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The Promise of New Human Rights Paradigms: Latin Americanist Reflections on the 2020 US Elections

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Abstract

As the United States faces social, political, and electoral turmoil, we can learn much from the Latin American experience – but only if we confront the origins of such problems in familiar structures. Too often those arguing against authoritarian rule invoke the Latin American experience in shallow ways that exoticize it as a cautionary tale, rather than understanding it as driven by the same demons we face here in the United States: rapacious inequality, entrenched racism, an extractive economic model that’s clearly unsustainable. To move forward, we should rethink our understanding of authoritarianism’s origins and also reimagine the tools we use to contest it. Older human rights paradigms assuming that exposing atrocities leads to their cessation no longer hold the same persuasive power. Newer approaches, informed by abolitionist thought, suggest our (and Latin America’s) problems are not the product of individual racists or bogeyman dictators, they’re baked into our institutions, even our identities, and these must be radically reimaged if we are to live into the promise of human rights.

I’m a little daunted at having to dispense some wisdom at a moment of such profound uncertainty. As a scholar of human rights – as a human being -- it’s been a helluva week. But I thought I’d share a few reflections from where I sit.

I came up in this field as an activist before I was an academic. My first job out of college was organizing at Amnesty International, where I was schooled in the version of human rights symbolized by the organization’s logo, the candle in barbed wire. The organization’s tagline was and is “shine a light on human rights” – the idea being that if we expose violations taking place

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in secret prisons or darkened torture chambers, those responsible for these abuses recoil from that exposure and stop the abuse. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, as they say.

This assumption remains foundational in human rights even today – and not only in the work of organizations like Amnesty but in journalism, for example, where people are dedicated to ferreting out the details of the forced hysterectomies in ICE detention, or for that matter, Trump’s tax returns, with the idea that if everyday people see what’s happening we will collectively act to stop the abuse. Yet during weeks like this one, when over 60 million Americans apparently voted for a man who *openly* advocates racism, political violence, sexual assault, and the party that has embraced and abetted his crimes, I think we have to wonder if maybe that assumption is even true anymore: does exposing the atrocities make them stop? With Trump, they’re all out in the open, and part of his appeal is the way he revels in that fact.

Now, I’m not saying the *values* of human rights or the *principles* of fairness don’t apply anymore. I’m saying maybe we need new ways to bring about change that lives up to those values.

Forgive me for a second for being simplistic, but I’ve been thinking that that classic way of doing human rights – the Amnesty International paradigm, if you will -- rests too much on assumptions that no longer hold, and this week’s US election illustrates this.

What do I mean by the Amnesty paradigm? Amnesty was, of course, founded in London in 1961 by a British attorney, Peter Benenson, who was famously appalled at the imprisonment of Portuguese students for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom, and had the idea to appeal to civil society to shame the Portuguese dictatorship into freeing them. There’s a whole legal apparatus behind international human rights, but Amnesty’s chief tool has always been public shaming. I’ve met many people who credit their survival to the work of Amnesty and organizations like it, so I don’t want to criticize it too harshly. But I think we have to acknowledge that these tactics have always worked better against the Portugals of the world than against global superpowers – not because Portugal necessarily has a worse human rights records than the United States, but because it has less power.

So there’s always been an uncomfortable linking between power and virtue in the human rights world – not because Amnesty or other human rights organizations want it that way, but because powerful countries have often cloaked themselves in the language of human rights to justify interventions in less-powerful countries, even when these were ultimately detrimental to democracy. The United States has historically been the master of this, perhaps most archetypically in the region of the world I study, which is Latin America.

In fact, as a Latin Americanist, the bemoaning we’ve heard from Democrats over the last four years about the so-called “loss of American leadership” under Donald Trump is hard to wrap my mind around; in the places I study, that “leadership” has often been antithetical to democracy. And, increasingly, that’s not just a Latin American view, but one I see cropping up in my own classrooms. Let me explain:

Some of you know I have a weird passion for US declassified documents. I first started using the documents for teaching purposes because, when I began teaching 18 years ago and wanted to teach about the genocide in Guatemala, I needed to explain the fact that a CIA coup in 1954 installed the first in a series of military dictatorships which led to civil war and genocide. And I found that students would give me skeptical looks when I'd say that the CIA overthrew a democratically-elected government in Guatemala, so I started looking for ways to "prove" this to them, and found the best possible way was by showing the students the CIA's own documents. Their faces would fall, and I'd get a lot of "whoa" comments, because it was a history they'd never been taught and for many, it went against everything they'd grown up believing about their country. It was unfortunate, of course, to have to expose students to harsh realities, but as an instructor it was also satisfying to see the scales fall from their eyes.

That doesn't happen anymore.

Today, students come into my class with a fundamentally different orientation. It's not that they learned about the US' role in the Guatemalan genocide in high school – they haven't – but what's changed is that they have a very different assumption about the US role in the world.

