

Latin America

*A challenging prospect for regionalism*¹

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Abstract: This article contends that the prospects of regionalism in Latin America are highly uncertain. In the light of the inequality that has historically characterized the region, the commodity-oriented dependence, and the political instability, the region will not be able to face the future without cooperation. This article argues that Latin America must aim at pragmatic and non-ideological cooperation to focus on regional development. To reach that goal, the article discusses how both the traditional development formulas of neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism have been unable to deliver consistent responses to the current regional problems in the face of COVID-19 and the changing global order.

Keywords: COVID-19, Latin America, neodevelopmentalism, neoliberalism, welfare state

The future of regionalism in Latin America (LA) looks seriously challenging under the current scenario, requiring pragmatic cooperation around key issues of development and conflict beyond dogmatisms. As the liberal global order and regionalisms across the world declines and fractures, giving way to unexpected morbid forces and crises, we can expect a rather difficult picture. Behind that, the well-known historical structural problems of development (i.e., inequality and informality), a commodity-oriented international insertion, public policies dismantling public health and education, rising repression of social protest by neoliberal governments and poor regional cooperation, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To face that, the region needs pragmatic regionalism and cooperation beyond ideologies to overcome three decades by



the limitations of neoliberal and neodevelopmentalist models of development, to ensure it can contend with new times, structures, and development challenges.²

However, after 30 years of dismantling the welfare state in LA (mainly public health and education) for the sake of reducing fiscal deficits and attracting investment, such a shift seems unlikely to materialize in the short term. This fact, in combination with a world in hegemonic transition, a global pandemic, and the mistakes of the regional political-economic elites in controlling the crisis, do not forecast an optimistic future for the region on its current path (CEPAL, 2020). It has not been the pandemic what threatened the liberal international order and globalization in LA but the same outcomes of its historical structures, international insertion, and current governmental orientations (far-right populism, state repression, xenophobia, massive migrations, environmental crises, etc.) as they are still there (Worth, 2019). Just a few years ago, when considering the contrasting cases of regional development in Mexico, Chile, and Ecuador, we saw that these countries were rampant with gang violence and state repression of social protests that now seems blurred by the pandemic (ACLED, 2020). If neoliberal globalization, as part of the postwar world order, is declining and giving way to the rise of neomercantilism and populism, the negative impact will be even more pronounced on those regionalisms anchored to market-led development with privatized social protection like LA. Moreover, poor regional non-economic cooperation, the end of the Union del Sur (UNASUR), and decades of dismantling of public health and education have only increased this negative prospect. Thus, regional uncertainty and difficult conditions can be viewed as the characteristics of forthcoming tendencies.

For Antonio Gramsci, “crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (1971). LA is in the middle of that type of crises and will, at its core, depend upon regional cooperation to face the challenges. LA confronts massive inequalities—both politically and economically, dependence on the west, underdeveloped economies, and political instability. However, the growing dependance from Southeast Asia is not going to be different. Furthermore, LA features substantial informal sectors that range from economies of solidarity to highly sophisticated organized crime. Viewing from above, that used to be the normal for the region’s elites and middle classes, but in the last three decades, conflicts and crises have spread and deepened, signaling that the old is dying and the new is still to be born. The region’s situation highlights two main issues. The first is how harmful inequality can be for social protection, development, and political stability. The second is how the pandemic kills lower-class

people without welfare protection, irrespective of whether their country's government follows either of the dominant development models in LA, neoliberalism or neodevelopmentalism (Bresser-Pereira 2015; Steger & Roy, 2010). Neoliberalism is the policy model that encompasses both politics and economics and seeks to transfer the control of economic factors from the public to the private sector, following the neoclassic economic doctrine. Its policies enhance the workings of free market capitalism, eliminating price controls, deregulating capital markets, and lowering trade barriers by placing limits on government spending, regulation, and public ownership (Steger & Roy, 2010). Instead Neodevelopmentalism refers to a new political and economic role for the state in the economy, which aims at the development of a national capitalism for developing countries, away from the Washington Consensus. It shares central features with import-substitution industrialization or old developmentalism, such as the idea that the world is based on the competition of nation-states through their companies, and that development is a structural process defined by exports. The key is the transfer of financial resources to high-wage and high-value-added sectors (Bresser-Pereira, 2015).

