Critical Debates

Rethinking the Right in Latin America

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

Stéphanie Alenda, ed., *Anatomía de la derecha chilena: estado, mercado y valores en tiempos de cambio*. Santiago de Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2020. Appendix, 380 pages; paperback $19.

Richard Lapper, *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021. Abbreviations, notes, index, 320 pages; hardcover $29.95, paperback $17.95, ebook.

James Loxton, *Conservative Party-Building in Latin America: Authoritarian Inheritance and Counterrevolutionary Struggle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Bibliography, index, 304 pages; hardcover $74; ebook.

Camila Rocha, Esther Solano, and Jonas Medeiros, *The Bolsonaro Paradox: The Public Sphere and Right-Wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil*. Cham: Springer, 2021. Bibliography, index, 175 pages; hardcover $139.99, paperback $139.99, ebook $109.

Kurt Weyland, *Revolution and Reaction: The Diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Tables, figures, bibliography, index, 320 pages; hardcover $105, paperback $36.99, ebook $30.

Not long ago, academics and pundits alike interested in Latin America were obsessed with the left, particularly with the identification of different kinds of left-of-center forces and their divergent impact on both democracy and the economy. The situation is completely different today. Given that the left is not doing exceptionally well in elections, scholars have gradually become more attentive to the situation of the right. Part of this renewed interest is also driven by the consolidation of far right forces at the global level (e.g., Miller-Idriss 2020; Mudde 2019), raising the question of the (potential) emergence of the latter in Latin America.

Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that the right is becoming predominant across the region (neither Macri in Argentina nor Piñera in Chile

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was able to hand power over to right-wing brethren), the right has made important inroads in countries such as Brazil (Bolsonaro's election in 2018) and Uruguay (Lacalle Pou's election in 2019). While much more research is certainly needed to better understand the ideological characteristics, electoral potential, and political influence of the right across the region, the five books under review here are a very good starting point to begin addressing these issues. They provide relevant empirical evidence and theoretical arguments to rethink the right in Latin America.

These books differ in many aspects. Two of them focus on the rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil, one deals with the situation of the right in contemporary Chile, and the other two have a broader perspective: Loxton explores the politics of conservative party building during the third wave of democratization in Latin America, while Weyland analyzes the diffusion of right-wing dictatorships across the region in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, all of them share the idea that the right in Latin America is quite heterogeneous and so argue—either implicitly or explicitly—that it is important to disentangle national and regional patterns. Moreover, these books also reveal that historical legacies are extremely relevant when it comes to understanding the current situation and prospects of right-wing forces in the region.

The aim of this review essay is to highlight the lessons one can draw from these books for rethinking the right in Latin America. It is structured in three sections. First, a general overview of the books under consideration is offered, giving special attention to the concepts of the right that are developed and the methodological approaches employed. Then the main arguments and findings of each of the five books are presented. In closing, the essay puts forward a couple of ideas on the future research agenda for the right in Latin America.

General Overview

The five books adopt different angles: while some focus on the contemporary state of the right in specific countries, others elaborate a comparative outlook of the right in Latin America. Although all of them deal with the right, they share no common definition of it. To a certain extent, this can be explained by the fact that the authors work with different temporal and geographical scopes. The books centered on single case studies seek to understand the current situation of the right and therefore place particular emphasis on distinguishing "traditional" from "new" right-wing forces. By contrast, the two comparative studies consider longer periods (from the 1960s until the 1980s for Weyland and from 1978 until 2010 for Loxton), so both adopt conceptual approaches that "travel" across time and places.

Given that Weyland's central question is why right-wingers ended up supporting brutal anticommunist dictatorships in many Latin American countries, he develops a concept of the right that is directly linked to the kind of regime that is endorsed. According to him, the right seeks to defend the existing order, and one can identify two camps: the first camp can be defined as "moderate conservatives and centrists … [who] accepted or preferred liberal democracy as long as their fundamental interests and causes seemed secure." The second camp should be

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thought of as "hard-core reactionaries [who] ... had long been hostile to liberal democracy and waited only for a pretext to push for its overthrow" (Weyland, 19). By contrast, Loxton proposes a conceptualization of conservative parties that hinges on two core characteristics:

> Economically, they have a strong preference for property rights over redistribution, and, for the period that is the focus of this book, the free market over statism. Socially, they are cautious about major changes to existing norms and institutions, such as gender roles, sexual relations, family structures, and traditional sources of moral authority (often including religion). (Loxton, 7)

