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Democracies, Populisms, and the State in Latin America. Some observations for the current debate.

Democracias, populismos, y el Estado en América Latina. Algunas observaciones para el debate actual.

Democracias, populismos e o Estado na América Latina. Algumas observações para o debate atual.

Abstract

The brief observations focus on some key challenges that Latin American states are currently confronting, and on the question of how they can function effectively in their present state and under the pressures of polarizing transformations. There will be four points: First, the current state of democracies will be discussed, which is basically characterized by processes of democratic erosion or recession. Second, the challenges posed by the various populist movements, politics, and regimes will be addressed, which have proliferated and changed, making them more radical, aggressive, and detrimental to democratic politics. The third section will be dedicated to the problems of the functioning of the states in Latin America, their aspirations, shortcomings, and deviations, and the transformations the model of the weak 'strong developmental state' has gone through during the last

half century. In the final fourth point some recommendations for political action and for further clarification and research will be debated ('what could be done').

Keywords: Democracy, authoritarianism, populisms, state functions, structural change of the public sphere.

Resumen

Las breves observaciones se centran en algunos de los principales desafíos que los Estados latinoamericanos enfrentan actualmente, así como en la cuestión de cómo pueden funcionar de manera eficaz en su situación presente y bajo las presiones de transformaciones polarizantes. Se abordarán cuatro puntos: en primer lugar, se examinará el estado actual de las democracias, caracterizado fundamentalmente por procesos de erosión o recesión democrática. En segundo lugar, se analizarán los desafíos planteados por los diversos movimientos, políticas y regímenes populistas, que se han multiplicado y transformado, volviéndose más radicales, agresivos y perjudiciales para la política democrática. El tercer apartado estará dedicado a los problemas del funcionamiento de los Estados en América Latina, sus aspiraciones, limitaciones y desviaciones, así como a las transformaciones que ha experimentado, en el último medio siglo, el modelo del "Estado desarrollista fuerte débil". Finalmente, en el cuarto punto, se debatirán algunas recomendaciones para la acción política y para una mayor clarificación e investigación ("qué podría hacerse"), y se situarán las trayectorias de los Estados latinoamericanos dentro de un esquema general de las distintas etapas de construcción estatal.

Palabras clave: Democracia, autoritarismo, populismos, funciones del Estado, cambio estructural de la esfera pública.

Resumo

Estas breves observações concentram-se em alguns dos principais desafios que os Estados latino-americanos enfrentam atualmente, além de abordar a questão de como esses Estados podem funcionar efetivamente em seu estado atual e sob as pressões de transformações polarizadoras. Para isso, são apresentados quatro pontos. Primeiro, é discutido o estado atual das democracias, que é caracterizado, basicamente, por processos de erosão ou recessão democrática. Em segundo lugar, são abordados os desafios colocados pelos diversos movimentos, políticas e regimes populistas, que proliferaram e se modificaram, tornando-se mais radicais, agressivos e prejudiciais à política

democrática. A terceira seção é dedicada aos problemas do funcionamento dos Estados na América Latina, suas aspirações, deficiências e desvios, além das transformações pelas quais o modelo do “Estado desenvolvimentista forte”, que na prática se revela um Estado fraco, passou durante a última metade do século. Por fim, são discutidas algumas recomendações para a ação política, bem como para novos esclarecimentos e pesquisas (“o que poderia ser feito”).

Palavras-chave: Democracia, autoritarismo, populismo, funções do Estado, mudança estrutural da esfera pública.

Some observations for the current debate

One of the most urgent questions of Latin American politics and its mirror in political science (including the Congress of CLAD) is: What are the most critical challenges the states and their agencies are confronted with, and how can they function effectively under the pressures of the ‘deep’ transformations they are facing? The most important among the latter being the present changes and trends of modern mass democracy (or its deformations), globalized interdependencies, the new ‘social media’ and their platforms, the profound structural change of the public sphere and of political communication and intermediation they have brought about, further technological, social and cultural change, the various perceived crises of the institutions and social relations, and the rise of new political movements, most of them populist. An adequate answer to these questions would require a series of books that have yet to be written. We are still at the beginning of the debate. In what follows, I will attempt to outline some basic aspects of the issue, provide key points, indicate the general direction of the argument, and identify some questions and open ends for further research. I hope that my modest observations can contribute to the ongoing debates. In doing this, I will primarily focus on the general constellations and give more attention to politics than to policies.

