the government to redistribute wealth were also a key factor. Among these, none has garnered more praise than those implemented by the Lula administration, especially *Bolsa Família*, or Family Purse. The program channeled direct cash payments to poor families, as long as they agreed to keep their children in school and to attend regular health checkups. By 2013, the program had reached some 12 million households (50 million people), helping cut extreme poverty in Brazil from 9.7 to 4.3 percent of the population.

Last but not least are the political achievements of the Pink Tide. It made Latin America the epicenter of left-wing politics in the Global South; it also did much to normalize democratic politics in the region. With its revolutionary movements crushed by military dictatorship, it is not surprising that the Latin American left was left for dead after the end of the Cold War. But since embracing democracy, the left in Latin America has moderated its tactics and beliefs while remaining committed to the idea that deliberate state action powered by the popular will is critical to correcting injustice and alleviating human suffering. Its achievements are a welcome antidote to the cynicism about democratic politics afflicting the American left.

How the epoch-making legacy of the Pink Tide will fare in the hands of incoming right-wing governments is an open question. Some of the early signs are not encouraging. The Temer administration in Brazil has shown a decidedly retro-macho attitude, as suggested by its abolishment of the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights (its functions were collapsed into the Ministry of Justice) and its close ties to a politically powerful evangelical movement with a penchant for homophobia. In Argentina, President Mauricio Macri has launched a “[Trumpian](#)” assault on undocumented immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, blaming them for [bringing crime](#) and drugs into the country. Some [political observers](#) expect that Piñera will abridge or overturn Chile’s new abortion law.

But there is reason for optimism. Temer and Macri have been slow to dismantle anti-poverty programs, realizing that doing so would be political suicide. This is hardly surprising, given the success of those programs. Right-wing governments have even seen fit to create anti-poverty programs of their own, such as Mexico’s Prospera. Moreover, unlike with prior ascents by the right in Latin America, the left is not being vanished to the political wilderness. Left-wing parties remain a formidable force in the legislatures of most major Latin American countries. This year alone, voters in Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia will have presidential elections, raising the prospect that a new Pink Tide might be rising. Should this new tide come in, the Latin American left would do well to reform its act and show what it has learned from its mistakes.

Latin American leftists need not look far to find a model to emulate: Uruguay. It exemplifies the best of the Pink Tide without its excesses. *Frente Amplio*, or Broad Front, a coalition of left-wing parties in power since 2005, has put the country at the vanguard of social change by legalizing abortion, same-sex marriage, and, most famously, recreational marijuana. For these reasons alone, in 2013 *The Economist* chose “[liberal and fun-loving](#)” Uruguay for its first ever “country of the year” award.

Less known accomplishments include being one of only two countries in Latin America that enjoy the status of “high income” (alongside Chile), reducing poverty from around [40 percent](#) to less than 12 percent from 2005 to 2014, and steering clear of corruption scandals. According to [Transparency](#)

[International](#), Uruguay is the least corrupt country in Latin America, and ranks among the world's 25 least corrupt nations. The country also scored a near perfect 100 in [Freedom House's](#) 2018 ranking of civil and political freedoms, virtually tied with Canada, and far ahead of the United States and neighboring Argentina and Brazil. The payoff for this much virtue is hard to ignore. Among Latin American nations, no other country shows more [satisfaction](#) with its democracy.

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