The two books on Brazil try to understand the peculiarity of Bolsonaro in comparison to the other kinds of conservatives that have existed and still operate in the country, so that particular attention is given to traditional versus new right-wing forces. In fact, Lapper considers Bolsonaro "as an extreme right-wing populist, as someone similar to leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian President, or Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippine leader" (6). Therefore he presents and discusses some of the common traits of the populist radical right—a new kind of political force that is gaining ground at the global level. Similarly, Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros maintain that the rise of Bolsonaro cannot be understood without analyzing a "new right," which emerged thanks to the support of an array of counterpublics that

> use aggressive rhetoric, curse words, and acid humor, "political incorrectness" that aims to alter the social order to restore traditional hierarchies, values, and ways of life. By occupying the Brazilian state, their members created a new dynamic in the public debate, dominant counterpublicity, an unstable phenomenon based on reiterated attacks on institutions that seek to ... foster an authoritarian political culture. (Rocha et al., 7).

Meanwhile, Alenda posits that the right should be thought as an array of different beliefs that evolve over time and that in contemporary Chile are structured around different intellectual traditions supported by the cadres of each of Chile's right-wing parties. At the same time, Alenda's book shows that the right is undergoing profound changes in Chile, which can be synthesized in the emergence of a battle between two opposing trends: "moving towards the political center by moderating moral positions or those related to the Welfare State, without necessarily renouncing certain fundamental premises; or circumscribing the defense of the right doctrinal core (economically liberal and morally conservative), becoming less likely to build a cultural majority in the 21st century" (Alenda 2020, 27). Interestingly, Alenda argues that those in favor of each of these two opposing trends (moderation versus defense of the core doctrine) are trying to distance themselves from the traditional right wing and therefore seek to build new right-wing forces.

Methodologically, the five books under review adopt very different approaches. Weyland's monograph employs comparative historical analysis and relies on qualitative investigation, particularly archival and field research. By examining an

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impressive amount of empirical material—such as secondary literature, primary sources, oral history transcripts, and interviews with leading politicians—he employs process tracing to disentangle the complex interplay of revolutionary diffusion and reactionary counterdiffusion that occurred in Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s. As he rightly points out, "this methodological approach is unusual in diffusion studies, where statistical investigations predominate," despite the fact that they "have inherent difficulties modeling complex interactions and multiple paths" (Weyland, 15–16). The methodological approach is not only convincing but also effective for addressing the question at stake, so that—as I will argue later—scholars interested in rethinking the right in Latin America should take note of this for future investigations that could analyze the diffusion of right-wing ideas both from other places to Latin America and within Latin America.

Loxton also relies on comparative historical analysis. He develops a very thoughtful research design, centered on two successful case studies of conservative party building (Chile's UDI and El Salvador's ARENA) and two failed case studies of conservative party building (Argentina's UCEDE and Guatemala's PAN). Therefore, the comparative angle of the book relies on the examination of cases in both Central America and South America—a very welcome development, since scholars usually look separately at each of these subregions of the continent. Archival material, elite interviews with party leaders, national press records, and a review of secondary literature are part of the empirical evidence Loxton employs to undertake a careful qualitative analysis to demonstrate the plausibility of his theoretical framework on effective conservative party building during the third wave of democratization in Latin America.

Because the other three books are single case studies, they adopt different methodological approaches, which center less on the supply of comparative evidence and more on the provision of detailed information useful for understanding the current state and future prospects of the right in Brazil and Chile. It is worth noting that Alenda's book is an edited volume focusing on the Chilean right, which includes chapters that employ different methodological tools. Nevertheless, several chapters make use of a unique survey of almost seven hundred leading cadres of the main right-wing forces of the country. This is a carefully crafted elite survey that offers novel and interesting data to examine similarities and differences between key personnel working for the right in contemporary Chile. Some information is also given about those who vote for or identify with right-wing forces, but the book puts much more emphasis on the characteristics and ideas of right-wing actors.

The two books on Brazil are case studies that employ different, and to a certain extent, complementary methodologies. Lapper is a connoisseur of Brazil who relies on secondary literature, conversations with national and international experts, newspaper articles, and his own experience in the country to provide a compelling account about who Bolsonaro is, why he was able to achieve office, and the challenges ahead for both his government and the country. Rocha et al.'s main empirical material consists of the discourses developed by the right-wing actors behind the emergence of Bolsonaro,

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whom they understand as "counterpublics" that, by providing alternative explanations for the problems affecting the country and the solutions needed, effectively altered the dominant public sphere, paving the way for the emergence of a new kind of right-wing project that is putting Brazilian democracy under serious stress.

