Democracy, Ethics, and Neoliberalism in Latin America

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López-Pedreros, A. Ricardo. 2019. *Makers of Democracy: A Transnational History of the Middle Classes in Colombia.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ellison, Susan Helen. 2018. *Domesticating Democracy: The Politics of Conflict Resolution in Bolivia.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wendy Brown's (2015) warning that neoliberalism is a threat to democracy has for decades had a particularly literal resonance in Latin America. Neoliberalism here has become a byword for government-endorsed dispossession, extractivism, and environmental destruction (Hetherington 2020; Riofrancos 2020); the dismantling of the state (Shever 2012); and the physical violence and economic decimation of dictatorial rule (Han 2012; Whyte 2019: 156–197; Winn 2004). Academic discourse in and about Latin America tends to reduce neoliberalism to Marx's famous description of capitalism's icy waters and "cold and restricted … calculation" (Gago 2017: 10) promoted or acquiesced to by complicit, naive, corrupt, or powerless peripheral governments and a *lumpenbourgeois* elite. That foreign intervention in the continent in the name of democracy or its values often directly funded human rights violations only tightens the associations between neoliberalism, lack of democracy, and top-down projects.

Echoing recent calls for more careful use of the term neoliberalism (Ferguson 2009; Venugopal 2015), scholars are examining the history and precise ideological content of both the term and the phenomena it indexes (see, for example, Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Slobodian 2018; Whyte 2019). Beyond top-down projects and canonical ideologies, neoliberalism has been opened up as a kind of reasoning (Gago 2017; Peck 2010), a logical intuition (Carrier 1997), and "a frame of mind, a cultural dynamic, an entrepreneurial personality type, and a rule of law" (Goldman 2005: 8). As a result, the relationships that the protean phenomenon of neoliberalism can entertain with different understandings of democracy and democratic relations and subjectivities have become increasingly complex. Most famously in social anthropology, Andrea Muehlebach's (2012) *The Moral Neoliberal* showed how, far from being an

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amoral economistic order, neoliberalism is a particularly apt vehicle for the fashioning of ethical selves attuned to the civic and political duties of contemporary established, historically Judeo-Christian democracies. Even more boldly, Jessica Whyte (2019) shows that from the moment of its formulation in the 1940s, neoliberalism was above all things a moral, normative order, concerned less with markets and profit maximization and more with guaranteeing civil and political propositions to foster and naturalize certain kinds of relations. These relations, in turn, demanded the active investment, not retreat, of the state, to sustain this moral order and the fashioning of certain kinds of subjects within it: explicitly or implicitly, its framework would be a transnational, globalist, free market democracy.

These arguments do not overrun Brown's point that, at the end of the day, neoliberalism (as a form of government, a kind of reasoning, or an affective disposition) is a threat to democracy; they may in fact be pointing toward the most insidious logics that confirm it. For example, Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) has shown how the tokenization of difference and indigeneity in a celebrated marketplace of identities for choice produces a second-class citizenship and entrenches civic and political inequalities in democratic contexts. If anything, these arguments call for an ever-closer examination of neoliberalism as an ethical project in itself and neoliberal governance as a vehicle for ethical projects in democratic contexts today. That "democracy" is also such an abstract noun only makes it harder to understand how exactly neoliberalism and its ethics affect, or even, effect democracy or democratic relations.

It is from this perspective that A. Ricardo López-Pedreros's *Makers of Democracy* (2019) and Susan Helen Ellison's *Domesticating Democracy* (2018) examine neoliberal interventions in Latin America in the name of a particular kind of democracy that became twentieth-century common sense: one of empowered, informed, sovereign selves with abstract, universal rights and an inherent right to tend to their own business. This is, today, the democracy of prevailing human rights discourses, of a globalist, moralizing, borderless integration of peoples and markets and of the asymptotic empowerment of the sovereign self. Well beyond the liberalization of trade and the dismantling of the state, at stake in these books is whether, through the right approach, Latin Americans could become the citizens that thrive in the moral neoliberal order of democracy today. These interventions, as we shall soon see, had to be legitimized in the name of a particular sense of democracy, had to distribute bodies and prerogatives among them according to certain ethical projects of democracy, and had to be naturalized through various techniques, making it harder to interrogate the definition of democracy these neoliberal ethics tend to.