Under Neoliberalism in the region welfare states have been reduced and their sources and functions transferred to markets (i.e., Chile), but this mainly occurred where welfare was considered central to fiscal problems, as per the fundamentals of neoliberal globalization (i.e., Right-wing and pro-market governments). The result was simple: weak administrations and short-term policies reluctant to protect lives given the public cost that it entails for neoliberal policies. Politicians, elites, and mainstream media, in most of the countries with pro-market governments, first downplay the "*gripezinha*" and undermine scientific advice. Next, they avoid sanitary measures that hurt their economies and bring about fiscal deficit, and with that they began to mask the numbers of cases and deaths (except Mexico) (Martens 2020; Toledo 2020). Disturbingly, critical journalists and epidemiologists in the region highlight the fact that deaths and contagion are often more than ten times the reported numbers. Governments have often tried to cover up the extent of their failure to handle the pandemic and continue to fail to recognize their role in dismantling the welfare system to accomplish, through policies of austerity, and the reduction of fiscal deficits. In LA, the governments that are the strongest adherents to these policies are among the list of countries with the highest COVID-19 death and contagion rates as well as the worst management of the crisis (i.e. Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile).

Despite the political claims in the region from the new right-wing governments, it is not socialism that is damaging capitalism but their own policies, environmental management, regional political mismanagement

of the pandemic, and lack of attention to science. Inequality undermines societies, polarizes them, and in the context of the actual dismantled welfare state, the region is very weak in its ability to respond to the crisis, notwithstanding the mishandling of the pandemic (Martens, 2020).

The problems and crises facing LA did not start in Wuhan. By 2019, the region was in turmoil after the sudden decline of the Pink Tide, shifting again toward conservative and neoliberal governments and elites. For some, it was a matter of economic malaise after the end of the commodities boom, more so than foreign meddling (Naím & Winter, 2019). Others, such as Celso Amorim, Brazil's former Minister of Foreign Relations, defines it as a popular "counter-reaction" to the "onslaught of neoliberalism" (Philips, 2019). Indeed, these different explanations stem from the historical and typically binary views concerning the region, but there are more integral approaches. More than upheavals, it is possible to see that old and new regional issues of development, as mentioned prior, are coming to the surface, aggravating domestic and external problems for the region (Busso & Messina, 2020). In this context, four major issues can be identified:

- (1) Three decades of dismantling the Welfare State in LA and the shift to market-led social protection (neodevelopmentalism) and market-based development finance (neoliberalism), with Chile presented as the historical and global case of success.
- (2) The exhaustion of the two dominant models of development: neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism, which dominated the region since the rise of the postwar Liberal Order (1950s–early 1970s) until the sharp decline of the neoliberal global order (Vivares, 2013).
- (3) The structural and agency links among international engagement, domestic economic configurations and social structures, and political orders of development in LA and each one of its countries.
- (4) The political mismanagement of the pandemic by governments through pro-market reforms and policies, and the inexplicable attitude to hide the real numbers of death and infections by governments, elites, and media, as a way to avoid damaging the external image of a country.