Main Arguments and Findings

The five books under scrutiny develop interesting arguments and provide rich empirical findings about the right in Latin America. Because of their different methodological approaches, analytical perspectives, and comparative scope, they can be seen as complementary contributions that together paint a better picture of the past, present, and future of right-wing politics in the region. Therefore, a summary of the key ideas advanced in each of these books is useful.

Unlike most Latin American countries, since the transition to democracy in 1989, Chile has seen the consolidation of electorally successful right-wing political parties. In effect, Chilean right-wing parties have not only managed to remain united over time under the same electoral coalition for local and national elections but have also won executive power on two occasions: the 2009 and 2017 presidential elections, both times under the leadership of Sebastián Piñera. However, we have very limited knowledge about the right in contemporary Chile, and Alenda's book seeks to address this research gap, especially by providing empirical evidence about the main cadres of the different right-wing parties that supported Piñera's second administration (2018–22). Thanks to the realization of a novel elite survey—undertaken in 2015 and 2016—of about seven hundred cadres of the right-wing forces of the country, Alenda identifies three different ideological strands within the Chilean right today.

> One additional contribution of this project lies in understanding the new center-right by distinguishing three strands . . . . Therefore, it is possible to speak about a subsidiary strand that is the direct heir of the liberal-Catholic confluence of the dictatorship; a caring strand, mainly related to the social-Christian and conservative tradition; and a last strand of liberal-orthodox roots, which was reconfigured during the Chilean dictatorship, and that we call the ultra-liberal. (Alenda 2020, 101).

The evidence reveals that the biggest strand is the subsidiary (55.5 percent of the sample), followed by the caring strand (31.5 percent of the sample), and last the ultraliberal strand (13 percent of the sample). Interestingly, these three ideological strands have similar weights within all right-wing parties and, generally speaking, are not substantively distinguished by individual characteristics, such as religiosity, age, and gender of the leaders. What, then, are the key differences between the cadres of the right-wing parties of the country? Cultural issues related to the rights of sexual minorities and abortion, as well as the necessity of drafting a new constitution, are the main lines of conflict. Moreover, this empirical material reveals that the cadres that supported Piñera's second administration are not homogeneous but are divided into a conservative and a moderate group. In a

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prophetic way, the study argues that this heterogeneity of the right-wing coalition could become a source of harsh internal tensions in the near future.

What about the two books on Brazil? It is important to highlight that those interested in the right in contemporary Latin America are paying special attention to Brazil for an obvious reason: the 2018 electoral triumph of Bolsonaro represents not only the defeat of the leftist Workers' Party, which was in government for more than 15 years, but also the clearest Latin American example of the emergence of what Hunter and Power (2019) have accurately described as an "illiberal backlash" akin to the projects pursued by the far right around the world today (e.g., Miller-Idriss 2020; Mudde 2019). Bolsonaro's rise indeed took most academics and practitioners by surprise, since far right candidates have been anything but electorally successful in Latin America in recent years (on this topic, see Zanotti and Roberts 2021). Consequently, it is worth exploring the Brazilian case in more detail, particularly to clarify if the coming into power of someone like Bolsonaro is an aberration in the region or a possible future for (many) other Latin American countries. The two books under consideration offer interesting and complementary explanations of this issue.

Lapper's monograph presents a detailed account of Jair Bolsonaro's ascension to power, which should be thought of as a very peculiar phenomenon that is difficult to replicate across the Latin American region. The main reason for this is that Brazil experienced a very unusual chain of events—a "perfect storm"—that paved the way for the electoral success of a far right leader. According to Lapper, three factors came together to make this possible.

> First, the country's recession between 2014 and 2016 was the worst in its modern history (although the current COVID-related downturn may well turn out to be more severe) . . . . Second, the economic deterioration coincided with a highly publicized scandal that exposed the corrupt relationship between state-owned companies, politicians and private construction companies. Corruption in Brazil was not new, but never before had it become so visible to the public . . . . The third issue that triggered Bolsonaro's brand of populism was the increase in violent crime, which became the subject of obsessive interest in the press and on social media. (Lapper, 10–11).