Debating the problems of democracy and the functioning of states in Latin America always implies that we must also discuss the various populisms in many Latin American countries and their impact on democracy and the state. Hence, I will address four points: First, the current state of democracies will be discussed, which, despite a basic resilience, is presently characterized by processes of democratic erosion or recession. Second, I will address the specific challenges posed by the various populist movements, politics, and

regimes during a phase of proliferation and transformation. This has made them more radical, aggressive, and detrimental to democracy, to the liberal script, and the effective functioning of the state. The third section will be dedicated to the concerns of the functioning of the states in Latin America, their ideals and aspirations, their shortcomings and deviations, and the transformations the model of the weak 'strong developmental state' has gone through during the last half century. In the final fourth point, some recommendations for political action and for further clarification and research shall be addressed ('what could be done').

Democratic erosion

The democratic euphoria, which also in Latin America had set in after the demise of military regimes since the 1980s (Fukuyama's 'end of history'), lasted for not much more than a decade. Processes of democratic consolidation which were underway, in many countries have slowed down, remained protracted and contained, or have been stopped or reversed. Even though Latin America, its highest degrees of political polarization and violence notwithstanding, still is the second most democratic region in the world after the transatlantic region (Nord et al. 2025; BTI 2024), most democracies have performed in a defective or incomplete mode regarding the requirements set for 'liberal' or 'embedded democracy' (Merkel et al. 2003; Merkel 2004). While the direction of politics so far has overwhelmingly followed the swings of the pendulum from right to left and back decade-wise,¹ we find continuous processes of democratic erosion (or democratic recession, as the Latinobarómetro has put it) since the beginning of the 21st century, and more so since the 2010s.

According to the respective indicators (V-DEM 2025, BTI 2024, Latinobarómetro 2023, LAPOP 2023), we now locate the usual suspects de *toujours* as consolidated 'liberal' or 'embedded democracies', mostly also with solid governance: Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica, of which the latter, however, has recently somewhat receded and lost democratic quality. At the other end, we find six autocracies: Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Haiti, which also qualifies for failed stateness. All other countries can be found between these two, in the large group of what has often been called electoral democracies and what we have called defective democracies: democracies with defects in particular sectors, which could be characterized in more detail (Merkel 2004).

1 More rightist governments in the 1990s and 2010s, more leftist governments in the 2000s ('pink tide') and 2020s (with exceptions and slowing down), both categories including moderates and radicals, and more or less democratic and authoritarian ones. Cf. Börzel et al. forthcoming.

Among these, Peru and Mexico, overall, have lately shown a downward tendency; Panama, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic have partially improved, though often incrementally or with significant sectoral deficits (like blocked governance). Others have oscillated around stagnation or moved back and forth. The dynamics of change may also vary: processes of erosion could be due more to polarization (as seen in Ecuador or Peru), or to the expansion of executive power (as in Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil).

Since the second decade of the 21st century also the support for democracy has receded. According to Latinobarómetro data (2023), since 2018 the support for democracy (as the 'best' or 'preferable' form of government) on the Latin American average has been as low as 48%, much less in LAPOP (28%). Despite little movement on average, in some countries support for democracy has receded dramatically between 2020 and 2023, in Venezuela by 12 percentage points, in Costa Rica by 11, in Mexico and Guatemala by 8. The authoritarian potential has grown respectively on average by 4 percentage points, more in Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic. In 2023, according to Latinobarómetro, 17% of the interviewed Latin Americans preferred an authoritarian regime, and 28% answered 'da lo mismo'. The details may vary, but the trend is clear.

Support for democracy has also declined in the 'Churchillian' version, from 79% in 2013 to 63% in 2020 and 66% in 2023. Satisfaction with the way democracy functions in a particular country is down to 28% (69% unsatisfied), and only 21% said that the political parties 'funcionan bien'. Hence the share of those who agreed that 'no puede haber democracia sin partidos' has fallen from 58% in 2013 to 44% in 2023. Trust in institutions has generally declined. But here, the various country profiles often tell us more than the Latin American average.

Latin American democracies have also shown a general vulnerability in relation to authoritarian temptations (many of them populist) or simple inefficiency and corruption, not least due to their institutionalized presidencialismo, weak mechanisms of control and accountability, and executive-heavy models of democracy. They also prefer output legitimation (and not procedural legitimation). It is no coincidence that the most democratic states (Uruguay, Costa Rica, Chile) are those that have the strongest and most influential parliaments.