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Rationality of Intervention: Ethics and Logistics for a Neoliberal Democracy

For decades now, López-Pedreros argues, developmental, political, and economic discourses have naturalized an ontological identity between middle class and democracy: a democratic nation is a nation of and for the middle class. Scholarship on Latin America tends to reproduce this link in explaining the continent's lack of one through the lack of the other, or provincializing both by studying them "in their own terms." In a world marked by Cold War anxieties, these "terms" needed to be understood in order for these democracies to be brought in line. Studying modernization projects in 1960s and 1970s Colombia, López-Pedreros sets out to explain the discursive, affective, and economic labor that produced the link between an autonomous, entrepreneurial and civic middle class and the increasingly naturalized notion of free market democracy that eventually became transnational common sense. This was not a democracy defined solely by rituals of election and representation, which Colombia already had; also, the task was not to invent a middle class that in strict economic terms, as a middle stratum (30), was also already there. Rather, this was democracy as an ethical orientation toward the moral values of the market, of interdependent competition, self-investment and autonomy, that the "bastard" Latin American elite-miming middle class, prone to "manorialism," politically unaware, factionalist, and potentially deviant, needed to learn how to inhabit (30–39).

The ethical languages of universal rights, untapped economic potential, and civic harmony aimed for a whole new Colombia by way of its reformed middle class. Under the auspices and financing of the Alliance for Progress, a US-backed developmental project, Colombia's two main parties agreed to suspend conflict and develop a nation for white-collar, free-market-oriented professionals embracing "harmonious social and labor relationships" (23). This required spectacular investments in infrastructures of knowledge, banking, and tertiary sector economies. University courses and workshops conscripted professionals to "develop a consciousness of state" (50): an administrative, technical ethics devoted to the common good, promoting the middle-class values of discipline, autonomy, and a conspicuous political detachment. In particular, the fifth chapter, "In the Middle of the Mess," follows middle-class professionals as they came to conceive of themselves as the natural ruling class of a democratic Colombia, charged with sensitizing indolent elites to the plight of the disenfranchised and educating the working masses in the values of democracy (112–116). Through an impressive selection of resources involving state archives, school, bank and private company reports, interviews,

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and personal diaries, López-Pedreros shows how a Gramscian sort of hegemony emerged where people understood themselves and made others understand them as both the obvious apex and condition of possibility of the nation's democracy.

Meanwhile, *Domesticating Democracy* examines the subjects and rationalities of intervention of twenty-first-century transnational discourses of empowerment, Latin America's Pink Tide left-leaning governments and funders' priorities. By the time Ellison conducted her fieldwork into alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms among the semi-urban poor in El Alto, Bolivia, US and other international donor agendas in Latin America had changed. As Cold War concerns gave way to the war on drugs, Bolivia saw a proliferation of ADR initiatives aimed at allowing residents to bypass a clogged judicial system they distrusted and develop an enterprising ethics towards conflict resolution (and, in the process, free up court time and resources for dealing with drug crimes). *Domesticating Democracy*'s objective is to examine what kinds of social issues ADR mechanisms address and how, and what kinds of selves and democracy emerge from them.

In Ellison's analysis, ADR mechanisms foster democratic relations through an ethics of autonomous, responsible, and accountable selves relating freely and individually with each other—a market democracy, too, laced with a strain of realpolitik. The shift of locus of intervention, from institutions to individuals, resulted not just from a new conceptualization of democracy as empowerment but also from the concrete failure of institutions and the need for solutions that will work for the Bolivian poor. Politicians and funders lamented that the propensity to conflict in El Alto harmed democracy *and* economic growth (50). In this sense, the "domesticating" in the title points to the need to rein in and funnel conflict: these interventions need to bring concrete relief to these courts and concrete solutions to these people. What emerges is, in a way, a democracy of fact. This democracy is less concerned with what is effectively a socioeconomically tiered access to justice (one of the domains where, in the political theory of democracy, all citizens, rich and poor, should be equal) and more concerned with allowing these people *some* sort of space to resolve concrete problems in an expedient manner. The ethical project that in *Makers of Democracy* was to lead the whole of Colombia into prosperity is in *Domesticating Democracy* deployed to enable an elementary form of citizenship to Bolivians on the margins of civic and political citizenship: ADRs are to contribute to economic growth, enable the private sectors, and guarantee basic rights to citizens (47). ADRs sought to turn the Bolivian poor, understood as politically volatile, rebellious, and prone to litigiousness, into the individually responsible,

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autonomous, and accountable subjects that could inhabit the public and private spheres of a domesticated (Bolivian) version of the disembodied notion of democracy (54).