Three decades of dismantling of the welfare state and polarization of societies

The crises of 2008 and 2014 once again demonstrated the key developmental limitations of neoliberalism (external financial and extractivist de-

pendance and deindustrialization) and neodevelopmentalism (economic over-reliance on state budget and extractivist dependance) to make strategic sense of different and changing domestic–international conditions (Kaminsky, 2019). Several studies assessing the development impact of globalization on the region, driven by market-led processes, conclude that inequality was functional, in one way or another, to the development models adopted by each country in the last 30 years (Astorga, 2015; Gasparini & Lustig, 2011). The weakening of labor movements and organizations shifted labor from the formal to the informal sector, exacerbated by the privatization of state-owned firms and the dismantling of the welfare state (Astorga, 2015). Inequality in the region shows a history of increasing social polarization to varying degrees, tied to a country's development strategy, accounting for external, domestic, economic, demographic, and political variables (i.e., literacy and access to public primary health care) (Astorga, 2015). By 2017, according to the World Bank, despite reductions in inequality in the last two decades by Pink Tide,³ as well as neoliberal governments, the region remains as the most unequal in the world with the highest rates in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador. However, the regional economic and social scenario only worsened after 2008 and 2015 as a result of the external financial crises, worsening regional inequality, environmental depredation, organized crime, and protests (ACLEDA, 2020).

Social discontent and protest began to spread already by the end of the 1990s. Indeed, that showed the limits and perils of neoliberalism, but after the crises of 2008 and 2015, neodevelopmentalist strategies became insufficient. Shortly thereafter, a wave of regional protests broke out in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Guatemala, soon followed by Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia (Open Democracy, 2020). Pink Tide governments following neodevelopmentalist strategies and seeking autonomy from Washington faced an abrupt external change and reduction in development finance that deepened the commodity dependence of the region, inequality, and political instability. The next stage followed the historical path of the region: neoliberal and conservative political-economic forces started to advocate for market-based solutions via the cutting of fiscal spending in social issues and repressing social protests. Harsh right-wing governments democratically arrived in LA, returning the region to the conservative and neoliberal posture of the 1990s. In more than a decade, neodevelopmentalism failed to produce the promised regional structural change, and neoliberal conservative governments dismantled everything that could be considered progress in their way. However, the doors for the democratic return of the neoliberal and conservative parties remained open. The anti-corruption movement took to the streets, and some sections of the media, after the

Odebrecht scandal, exclaimed the “Latin America spring” as a label for the struggle against the corrupt and populist version of the Pink Tide, led by the new right-wing forces (Phillips, 2019).

Nevertheless, something worse had been happening in the region for the last three decades: the dismantling of the welfare state to use public resources to foster financialization and private investments, driven by states fostering globalization based on the hegemonic belief in market fundamentalism. LA economies underwent profound structural transformations since the end of the 1970s, with the rise of neoliberalism consolidating the financial aspect of the liberal international order and triggering critical tensions of development on different levels, although particularly increasing inequality and polarizing societies (Weeks, 2018). By the end of the 1980s and 1990s, protests spread across the region, clashing with neoliberal globalization. Even after ten years of distribution and soft prosperity, tied to public spending by the Pink Tide, the region experienced a sharp decline with the end of the commodities boom in 2014. Once again, unrest grew and proliferated. By 2019, Latin American societies remained highly polarized, divided, politically unstable, and extremely unequal, in an unprecedented economic fall due to the impact of COVID-19. Noticeably, the countries more affected by COVID-19 are those with large open economies, dismantled and privatized welfare states, and high levels of inequality (i.e., Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Ecuador). COVID-19 appears to be unstoppable, although what kills people is not always the virus but the absence of a public healthcare system.

Four central elements are evident in the Latin American countries most shaken by the pandemic today: (1) a lack of social protection in most of the region after three decades of openness in trade and finance; (2) the dismantling of the welfare state; (3) increasing social risks and vulnerabilities concerning global or regional issues; and (4) the slow and ineffective governmental response to COVID-19. These reveal the severe structural restrictions of the region and the potential avenues of advancement that any type of regionalism should seek. Moreover, regional development has also entered the geopolitical domain, as the current global environment demands countries to opt for aligning their business with either Washington, Europe, or China (Vivares & Stanley, 2020).