When I first started to notice people weren't responding with shock and horror to my lectures about the US-led coups in Chile or Guatemala anymore, I was confused. I remember asking one student in the front row, "Hey, you guys learn this in high school, or what?" and he literally said, "No, but... Iraq War?"

I used to drop little breadcrumbs throughout the quarter about the popularity of Alberto Fujimori or other authoritarian leaders in Latin America – just little mentions here and there that I'd return to on a day when I felt like being provocative, to ask my students whether they thought that could ever happen in the United States. We'd have fascinating discussions about the idea. But now it'll be like week 2 of the quarter and I'll be mentioning Pinochet for the first time and some student will be raising her hand and saying, "Wait, this guy sounds like Trump."

I often find myself wondering which is worse: the idealistic, but ignorant, students of decades past, who'd be shocked to learn this history, or the jaded students of today who accept, without knowing the facts, that this country has so often been an amoral, imperialist force.

In light of these changes, I ask myself what I really want to teach them? Why do I think it's important for students to understand Latin America today? I've been thinking about this not only in my teaching, but as I've increasingly heard the language of dictatorship invoked to explain US domestic politics.

First, while many young people's assumptions about the US' inherently "democratic" nature may have shifted, I haven't yet seen a rethinking about our assumptions about the trope of the Latin American dictator. We see it both on the right and left:

- On the right, there's an effort to actively embrace the symbols and ideals of Latin American dictatorships. Proud boy leaders wear shirts saying "Pinochet did nothing wrong."

- On the left, you see commentators invoking Latin American dictatorships as a cautionary tale as Donald Trump increasingly embraces authoritarianism. Even some Latin Americanist scholars I admire have published op-eds saying “Listen to us! We know why this is bad!” for example, when plainclothes federal agents in Portland were rounding up protestors in unmarked vans this summer, detaining them without warrants or probable cause, some people started to invoke “disappearances” or “death squads” – deliberate references to the Latin American experience of authoritarianism.

On the one hand, yeah, I agree with that; we should and must learn from the experiences of other nations, including those in Latin America. I try to do that myself.

But on the other hand, this is a simplistic and ahistorical rendering of what Latin America can teach us. It’s not actually a call to understand Latin America; it’s a call to fear it as something we might become. Even the language we use reveals this – you often hear ostensibly progressive politicians or pundits say that under Trump we’ve “fallen to” the status of a banana republic, for example.

Fallen to? *Wait a minute.* There’s at least two reasons this is gravely wrong:

- 1) The history of “banana republics” in Latin America is inextricable from the history of US intervention. I’m not saying the US is the only cause of the Latin American dictatorships we’ve seen, but I’m saying it can’t be ignored as a contributing factor. Authoritarianism then, is not un-American, it’s not something we “fall to” from an imagined higher perch. Ultimately, if the only way we’re invoking Latin America is as an imagined evil we can come to resemble if we’re not careful, are we really doing anything that different than Trump himself when he makes mention of “shithole countries,” distinct from and worse than our own?
- 2) Secondly, and relatedly, *is this even new?* In the case of the federal agents snatching people into unmarked vans in Portland, something Portland’s Democratic mayor and Oregon’s governor and senators all vociferously denounced, ICE has been doing exactly this in their state for the better part of 10 years now against people they know or believe to be undocumented. I’m not exaggerating: ICE snatches people off the street, without warrants, and throws them into unmarked vehicles, often without so much as flashing a badge, and often the grounds for believing someone is undocumented appears simply to be the color of their skin. If you haven’t been following this, there are videos of these abductions you can watch on YouTube – it’s no secret. So why have our elected officials been silent about that, but so up in arms about the teargassing of the “Wall of Moms”?

I think we all know this selective outrage has something to do with race.

So, is selective outrage okay? This goes back to my question about whether it’s better to have students who are ignorant but idealistic, or students who already believe the system is unjust. In some ways, it’s tempting to say the first is better – twenty years ago my students could be galvanized into action by the model of restoring broken promises, whereas today’s students seem not to believe in those promises at all.

But I actually think the opposite is true; it's from this place of honesty about our record that we need to build a world where human rights are respected.

If the classic Amnesty International paradigm that I learned fresh out of college was the idea that the darkest corners of human cruelty could be cleaned up by exposing them to the light of day, that was based on the fiction that we all really believe in human rights, that any violations exposed are aberrations that can be fixed by widespread condemnation. Today, that's just no longer believable: for Trump and his supporters, cruelty is not an aberration, it's the point – it's not a bug, it's a feature -- and the fact that Americans did not massively repudiate that at the polls should be deeply sobering to us.

This is where the old human rights model runs out of steam: the problems we're facing are not the product of individual racists or "tin pot" dictators in countries we imagine to be "other" to our own, they're baked into our own institutions, even our identities. This is why 60 million Americans voted for Trump, it's why the human rights language of these times is about abolition of harmful institutions rather than incremental reform, and it's why as we send Trump packing I don't want to hear anyone talking about "returning to sanity" or "restoring American leadership." We have way too much work to do as a nation to go backwards.