Old and new populisms

The same constellations that had the potential to endanger and disfigure democracies in Latin America have often favored the rise and success of populist movements and regimes through most of the 20th century. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, we are facing an exceptional situation with a decisive impact: Both democracy and the functioning of the states have been affected by the challenges of various populisms in a phase of their hype and proliferation, but also of a significant change of their constellations and some fundamental transformations. These transformations make them more radical, more polarizing, and destructive, and more of a threat and danger to democratic politics and institutions. We need to examine the details more closely to understand what happened.

In general, populisms have always had an ambivalent relationship with democracy. They have helped to consolidate and extend democracies as well as contributed to their erosion and demise, the latter due to their antiliberal positions, their Freund/Feind schemes (cf. Schmitt, 1923), conspiracy narratives, and their rejection of intermediary organizations (parliaments, parties, courts of law, or independent media), in favor of the fiction of a direct, unmediated relationship between the leader(s) and the followers. Their disregard for effective control and accountability, their anti-pluralist and polarizing practices, and often the uninhibited authoritarian inclinations of their leaders, overall, have done more damage to democracies than their participatory aspirations have improved them (Puhle, 2020; cf. also Urbinati, 2019; Müller, 2016).

There have, however, been exceptions, particularly in Latin America, in the 'classical' time of populist regimes, between the 1930s and the 70s. Here we find three different types: Not only the postrevolutionary stabilizers (the PRI in Mexico from the 1930s on, or the MNR in Bolivia since the 1950s) and authoritarian rulers (like Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina), but also quite a number of important democratic populist parties, like APRA in Peru, Acción Democrática in Venezuela, the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) in Costa Rica, the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), and, in a second wave, since the 1960s, the Christian Democrats in Chile, Venezuela (COPEI), El Salvador, Guatemala, or Acción Popular in Peru. All of them have been anti-imperialistic 'project populisms' with a reformist *desarrollista* agenda,² and they all (except APRA which never governed) have contributed substantially, though with limitations and costs, to a wave of progressive politics of development, to an increase in participation and reformist stabilization of their

2 In contrast to the protest populisms in the United States or in Europe.

countries (for more details, see Puhle, 2020, and forthcoming).³

This period, however, has ended. Typological diversification began in the late 1980s, with the rise of rightist 'neoliberal', at times also authoritarian, later anti-migration, evangelical, and all kinds of protest variants as they were also known from Europe or the United States, e.g., of minorities, 'anti-globalists', extremists of the Right and the Left, etc. (cf. Puhle, 2024, 2020). They all no longer correspond to the traditional patterns of Latin American populism but represent entirely new (sub)types. So at present we can find at least three variants of populisms in Latin America, among them two with a certain continuity: On the one hand we have the populist movements with a longer tradition, like the Peronists in Argentina (with a more rightist and a more leftist wing), or the PRI in Mexico, both now democratized. On the other hand, we have new or mixed and hybrid movements which still move within the lines of traditional Latin American populisms (and more on the left), like the PT in Brazil, MORENA in Mexico, the MAS in Bolivia (cf. Wolff, 2029), the Correistas in Ecuador, or, differently, also the erratic Chavismo in Venezuela. A third variant lacks the lines of continuity with traditional Latin American populisms, however modified and diluted (cf. De la Torre, 2018). Here we find all the movements of completely new types, protesters, evangelicals, libertarians, destructive state skeptics and true believers of all kinds (more on the right), and also some heavyweights like Bukele in El Salvador who fights organized crime and terrorists with state terrorism (cf. Meléndez-Sánchez & Vergara, 2024), and Bolsonaro in Brazil (cf. Tanscheit, 2023), Milei in Argentina (cf. Vommaro, 2023) and Kast in Chile (cf. Díaz et al., 2023), who are trying to combine, in different ways, neoliberal economics with ultraconservative, reactionary and repressive aspirations and libertarian approaches.⁴

Overall, the mixes, and hybrids dominate. At present, we can find all imaginable kinds of populisms in Latin America (and elsewhere), those with projects and those of protest, not to speak of the many fundamentalist believers and missionaries. We also find trans-continental learning processes, as well as decontextualized and fragmented, loose populist elements traveling around and being imitated or modified (compare, e.g., the rhetoric and politics of Trump and Bolsonaro). The new populisms are more polarizing and des-

3 For the extended literature on the 'classics' of Latin American populisms, see also, e.g., Di Tella, 1965; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Hermet, 2001; Hermet et al., 2001; Weyland, 2001; Laclau, 2005; Roberts, 2015; Taggard & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; De la Torre, 2017; for the context Collier & Collier, 1991.