Neoliberal Democracy and Its Values: Markets, Bodies, and Selves

If, in the rationality of those who intervene, the ethics of neoliberal democracy cannot be expected to just emerge spontaneously (or at least not just anywhere), both *Makers of Democracy* and *Domesticating Democracy* emphasize the work it takes to foster those ethics in their respective sites. The former's third chapter, "The Productive Wealth of This Country," shows the Colombian state reduced funding for state projects, a move aligned with general discourses of neoliberalism as a state-shrinking project, but only to reallocate money to fund loans and grants aimed at promoting small and medium businesses in a process of "economic democratization" (62). This intervention involved careful selection processes where recipients, mostly men in heteronormative familial settings in a certain "middle-income" bracket, attended workshops, seminars and university courses aimed at helping them develop a work ethic, knowledge, and disposition toward risk, ready for the competition with other small businesses in the free market that was emerging through them. Attuning oneself to the laws of the market was a democratic virtue in and of itself to the extent that it required collaboration, competition, and exchange among equals in an economic sphere defined by impersonal civility. These individuals are not nearly as atomized as critics of neoliberalism often argue; as Whyte points out, in the ethical project of neoliberal democracy division of labor *promotes* mutual dependence—even if impersonal (2019: 61). As a result, Colombia's white-collar professionals triangulated their self-ascribed, middle-class identity with a level of income and an ethical orientation opposed to the static orientation of the elites, fixated with hoarding land and inherited privilege, and the irrationality and unproductiveness of peasants (69–73).

As López-Pedreros argues, partly through the policies listed above, during these years, Colombia's rapid urbanization coincided with the bourgeoning of the service sector and with the popularity of economic theories of human capital. The latter in particular allowed middle-class office workers to think of themselves as white-collar professionals: the fact that their labor, as an investment in themselves, was a form of capital, relegated to an atavistic past the antagonism between capital and labor (89). I analyze later the depoliticizing effects of this ethical framing;

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what matters here is that offices were emerging as the quintessential democratic space where the aforementioned administrative ethics allowed these professionals to see in themselves the right life project for the logics of a free market. As office spaces and their demand for mental work epitomized a particular understanding of democratic relations, they also naturalized in this democracy the strongly hierarchical relation between the sexes at the time: single, young, and middle-class women allegedly brought to the office workforce their negotiation abilities, their docility, and their ability to "care for others … to serve others … to have patience" (99). The translations of sexism and of reproductive and other kinds of labor into values, talents, and "natural" dispositions only enhances the senses in which this neoliberal democracy was naturalized as an *ethical* project.

Domesticating Democracy's ethnographic method allows a different window into how these interventions work to produce certain subjects and their relations, capturing as well their disjunctions, contradictions, and paradoxes. Although donors had legitimized ADRs as outgrowths of native traditions of conflict resolution to lend them logical and ethical continuity (12), ADR conceptualized conflict as a dyad of opposing interests around a concrete problem, where duties and prerogatives could be distributed between two warring parts. Yet the nature of *compadrazgo,* a form of extended kin common in some parts of South America, often meant that conflict enfolded dozens of people and involved irreducible social obligations in several directions at once (131). The ethical project of turning Indigenous traditions of cooperation as understood by funders into an ethics of neoliberal responsibility and autonomy for selves bounded in a certain way required immense work, often fruitless, to reduce the number of disputing parties (which sometimes did not even fit in a room at once) (137) and distill what could, or could not, be mediated by ADRs, like certain forms of violence (184).

During Ellison's fieldwork, another logic of intervention toward free market democracy had become very popular in Bolivia and much of the Global South: microcredits. The latter's rationalities of empowerment, accountability—in the sense of responsibility and in the sense of generating accounts (Strathern 2000)—tone of solidarity, and social sensitivity, so exacerbated the ethical project of ADRs that much of the latter's mediation involved conflicts generated by microcredit and its spawning networks of debt (150). The second half of *Domesticating Democracy* tackles their entwinement. Following Sohini Kar's (2017) study of microcredit in India, Ellison argues that despite the discourse of empowerment, self-reliance, and individual responsibility, microcredit institutions in Bolivia capitalize on the social embeddedness of Indigenous practices of lending,

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deliberately leveraging the entwinement of debt with kin obligations among the poor as a hedge against the risk of lending to them (149–154). In one exceptionally telling vignette, a single sewing machine had been a commodity, collateral, and capital good to 16 women, each somehow linked to some of the other 15, and four different credit organizations (173).