Likewise, the last regional shift brought about more tough right-wing governments, resulting in the further dismantling of the state, an increased dependence on the Trump Administration, and direct repression in response to social protests against conservative and neoliberal policies (i.e., Argentina–Macri, Bolivia–Áñez Chávez, Brazil–Bolsonaro, Chile–Piñera, Ecuador–Moreno). Social discontent has not been in opposition to democracy but to structural adjustment, repressive policies, a lack of social and

environmental protection, and co-optation of resistance by the new right-wing wave (Naím & Winter, 2019). According to Michael Shifter, from Inter-American Dialogue, protests in LA were against elites, given the widespread sense of injustice, above all in the most pro-market countries, such as Chile and Colombia (2020). That is an important point; however, domestic social structures and political orders cannot be understood without the international aspect in political-economic and geopolitical terms.

The Chilean protests against Pinochet's development model, inherited and defended by the Piñera administration, started in 2016 and peaked between 2018 and 2019 following extreme slogans such as "Neoliberalism was born in Chile and will die in Chile" (Vally, 2019). For decades, Chile has been praised as the successful neoliberal and conservative miracle where a country found order, development, and neoliberal global engagement, as Milton Friedman described it (PBS, 2020). But something went wrong with the Chilean development model after Pinochet as, in a democracy, inequality only works with abundant development finance or repression. The Chilean order did not deliver prosperity for all and benefited just a handful of powerful families whose wealth accounts for more than 10 percent of Chilean GDP (Wright, 2019). Students led the protest and became the kernel articulating diverse urban and suburban social forces against the model inherited from Pinochet's dictatorship, which delivers a world without hope and full of frustrations for young generations. Mismanagement of development, inequality, the indifference of the elite, corruption, and repression appear in all LA crises and protests, with the same development outcome—few new millionaires and millions of new poor (Margolis, 2019).

In November 2019, the Bolivian government of Evo Morales was forced to flee under the protection of Mexico and Buenos Aires. In a few months, the right-wing governments of Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, and Ecuador were applying the same recipe of the iron hand against social protest, implementing fiscal austerity, reducing social spending, and anchoring their foreign and security policies to Washington. In Ecuador, governmental repression against demonstrations came after the unexpected government shift of Lenin Moreno to dismantle all policies of the Correa administration, including the prosecution of members of the past administration (of which he was the vice president). In October 2019, the battle of Quito witnessed the unjustified use of public and military force against protesters. After the agreement with the International Monetary Fund concerning the reduction of the fiscal deficit to access external credit, the Lenin administration decreed the elimination of the subsidies to combustibles. In a matter of hours, this triggered a wave of national protests led by taxi drivers, "cholos," students, indigenous, workers, and small farmers breaking

with the social Pax set by the Correa administration and its neodevelopmentalist model. The neoliberal and conservative shift only increased the struggle and preexisting gap between upper and lower classes, cities, and regions. In the case of Ecuador, it deeply increased the social vulnerability as the public health system suffered significant cuts in its financing, as Figure 1 shows. The Ecuadorian situation and battle in October 2019 would show the limitation of the governmental responses to COVID-19 in 2020 and why Ecuador would be like the Wuhan of LA (Martens, 2020).

Inequality rises under two conditions: the state's abandonment of its developmental role, and the unleashing of market forces. Both bring discontent and protests, especially when the people lost the primary conditions of survival. Inequality is one of the three major historical features of LA, with the other two being international engagement peripherally dependent on commodities and political instability and violence produced by sudden development changes. COVID-19 does not determine them, but it fuels regional issues. When the pandemic arrived, LA was already defenseless against the virus, without the necessary welfare programs, doctors, nurses, installations, technology, protocols, or even cemetery plots to deal with the coming deaths. Countries with the highest rates of contagion and death, including Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Brazil, are those where politicians have demonstrated disregard for international scientific information about the pandemic, delayed implementing quarantine measures to avoid economic harm, and believed in herd immunity. In a short period, the pandemic in LA demonstrated the limitations of its political-economic elites, business blindness, self-referential and overconfidence in the han-