4 On the theoretical background of the elective affinities between neoliberal concepts and the populist far-right, see now Slobodian, 2025.

tructive, contesting democratic institutions frontally, whereas the traditional populisms have been more integrating, stabilizing, and reformist (cf. Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Puhle forthcoming). These trends have been enhanced by the repercussions of the new structural change of the public sphere ('Habermas II'),⁵ a significant threshold worldwide that has involved advanced globalization, the breakthrough of 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) with its network logic and the 'social media', new modes of political intermediation, communication and campaigning, and a significant push forward of the elements of what one might call 'populist democracy' (as a structure; Puhle, 2020). The latter is particularly characterized by the emphasis on the direct and immediate relationship, and the fiction of a permanent two-ways communication between the voters and the leader(s), circumventing the 'corps intermédiaires' designed to provide channels of control and accountability (like parties, parliaments, courts of law and independent media). These changes clearly tend to favor populist actors and politics, giving them a comparative advantage.

As structural changes and populist aspirations are reinforcing one another, this is a good time for populists, for movements anyway, but also for individual mavericks who do not represent a significant movement or party (present in the country and parliament). If they know how to use the new mechanisms, and if they are able, entertaining and lucky, they can attract sufficient votes to make it to the presidency (like Milei), and then try to build parliamentary parties later (a kind of leadership populism, or postmodern caudillismo).

The new constellations (down to the logic of the algorithms of the social media favoring negative emotions) fit well with the populists' Freund/Feind scheme, with their view of elections as a permanent war between good and evil which should be guided by hatred and rage, and their preferences for 'politics of fear', negative campaigning and affective polarization (cf. van Erkel & van Aelst, 2021). They have also helped much to facilitate the dissemination of typical elements of an enhanced and 'modernized' populist subversion, like

- the attitude of 'antiestablishmentarianism' (Urbinati),
- contempt for institutions and semi-loyalty towards democracy (cf. Linz, 1978),
- the conversion of prejudices and fundamentalist convictions into quasi-religious belief systems,

5 On a decisive earlier structural change of the public sphere, see the seminal work by Jürgen Habermas, 1990 (1962). Its equivalent for the recent change is still a desideratum.

- the transformation of repeated propaganda lies and conspiracy narratives into outright reality denial (e.g., of COVID-19, climate change or election results) and 'alternative facts',
- refined techniques of resemanticization (*Umdeutung*), and 'doublespeak' (cf. Urbina-ti, 2014; Puhle, 2023).

All in all, it appears that the present-day populisms in Latin America, and particularly the new ones, overall, are less democratic than they were in the 'classical' phase. Particularly, the new mixes and the polarizing antidemocratic versions of populisms seem to advance, and it might be possible that also Latin America may finally fall for the worldwide trend towards the simple new cleavage of (authoritarian) 'populism' vs. democracy (cf. Norris & Inglehart, 2019), with less productive exchange and interaction between the two than before.

The functioning of the States

Also in Latin America, the challenges of democracy and the enhanced and diversified populist contestations interact with specific problems of the various states and of state-ness. I will attempt to briefly summarize the nature of these problems, their impact on state functioning, and potential solutions to improve the situation. Doing this I will look at state functions with special emphasis of development and 'progress' however defined, and of the ways how the states deal with the 'varieties of capitalism' (Hall & Soskice, 2001) they are confronted with (since at present, with very few exceptions, capitalist economies appear to be 'the only game in town'). Here the state is a key actor, and an exceptional actor, for two reasons: it is not just one actor, but many actors; and it is not only an actor, but also an arena, among other things.

'The state' is a construct, a reification, a simplifying notion for many hard things, like the institutions of government, at all levels and in all branches, and the personnel that represents these institutions, from the policeman, tax inspector or schoolteacher to the city planner, welfare bureaucrat or Supreme Court judge. The term can also stand for some 'grand designs', programs and projects to which the government may have committed itself, and for many aspects of the resulting processes of interaction (like in Engels's (1962, p. 222) and Hilferding's definition of the state as 'der ideelle Gesamtkapitalist'). The functions of the state (counting only the most important ones) usually fall into four closely intertwined clusters, with some overlaps: the guaranteeing state (strong state), the servicing state (active state), the enabling and empowering state (strong and active), and the mediating or moderating state (broker state).

The guaranteeing state provides:

- protection (life/liberty/estate, internal and external peace, etc.),
- order, regulation, effective administration,
- predictability and 'stability' (inside/outside, real/perceived).
- rules for all kinds of competition,
- property,
- rule of law,
- transparency, accountability,
- human rights,
- freedom of choice, equal chances,
- 'taming', containment, self-restraint of the state.
- conduciveness (to growth, development, 'progress', protection, 'justice', integration, etc.) as a guarantee.