Rather than fostering a market ethics of empowerment and self-discipline, the superimposition of ADRs and microcredit generated an emergent "moral economy of legitimate lending" (192) that gave the extended networks of social and kin obligation the logics, temporalities, and bureaucratic rationalities of banking. To an extent, as the author shows, this defeats the purpose of this alternative, realpolitik governance: her last chapter, "You Have to Comply with Paper" shows residents use the ADR negotiations to procure written documents (injunctions, testimonies, agreements) to record and materialize their claims, including those concerning microcredits, in a form evoking less the democratic spirit of universalizing paperwork and more the state's coercive apparatus, which ADR mechanisms were precisely design to bypass.

As said above, ADR mediators constantly work to purify conflict into things they can conciliate and things that need to be sorted elsewhere. Yet, rather than unambiguously allocating fault and tort to produce the reflexive, cooperating citizens the ethics of free market democracy requires, this compartmentalizing of issues erases the violence in debt complaints, notably domestic violence, and conversely misses the patterns of ever growing indebtment fueling physical violence. Conciliators often see these tensions and realize these harms, but these conflict resolution instances remain, after all, the only possibility for some sort of justice many of these residents have, closing the circle that reproduces a second-class citizenship in Bolivia's free market democracy and the forms of violence that stunt it. Meanwhile, a "legion of conciliators" (101), an NGO class of salaried people in the growing market for ADR in Bolivia, trains itself into perpetuating the ethical project of their intervention.

The Ethics of Neoliberal Democracy: The Anti-political

As political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2005) argued, the political dimension of social life in contemporary democracies is increasingly subsumed in the moral register of right versus wrong. In both books, the salience of ethical interventions and sensitization in the project of free market democratic subjectivities only exacerbates the question of what kinds of contestation are possible. In other words, what can be disagreed

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on and how? What grammars are out there to formulate a challenge to these ethical projects from within, and who are they available to? Both *Makers of Democracy* and *Domesticating Democracy* show an array of what Andrew Barry (2005) calls "anti-political" practices and rationalities, aimed at suppressing, dissolving, or pathologizing forms and subjects of contestation; limiting, funneling, or sanitizing allowed contestation; and naturalizing certain hierarchies and orders between bodies and reasons, making it harder to consolidate a challenge in the public sphere. As Barry points out, much of what we call politics is indeed, in this sense, anti-political, ensuring that disagreement in contemporary democracies only takes forms that do not threaten key aspects of the political order.

Of particular interest in both books is the pathologizing of unions and organized labor in general as inherently inimical to democratic life, a common perception among certain discourses in Latin America (see, e.g., Lazar 2017). This is in part due to the presumed incompatibility between the premises of socialism, Marxism, or Indigenous traditions of associative life informing collective action on the one hand, and the ethics of autonomy, hard work, and responsibility of neoliberal democracy on the other. In particular, López-Pedreros argues the intervention to develop a middle-class subjectivity in Colombia during the second half of the twentieth century was motivated by the fears of the Cold War and Marxist and other forms of activism in Latin America. If this ethical project was explicitly anti-political in several ways, unions entered the rhetorical battlefield already diminished by the ideological synthesis between capital and labor mentioned above. Developed by theories of human capital, working on oneself as a mode of capital investment was the right way to inhabit this democracy: these selves were in fact the missing link "between the market and democracy" (78). In so doing, however, the collapse of the distance between labor and capital also dismissed unionization as an improper ethical orientation to the workplace, fitting theories of scientific labor management, and providing the political anxieties around ideological infiltration with a grammar of pathology and vice (78, 89–94). In this sense, even if as argued earlier, ADR promoters leveraged those Indigenous traditions of associative life to lend historical legitimacy to their project of conciliation, at the ideological level, the ethics of neoliberal democracy already refused organized labor as an acceptable funnel for contestation.