Thus, the book provides an informative account of who Jair Bolsonaro is and how he was able to come to power. Particularly insightful is the depiction of Bolsonaro's career, first in the military, later in different political parties, and then as the leader of an array of constituencies who actively support his populist radical right project. Moreover, Lapper pays special attention to the formation of a broad conservative alliance, which can be summarized as the coalition of the "three Bs": beef, Bible, and bullets—the title of the monograph. By giving detailed information on each of these different groups and their interaction, the author develops not only a powerful explanation for the rise of Bolsonaro but also a persuasive depiction of why the sustainability of this coalition is not a given. Because the beef, bullet, and Bible lobbies neither always nor automatically pursue the same purposes, keeping this conservative alliance pleased is a difficult endeavor.

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The Bolsonaro Paradox can be seen as a nice complement, since this book gives a broad perspective on the right in Brazil. It includes a description of the trajectories of right-wing forces in the country since the 1940s, the role the internet has played in the rise of an alternative public sphere that articulates ultraliberal ideas, and the institutionalization of these extreme right-wing counterpublics thanks to the formation of study groups, new think tanks, and nascent alternative political parties. Thus *The Bolsonaro Paradox* develops an interesting argument to better understand that the formation of a far right project in Brazil and its coming into power should not be thought of as an abrupt but rather a gradual phenomenon, which started in the 2000s with the development of a set of different ideas, articulated by right-wing actors at odds with the progressive reforms—in both cultural and economic terms—implemented by the governments of the Workers' Party. Seen in this light, even though the authors claim that Bolsonaro and Bolsanarismo are quite unique, they offer a theoretical framework that could be employed in other Latin American countries to examine the extent to which a right-wing alternative public sphere is emerging, particularly in those places where progressive ideas have become dominant in the last decade.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this book lies in the depiction of a sort of parallel universe subscribed to by those elites and citizens behind Bolsonaro's project. They participate in echo chambers that are quite resistant to the consensus in the public debate from experts and non-Bolsonarist actors, something that Rocha et al. demonstrate well by highlighting "the ability of right-wing and far-right actors to continue presenting themselves as anti-system even after they occupy central positions of power" (146). Given that Bolsonaro and his supporters perceive and present themselves as fighters against an establishment that is at odds with the silent majority, they can occupy a central position in institutional politics and at the same time claim that they cannot govern effectively because this establishment is allegedly controlling the system.

In line with the literature on the third wave of democratization in Latin America, Loxton argues that the region has seen the formation of many different parties but very few of them have been able to endure. Therefore, the main puzzle he wants to address is the following: Why did some new conservative parties in Latin America since the third wave become electorally significant and enduring political actors, while most did not? (4). To answer this question, Loxton's book advances not only clear concepts and operationalizations but also a powerful theoretical framework that emphasizes the crucial role of two causal variables behind the success of new conservative parties in the region: authoritarian inheritance and counterrevolutionary struggle. While the former provides a party-voter linkage and territorial organization, the latter works as a source of cohesion.

The author does an excellent job explaining in detail the different components of the theoretical framework and providing more than ample empirical evidence to probe its validity. Interestingly, the final chapter of the book examines variation in conservative party building in contemporary Latin America more broadly, whereby the plausibility of the overall argument is reinforced. Loxton claims that "when a

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conservative party has roots in dictatorship, but does *not* emerge from counterrevolutionary struggle, it may perform strongly for a time but eventually face problems of cohesion that put its longer-term prospects in jeopardy" (188, italics in original). He discusses four potential alternative paths to conservative party building: opposition to authoritarian regimes, corporation-based parties, the subnational strategy, and conservative fusion. In summary, Loxton's monograph is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding why successful conservative parties are so scarce in Latin America and how to theorize the potential appearance of new right-wing parties that can endure in the region.

Weyland's book is, to a certain extent, the logical continuation of his previous work (Weyland 2014), in which he draws on cognitive-psychological insights about the inferential heuristics that people commonly apply to analyze three waves of political regime contention in Europe and Latin America. However, the focus is different now: he looks at the proliferation of autocracy during the 1960s and 1970s across Latin American societies. As he rightly points out, this kind of research is extremely relevant, since scholars tend to study waves of democratization rather than waves of autocratization, so that we have limited knowledge about the propagation of reactionary rule. To address this research gap, Weyland maintains that interest-based learning, operating under bounded rationality, is the main explanatory variable.