The servicing state cares for:

- planning, communication, infrastructure
- education,
- organization of the labor market,
- welfare,
- integration, inclusion (e.g., of the poor, weak, discriminated, migrants, minorities),
- sustainability,
- securing capabilities for innovation, R&D, economic stimuli,
- effective tax collection (the 'tax state').

The enabling and empowering state provides:

- conduciveness (to growth, development, 'progress', protection, 'justice', integration, etc.) as an effort (see above),
- special proactive efforts to fight inequalities, provide justice, freedom of choice, equal chances, 'respect'.

The mediating or moderating state should:

- channel and moderate interactions between corporate agreements and institutionalization,

- mediate between capitalist interests and ‘the people’,
- negotiate ‘common interests’ and the pacts to secure more ‘justice’ and equal chances
- provide schemes for legitimation,
- moderate transformation conflicts (adapt institutions and power relations to changed constellations).

It is important to note that the state (or the ‘government’, in the Anglo tradition) is not a single actor, but many actors, in different institutions and bureaucracies whose interests can be opposed or overlap only in parts (cf. local bureaucrats vs. central bureaucrats), so that minimizing gridlock can become an asset of good leadership. The state is also the arena in which societal and political interactions and conflicts occur, serving as the gatekeeper and organizer of the marketplace for economic, social, and political relations and processes, often acting as a mediator. The state is the chief notary public and regulator of society, a norm-setter and a provider of protection, of law and order, and of legitimation, at times of empowerment. Due to this multiplicity of functions, the state is an exceptional actor, and indeed ‘more equal’ than other actors. And we also must not forget that ‘the state’ is not a static entity, but an ongoing process, or better: a process of processes, given to change and transformation, reflecting particular trajectories and past and present entanglements. Mostly, the state ‘is’ not this or that (not even for a given period), but it ‘happens’, it moves, acts, and reacts, in particular constellations.

The answer to the question of how the states of the future should look like would be easy and normative: The states should be strong and sustainable democratic social and welfare states under the rule of law (*estados de derecho*) with strong institutions, effective and impartial administration, control and accountability, functioning responsive and responsible political parties and politicians, and good governance, fighting polarization and violence, populist aspirations, authoritarian temptations, corruption, poverty, exclusion and inequality, promoting security, justice, and more equality of life chances. And they should be capable of mediating between the different logics of democracy and capitalism (which is one of their most important tasks).⁶ On the background of the real existing Latin American states, all these items sound like parts of a nice utopia. But as benchmarks and ultimate goals towards which to work, every one of them is, I think, valid and useful.

⁶ On the different trajectories on which this could be accomplished, see the classic by Rueschmeyer et al., 1992.

Keeping these targets in mind, we might start by asking what a realistic set of priorities would be to address the present needs. As a first step, we must account for the real situation: The functioning of the states in Latin America, in most cases, does not live up to the needs of the countries. The reasons for that are well known, and their mix may vary. Among them we find the structural dependencies on world markets and powerful neighbors or partners in trade, recurrent economic crises, recently the receding dynamics and 'negative stagnation' of the last decade, in addition to the overarching problems of demography and migration, of interdependent inequalities, inclusion, and sustainability. A more direct impact have institutional and political inadequacies, particularly the weak and unbalanced institutional systems lacking effective mechanisms of representation, control, and accountability and inviting for an expansion of executive power, personalismo, corruption or golpes fácticos, as embodied in insufficient checks and balances, neglect or contempt for the rule of law, a lack of trust and of a national consensus (also on goals), a weak and fragmented civil society, also reflected in the party system, and an inherent trend towards polarization. Moreover, in the field of services, tax collection and control, the institutions are often inadequate. The critical infrastructure of democracy is often not in good shape, despite significant progress in some areas (e.g., women, minorities, indigenous communities).

We must, of course, not forget that the Latin American states also are at a structural disadvantage due to the historical constellations in which they must operate, and the time constraints they are under. The older states of Europe have had more time to develop the norms and rules, the institutional devices, the procedures, politics, and policies of modern statehood. They mainly could address the needs of each of the (so far) six phases, or stages of state building, one after the other:

1. state building in absolutism: law & order, taxes, the military, basic education, economic empowerment;
2. rule law, estado de derecho, Rechtsstaat;
3. the constitutional state;
4. a (more or less) democratic state, the inclusionary state (1);
5. the social and welfare state, of various kinds, the inclusionary state (2),
6. and last the environmental state, our present challenge.