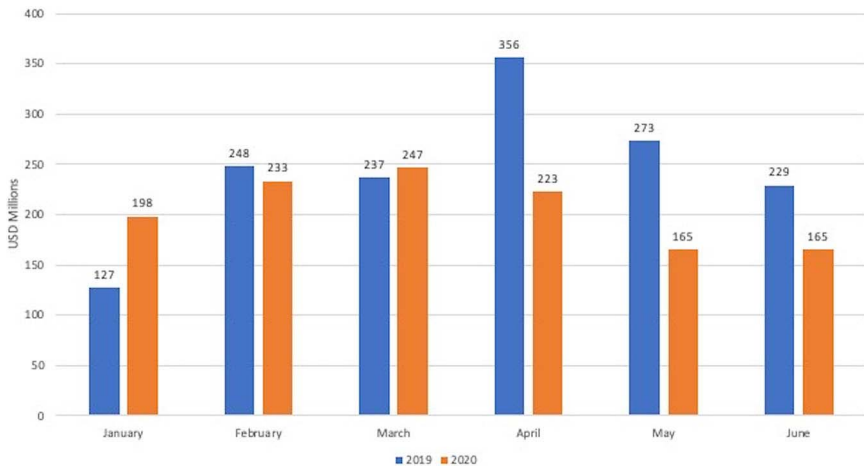


Figure 1

Source: Jonathan Báez Valencia (2020), quoting Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas-Subsecretaría de Presupuesto.

dling of COVID-19. The behavior of some governments in response to the pandemic has been similar to that of Trump and Bolsonaro's "*gripezinha*."

Is there life beyond neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism?

Perhaps, one of the most common themes of the debate surrounding LA regionalism remains the opposing development models of neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism, regardless of their limitations and failures in the last three decades (Chodor 2015). In the 1980s, developmentalism ended in a historical crisis, and in the 1990s, neoliberalism brought about an unprecedented collapse by the domestic implosion of the region's economies, inequality, and environmental disasters. After the first decade of the twentieth century, neodevelopmentalism finished deepening the vulnerabilities of the region, and today, taking the same route, neoliberalism is leading the region toward another breakdown. In fact, foregoing the proclaimed shackles and promises of each model, the region is still the most unequal in the world, with more than 50 percent of its economies living in informality, commodity-driven in its global engagements, politically unstable, and one of the most vulnerable in the world in social terms to COVID-19 and any crises in the neoliberal global order. This reveals a problem in the fundamentals of these models, focused on a narrow view of the domestic-international link for fostering development finance, now laid bare because of COVID-19. In order to avoid walking on a Möbius strip and present self-referenced explanations as some economic thought, we need a conceptual apparatus and methodology able to make explanations about the region in time, and in its hemispheric and global context, rather than philosophical assumptions. Indeed, there has been a lack of academic examination of these dual constructions and how their conceptual cages bias the understanding of the issue of development finance in LA.⁴

Neoliberal and neodevelopmentalist models of development are dominant rational constructions in LA that rest on the two major perspectives: market-led and polity-led global development, both concepts bringing their interpretations concerning the nature of globalization, liberal order, states, markets, and development finance for the periphery (Vivares, 2013). Market-led global development perspectives reflect the embodiment of the neoliberal ideology that expresses the dynamic and rationale of the neoliberal global order. It started to consolidate in the 1970s yet with some similarities to the authoritarian capitalisms of the 1910s and 1930s, the golden age of the free economy with the wrongly acclaimed prosperous countries like Argentina. Market-led global perspectives are a combination of technology, re-regulation, and development that works within the