> By applying cognitive heuristics and acting out of disproportionate loss aversion, sociopolitical elites, common people, and their organizations overreacted to perceived revolutionary challenges to their core interests; driven by excessive fear, they installed and supported repressive authoritarian rule to protect order and hierarchy. Thus, the central mechanism that produced the proliferation of autocratic regimes was a backlash effect. Left-wing efforts to spread revolution, inspired by the epic Cuban Revolution of 1959, prompted determined counterrevolution, which forcefully sought to immunize the region against the communist virus. (5)

The argument advanced is quite persuasive, demonstrating that the very attempt to reproduce a left-wing revolutionary process paved the way for a backlash effect. In accordance with research showing the key role of elites in the sustainability of democracy (e.g., Bermeo 2003; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014; Teorell 2010), Weyland provides rich empirical evidence to show that "powerful status quo defenders ... tended to overestimate the danger emanating from the radical left and to fear enormous losses" (65). With the aim of guaranteeing their own safety, these elites ended up endorsing autocratic rule as the only possible to way to combat the communist threat. Despite the fact that the insurgencies that imitated the Cuban Revolution were pretty unsuccessful, acute loss aversion prevailed among elites, and therefore they pushed for the installation of dictatorships across the region.

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Future Research Agenda

In contrast to the left, the right is and remains understudied in Latin America. As Loxton emphasizes in his book, this can be partially explained by the fact that since the transition to democracy in the 1980s, right-wing forces have not been exceptionally electorally successful in the region. However, this does not mean that right-wing actors are irrelevant or invisible, as they can use an array of different strategies—the electoral strategy one among several—to defend their ideas and interests (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 2021). Fortunately, the books under review here reveal that scholars are gradually paying more attention to the right in the region. This a very welcome development, since right-wing forces of different kinds are becoming more competitive, something exemplified by the emergence of populist radical right figures, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and José Antonio Kast in Chile, as well as the electoral victories of moderate right-wingers, such as Mauricio Macri in Argentina and Sebastián Piñera in Chile. Although there is no doubt that the books discussed here make an important contribution to the field, more research is needed to better understand the ideological characteristics, electoral potential, and political influence of the right across the region. To close this review essay, I suggest four avenues of future research, which, to a certain extent, are indirectly explored by some of the authors discussed here.

First, we need better and clearer conceptualizations of right-wing politics. The books reviewed here show that there is no agreement on the term. However, without some shared understandings of what it means, it is almost impossible to generate cumulative knowledge about "the right." Following Sartori's 1970 seminal work, the best way ahead consists in working with a minimal definition that allows identifying the least common denominator of all right-wing forces in the region and subsequently recognizing additional attributes that are useful for distinguishing different kinds of right-wing forces among them (e.g., mainstream right and extreme right). Reviewing comparative research on the right from advanced democracies (e.g., Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Gidron and Ziblatt 2019; Mudde 2019) could be a good starting point to examine if conceptualizations from abroad can be employed and adapted to analyze the Latin American context.

Second, right-wing actors do not operate in a vacuum. Since they are aware of developments in neighboring countries and world regions, they can try to import and test foreign ideas in their own contexts. For instance, extant research shows that the far right has become a global phenomenon (e.g., Miller-Idriss 2020; Mudde 2019), so it is worth exploring the extent to which the latter is gaining ground in Latin America, either by the emergence of new political forces or the transformation of existing ones. In this regard, Weyland's book is particularly interesting: it provides analytical and methodological tools to examine if left-wing efforts to spread radical projects such as Chavismo in Venezuela are sowing the seeds of an aggressive right-wing backlash, which could employ the frames and tactics that the far right is advancing at the global level.

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Third, despite the rich empirical evidence about the right in Latin America provided in the books reviewed here, they pay almost no attention to the demand side of right-wing politics in the region. Future studies would do well to offer an overview of the sociodemographic and sociopolitical characteristics of those who support right-wing forces there. At the same time, it would be important to develop knowledge about who are the citizens demanding classic tropes associated with the right, such as conservative positions on moral issues, defense of free market policies, opposition to multiculturalism, and promotion of tough measures to fight crime. In short, we need more information about the voters who favor right-wing ideas and parties in Latin America.

Fourth, there is consensus that the wave of left-wing electoral successes that characterized the region in the 2000s is over. Yet there is no clarity that we are witnessing a turn to the right across the region, or rather a process of power alternation generated by the punishment of incumbents—mostly on the left of center—in the last decade-and-a-half (e.g., Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021). To address this question, future investigations should try to analyze if and where one can observe a structural ideological realignment toward right-wing positions that could pave the way for the consolidation and hegemony of (new) right political actors in Latin America.

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