In Latin America, we find more backlogs and problems at various stages must be handled simultaneously. Some states still must work on law and order, on the tax systems and

rule of law, as well as on the social and welfare state, infrastructure, and human services (apart from exceptional forerunners like Uruguay), and not only on the issues of the last challenge which is the environmental state. There is still much more work to be done.

The Latin American states also had and have to cope with the ongoing crises of the traditional model of the 'strong' developmental state, as it had been practically (and sectorally) developed in some countries since the first decades of the 20th century, and was theoretically established after the Second World War in the interventionist concept of 'developmentalism' or 'Cepalismo' (named after the UN Economic Commission for Latin America ECLA/CEPAL) which dominated the region through the 1960s and much of the 70s. It favored autocentric development, acknowledged the center/periphery divide and the constellations of unequal exchange, and combined the strong developmental state with advanced policies of import-substituting industrialization (ISI), a diversification of production and exportation, some Keynesian and some corporatist instruments and an integration into the mechanisms of the World Bank system (see Prebisch, 1950; Bielschowsky, 2016; Lewis, 2019).⁷ The 'strong state' often, however, in reality turned out to be rather weak, ineffective and, particularly, unaccountable, due to the usual vices of underdevelopment, dependency⁸ and fragmentation, bad leadership, clientelism, corruption, etc. Notions like the 'weak strong state' (or 'giants on feet of clay') have been used by some authors since the 1970s to characterize Latin American countries (and also autocracies of Southern Europe; cf. Malefakis, 1995).⁹

As the states, on the whole, did not deliver, the concepts of the strong state came even more under attack from three sides: from leftist and internationalist critiques along the lines of theories of imperialism, dependency, the new world system, later antiglobalism and neo-imperialism (e.g., Hardt & Negri, 2000), from the reform-averse establishment and from market-centered neoliberals and libertarians, as embodied in the economic adventures of the 'Chicago Boys' in Pinochet's Chile which liberated the economy from state

7 I cannot go into the details here, and I leave out forerunners and related debates, e.g., on 'economic backwardness' favoring autocratic regimes and divergences from 'Western' patterns (Gerschenkron, 1962; Tilly, 1975, 1992), the 'Prussian model' (Löwenthal, 1963, and the 'Sonderweg' debates), or 'development dictatorship' (from Atatürk and the PRI to Franco, Vargas and Perón), and the problem of the concepts' regime blindness.

8 Such observations were backed up by many of the findings of dependency theories. Cf. Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Kay, 2011; see also Oszlak, 1978; Whitehead, 1994.

9 We can find a similar pattern in East and South Asia where the regime-blind strong developmental state was discovered later than in Latin America, in Chalmers Johnson's book of 1982 (on Japan), and modified by Shalini Randeria's sophisticated 'cunning state' (on India; 2003) which is neither strong nor weak, but rather ambiguous, and heavily unaccountable.

guidance and initiative to the point that —while the state was looking on — international market mechanisms, privatization and financial speculation could ruin traditional Chilean industry almost completely. For some time, the call for ‘bringing the state back in’ (according to the Evans et al. book of 1985) became fashionable (again), even in countries and situations where the state as an important player had never been ‘out’. In a way, over the last decades, processes of increasing and decreasing state initiatives and interventions in the economy and society have often followed the swings of a pendulum (like the changes between more leftist and more rightist governments; cf. Börzel et al., forthcoming).

We do, however, also have to account for a more categorical threshold in the last wave (so far) of what has come to be known as ‘Transformations of the State’, the title of a well-known research cluster at the University of Bremen (cf. Leibfried et al., 2015). Other research clusters studying the respective changes were organized under headings such as ‘Limited Statehood’, ‘Interdependent Inequalities in Latin America’, or ‘Contestations of the Liberal Script’ (all at the FU Berlin). They were complemented by many other studies on ‘Multiple’, ‘Entangled’, or ‘Reflexive Modernities’, etc. They all have centered around the repercussions of advanced globalization, of the breakthrough of IT and the ‘network society’, of the structural change of the public sphere which has already been mentioned, and new types of economic crises which have made state functions and power relations within and between the states more complex and challenging. Among the consequences of these transformations, we find more transnational entanglements and a reduced steering potential of the nation states, ‘Entgrenzung’, more transnational migrations, movements of capital and transfers, hence more transnational actors, institutions and regulations, and a contained and fractured sovereignty. This has, however, not enhanced the chances for more effective supranational regional alliances which in Latin America, on the whole, have remained weak and deprived of any ambitious functions, due to the reluctance of the member states to concede jurisdictions and competencies to the supranational entities.¹⁰ Within the states, apart from the decisive changes of political intermediation, communication and campaigning that have been mentioned, we particularly can observe more fragmentation, scattered responsibilities (more ambiguity and less accountability), loosely-coupled agency (or ‘anarchy’, as some would have it), short-term protest politics, and more populist mobilizations, either in disfigured and defective democracies or in what has been called electoral authoritarianism.