relationship between politics and economics, facilitating the power of capital over labor (Weeks, 2018). Neoliberal deregulation is re-regulation. It is not denying regulation on money, but the implementation of policies “that limit the scope of governments to act and intervene in the economy, social, and political spheres” (Weeks, 2018, p. 639). In summary, it is the rationale of an order where capital regulates political and social realms operating to the detriment of democracy. For its scholars, globalization based on the global expansion and integration of financial markets is the undeniable historical driver of civilizations and the force behind the decline of national states, being the frame within which to comprehend development finance. Accordingly, in a world of perfectly integrated financial markets, development finance need not depend on national savings since countries may replace them by borrowing from capital markets, ergo countries can no longer depend on domestic financing. The significant issue that arises is that markets end up absorbing democracy (Weeks, 2018). Having the capital market to finance development demands the reduction of those state functions that the private sector can take up more efficiently than states, such as health, education, or public services. By implementing this structural adjustment and making labor markets more flexible, states can transfer resources to markets for more efficient use (Levine & Zervos, 1996).

The second dominant approach to development can be summarized under the broad category of polity-led global development and generally includes the full range of neodevelopmentalist perspectives. A critical element within it is that of endogenous development, but it is anchored to the development of the international polity that places market failures at the international level within the liberal world order (the neoliberal, in fact). The major problems with this approach are the exchange rates for the management of capital flows and the policies toward the financial sector. Most of the heterodox international and regional economists can be classified here (Bertola & Ocampo, 2012; Griffith-Jones, 1984). Accordingly, the global financial system is a public good delivered by states and markets; otherwise, free trade and finance can take us into protectionism and isolation (Griffith-Jones, 1984). The nature of global finance historically changes, and the mismatch between global markets and international polity produces financial crises, which demand change and the creation and consolidation of financial institutions, something that is central in the Latin American neostructuralist conception of endogenous development (Chodor, 2015; Kaminsky et al., 2001). In short, neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism rely heavily on domestic factors but adopt static views concerning the external scenarios and factors, and their responses in the face of the pandemic have been inadequate. Any new attempt to overcome

the problematic situation of the region will demand overcoming these conceptual cages that are deeply rooted in the region.

LA, pandemic, and a tough prospect for regionalism

To fully comprehend the predicament LA finds itself in, and its future prospects, while avoiding the limitations of neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism, it is essential to view the situation through the frame of the region's historical and political-economic experience of development. Justifications solely focused on domestic conditions distort the historical commodity-oriented engagement of the region internationally. These arguments point almost exclusively to the external domain bias, hiding the historical and unequal internal social configurations (based on classes, race, and ethnicity) that are functional for the international insertion and the domestic political orders of development (Astorga, 2015; Thorp, 2012). Changes in any one of these structurally linked elements bring about changes in the others—the failure of the two development models discussed. Most of the possible avenues post-pandemic LA may take, therefore, rest on historical and political-economic dynamics between the domestic and the international.

With the global order and neoliberal regionalism in decline and fracture, the situation for peripheral regions like LA will worsen, compounded by COVID-19. With 30 years of dismantling the welfare state and the governments' dangerous improper handling of the pandemic, the prospects for LA's necessary regionalism are dire. The virus is killing the vulnerable, mostly where there is a critical lack of welfare state. The fundamentals of market-led regional development are melting away, and it is not the first time in history this experiment fails. LA will need new directions, beyond neoliberalism and neodevelopmentalism: the challenge ahead is to develop and foster a research agenda to do so.

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NOTES

1. I want to thank the kindness of the editors and reviewers for helping improve the article.
2. Regionalism is approached here from the international political economy perspective as regional historical responses to the world order driven by social forces, political projects, and contending development orientations. It means going beyond the top-down views on institutional and market-oriented formal integration by involving other configurations of forces and actors generally not included in the mainstream views. See De Lombaerde & Söderbaum (2013).
3. Pink Tide, or turn to the Left, refers to the move toward progressist and neodevelopmentalist governments in Latin American democracies, away from neoliberal development, between 1998 and 2015.
4. Both sides, neoliberals and neodevelopmentalists, have their historical points of reference. For the former, Argentina is the typical case as in early twentieth century: It was the granary of the world thanks to its open economic policies, which were mistakenly changed and abandoned after the 1940s, entering the country into a century of decline (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990; Waisman, 1987).

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