Both *Makers of Democracy* and *Domesticating Democracy* show that unions were rejected as rightful actors of neoliberal democratic life on other grounds as well. The former examines a relentless discursive siege against the very premise of organized labor demands: brazenly sexist/patriarchal and racist discourses dismissed unionized workers as

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"effeminate," lazy, violent, or too exotic for democratic life (87, 102, 136–137, 154). Meanwhile, Ellison shows how unions were taken as harmful to a democracy of peaceful market relations and economic growth because they exacerbated and manipulated the inherently bellicose nature of the semi-urban poor (6). Also, from the perspective of ADR professionals and certain middle-class discourses, unions disrupted the individualization of life projects by enforcing participation in mass mobilizations and instigating blockades to manipulate genuine demands (74; see also Grisaffi 2019).

What kind of room can there be, therefore, for shared demands to be voiced in this democracy? Countering the general notion that middle class democratic subjectivities are relatively disinterested in politics, especially in the sense of partisan activity and open contestation, López-Pedreros shows Colombia's middle classes developed their own organizations to lobby for a series of demands. For the most part, these organizations deployed a technical and moral language always aligned to the "apolitical" administrative ethics mentioned above (139). Still, they managed to push for a reconceptualization of certain workers' rights, distribution of national resources, and other issues that confronted them as the class with the natural right to inhabit, and rule, the normativity of the transnational, free market democracy of the second half of the twentieth century. As this middle class saw itself in "privileged alienation, material frustration and political disillusionment" (182), some within it progressively recanted their petit bourgeois condition, going on strike and challenging the terms of the hierarchical, gendered democracy they themselves were the fruit of. By this time, this particular iteration of the middle class had become a destabilizing force in the transnational discourse naturalizing the link between free market democracy and middle classness: the last chapter examines the governmental disciplining of middle classes promoting "irrelevant, exotic or impracticable" (226) alternatives to this democracy, with methods spanning discourse co-optation, economic reforms, and physical and psychological torture to bring those unruly bodies back in line. This may have been an ethicizing project, but there were no ethical boundaries when it came to protecting this ethicizing project and guaranteeing Colombia's middle class, the natural seat of this democracy, would be protected from the political: "if the enemy is political, then the state should be beyond politics" (230).

Domesticating Democracy's ethnographic focus on the encounter of arbitration shows a different facet of a similar anti-political effect of the ethics of neoliberal democracy: ADR mediations are less about having a say than about fostering a certain kind of voice (16). In principle, anyone

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can participate, and Ellison also examines collective versions of mediation, as well as workshops and training sessions to foster negotiation skills as technical, apolitical mechanisms to resolve conflict (81). Yet, in a manner analogous to the tokenization of cultural alterity that entrenches inequality (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010), the bleached inclusiveness of ADR conflict resolution actually makes it harder to genuinely challenge the deep running inequalities that confirm the exclusion of certain bodies from the dominant forms of citizenship in free market democracies. A certain aesthetics of reasonableness about the approach further pathologizes anyone resisting ADR mediation as those recalcitrant few who seem to want perpetual violence (91). This is, in a sense, a consequence of one of the defining aspects of the kind of voice ADR fosters: a private one, the voice of an empowered, single, self. That this self is by definition private further confirms ADR itself as an anti-political practice: as Ellison argues following Timothy Mitchell (2011: 25), the struggle in free market democracies today is to try to establish as a matter of public concern that which is constantly reduced to the private, the self, the individual.

Conclusion: Democracy beyond Neoliberalism?

Through the governmental experiments commonly referred to as the Pink Tide, Latin America has provided researchers with a fertile site to examine how neoliberalism harms democracy and different concrete attempts to transcend these harms, either by reimagining democracy or by trying to contain neoliberalism: from Bolivia's vernacular democracies (Grisaffi 2019) and attempts to reorganize resource extraction in fairer ways (Gustafson 2020) to Ecuador's grassroots national and popular movements (Riofrancos 2020) and Paraguay's efforts to rethink the dependence on soy (Hetherington 2020), spanning alternative conceptualizations of citizenship (Lazar 2012). These studies are converging with interdisciplinary research into neoliberalism in an invitation to reflect on what exactly we mean by neoliberalism and how we think we are reflecting outside it, and here is the crux of Ellison and López-Pedreros's contribution. We may think of discourses of economic and civic empowerment, popular choice, certain celebrations of difference, and the ethics of self-fashioning individuality as part of an ethical project beyond neoliberalism. Yet, as evidence from the middle of the Colombian middle class and from the socioeconomic margins of Bolivia's urban periphery show, all are already, in a way, iterations of particular aspects of a neoliberal democracy increasingly understood in moral terms, or moral imperatives, even, and more and more as matters of common sense.

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