10 This also implies a structural problem, as the persisting need to empower, strengthen and ‘modernize’ the states in most cases may not be easily compatible with transferring functions and powers from them to supranational bodies.

These transformations have indeed affected the functioning of the state. Depending on 'degree', intensities, and sectoral impacts, they have made it less 'rational', less reliable, and less conducive to good governance and to delivering what people are expecting. The changes have affected the channels of legitimation, the mechanisms of accountability, the character of state-society relations, and many other functions of the guaranteeing state, the servicing state and the enabling and empowering state. They have also influenced the role of the state as a mediator between 'the interests' and the 'common good', or between capitalism and democracy. And they have broken up whatever there may have been left of the model of the strong, or weak and strong developmental state. Various model mixes have emerged, eventually shifting from traditional catch-up strategies to those of an 'alternative' development, more in the way of bricolage than of conceptual cohesion. There is no way back to Cepalismo, however modified.

What could be done

The changes and transformations that have been briefly sketched here, particularly those of more fragmentation and weakness, more populist democracy and autocracy, more ambiguity and more unaccountability, have affected most of the functions of the state. The most important among them might be those of 'stability' and 'conduciveness', effective administration and controls, the rule of law, freedom of choice, inclusion, various economic and social policies, empowerment, and legitimation. The obvious question of what could be done will usually trigger two lines of recommendations: one asking for a list of priorities for immediate action, and a second one trying to identify, in a more focused way, some particularly interesting (or even 'key') problématiques that should be addressed because they have impacts on many others, provide useful spin-offs and might inspire further research.

Regarding the first line, priorities for action, the usual recommendations for policies have been extensively discussed by experts and politicians alike, most of it as part of an effective Reforma del Estado, but also beyond that. From what I have learnt in these debates, at present priority should also be given to investments and reforms in the educational and health care systems, to advances in digitalization and AI, and to institutional reforms addressing inequality and exclusion, curtailing the informal sector and increasing productivity. Even more urgent might be measures to improve and empower tax collection, and an efficient regulation of the internet platforms and social media. Functions have been widening and so must be the capabilities. Regarding politics, particularly the

challenges by populist and antidemocratic mobilizations would have to be addressed. Here the best remedy has always been 'good' and adequate, responsive and responsible politics and policies of the democrats and non-populists: Establishing trust, securing consensus and fairness, avoiding and sanctioning corruption, setting adequate priorities, not promising the impossible 'and 'delivering' on what has been promised (and what is most urgently needed). Equally important, however, is that these 'good' and adequate politics and policies are communicated convincingly. Democratic leadership basically is effective communication. And the best policies are of little help if they are not effectively communicated.

In the second line of recommendations, the 'big' problems for longer debates, many issues could be raised. I will conclude with five key examples I find particularly interesting for a future research agenda on the functioning of the state.

1. One crucial question is whether a state has the adequate strength and power to perform its functions (and which functions with priority), and if not, how it could be made strong enough to do so. Analytical and programmatic (or therapeutical) observations go hand in hand here. The state should neither be too weak, nor too strong, with regard both to its capabilities to fulfill its various functions (particularly in their basic guaranteeing and servicing dimensions), and overcome opposed interests, and to its mission to secure free space for the members of an open society. The situation typically depends on the specific problems at hand and the constellations of competition and conflict.

A central requirement that has often been neglected here is effective tax collection and revenue administration. The modern state, among other things, is supposed to be what Joseph Schumpeter has called a 'Steuerstaat' (tax state). Its European variant has been one of the inventions of continental absolutism (a component of 'discipline'), but also the Anglo nations have copied it, and all modern states have come to terms with it. Where it is deficient or non-existent it should be built, promoted, and empowered because otherwise the autonomy of the state lacks one of its fundamentals. In some non-European countries, there have been functional equivalents to build on. In the Latin American context, systematic research in this field (and some political action) has just begun.

The state also needs sufficient means to fulfill the functions which could be labeled under the term 'conduciveness', both in its guaranteeing and its enabling dimensions: The normative assumption here is that the state performs in a way that is conducive to all the other good things the state is expected to provide or promote, like growth, deve-

lopment, 'progress', protection, 'justice', integration, inclusion, etc. The state should be able to guarantee this conduciveness, and to make additional enabling efforts to that end where necessary.

2. A second area of particular interest could be the functions of the moderating state, or broker state. One question here is how and to what extent the state can manage to moderate the conflicts resulting from the more recent transformations, and the challenges to state and society that have been mentioned, particularly where those imply phenomena of social and cultural upheaval (e.g., migrations, and reactions), economic degradation and despair, ethnic diversity, fundamentalist ideologies, violence, etc., but also where they require more organizational efforts to cope with diverging interests and to adapt the institutions and power relations to the changed constellations. This leads to another, more general issue that refers to the capacity of the state and its leaders to channel and moderate the processes of interactions between corporate agreements, on the one hand, and institution-building and institutionalization, on the other. Successful politics of change and transformation usually occur along two parallel procedural lines of interactions: The actors involved come to agreements and negotiate pacts the contents of which then is transferred into laws, rules and institutions, based on which the next round of negotiations and potential agreements can follow, etc. These processes require a good sense for responsiveness, and for scope, timing and sequencing, on the side of the respective actors, but also adequate institutional and procedural resources and rules on the side of the state so that the steps of progress made in one line of interactions fit neatly into those of the other line.

3. A third area of interest on the agenda would refer to the protection of the weak. The question here is what the state does, and what it could or should do, to identify the groups of the weak, the poor, the needy, underprivileged, etc. that need protection, and what it would do, in which way, to address their problems. Particularly, it will have to be decided, in the process of implementation, whether adaptations of the general rules and of setting market incentives might be sufficient, or whether additional measures of empowerment will be needed requiring that an explicit consensus for it be organized. Here, the state has an important gatekeeping function.

4. One of the key characteristics of recent transformations has been a significant upsurge of protest politics. Protest, often violent protest, has been directed for and against change (often related to migrations), for the good old rights or for more rights and against their violations, against repression, or the corruption of elected and autocratic elites, for

the rule of law, for more participation, inclusion, etc., triggering reactions from other groups and particularly from 'the state'. Here a fourth cluster of relevant research topics emerges around the question of how these (often diffuse) protest energies can be (re-) integrated into civil society and organized politics: associations, networks, movements, parties, and the channels of political interaction provided and moderated by the state. New orientations and alliances depend on many factors, like social and political mobilization and organization, economic, social and cultural cleavages, religious and ideological 'values' and perceptions (and the cultural heritage behind), and not least leadership. The outcomes have shown a high degree of variation as many empirical studies from all continents have demonstrated. But they have also indicated that, in these processes, the reactions and initiatives of the government and of the agencies of the state have usually been of crucial importance.

5. This brings me to a fifth area of immediate concern because here, political regimes make a difference. In fact, we cannot refer to the state, to its role and functions, without referring to its political regime, and to where it stands, or moves, at least more or less, on the scale between autocracy and democracy and the many subtypes, nuances, and hybrids in between. I cannot see how even in development theory, reflections on the role of the state could, in the end and beyond limited technocratic assessments, remain regime-blind. Democracy makes a difference for many things relevant here. By which I mean: embedded, or liberal democracy, i.e. democracy cum rule of law, with the respective controls, as a working system without too many ambiguities and deficiencies.

This is particularly evident in several key state functions that have been identified as significantly impacted by recent transformations and therefore figure prominently on our agenda. Above all, this concerns the various factors required to secure accountability: like transparency, freedom of information, public control of state officials and corruption, human and civil rights, the rule of law, and limitations to the powers of the state. The more democratic a state is, the better it can fulfill these crucial guaranteeing functions. The same seems to apply for the functions that can be labeled under 'conduciveness', and for those that have to do with guaranteeing the life chances of citizens, like freedom of choice, equal chances, 'justice', 'respect', etc. It also appears that a more democratic state can much better fulfill the mediating functions which have been mentioned, including those of moderating between the capitalist interests and 'the people', or the public good.

Hence it would be legitimate to rank high on our agenda the question of whether or not (and why) the politics and policies of the state, and of those who are running it, can contribute to make the state more democratic, to secure democracy, or reduce the respective obstacles, and how, in case, conduciveness to more democracy could be enhanced.

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