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A Postcolonial Puerto Rico?

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The Venezuelan Exodus

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“Hurricane Maria laid bare the painful reality that Puerto Rico is an inconsequential American territory inhabited by second-class US citizens.”

Hurricane Maria’s Aftermath: Redefining Puerto Rico’s Colonial Status?

PEDRO CABÁN

Hurricane Maria was a singular event in Puerto Rico’s history. The storm struck on September 20, 2017, and left unparalleled devastation in its wake. At least 2,975 people lost their lives in the storm and its aftermath. Property damage and lost economic output exceeded \$95 billion. The Trump administration’s emergency and recovery response was widely criticized as inadequate and mismanaged. Maria shattered many Puerto Ricans’ belief that the United States would never allow a humanitarian crisis to imperil the lives of its citizens.

The desultory response to the disaster has revived a lingering debate over the viability of Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status. It was a sobering reminder that Puerto Rico is not equal to the member states of the union. In fact, nothing has changed since 1901, when the Supreme Court ruled that Puerto Rico was merely “a territory appurtenant and belonging to the United States, but not part of the United States.” Hurricane Maria laid bare the painful reality that Puerto Rico is an inconsequential American territory inhabited by second-class US citizens.

From its seizure by the United States in 1898 in the Spanish-American War until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Puerto Rico was a valuable strategic asset and a highly profitable investment site for US corporate capital. However, during the past quarter-century Puerto Rico has seen its status as America’s shining star in the Caribbean slowly dim. The US Navy shuttered its sprawling

base there over two decades ago after belatedly acknowledging that it had become an anachronistic military asset unsuitable for training for modern warfare. Similarly, multinational corporations that once extracted great profits from Puerto Rico have essentially abandoned it.

Globalization and a reconceptualization of US strategic interests in a transformed geopolitical environment have had a devastating impact on the once prized territory. Through no fault of its own, Puerto Rico is no longer regarded as an advantageous possession by the United States. This change in Puerto Rico’s status in the American empire ultimately made the island particularly vulnerable to Maria’s destructive force.

ECONOMIC SHOCKS

Hurricane Maria was the culmination of a series of shocks that hit Puerto Rico over the past decade and a half—a ruinous trifecta of economic crises. The first was set in motion in 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed legislation phasing out Section 936, a provision of the US tax code that granted an exemption for corporate income from operations in Puerto Rico. When the tax incentive expired in 2006, corporations abandoned the island and manufacturing employment plummeted.

In 2004, the Navy closed the sprawling Roosevelt Roads military complex. Thousands of jobs were lost, and the millions of dollars the Pentagon spent on construction and base operations stopped flowing into the local economy. Demilitarization aggravated the already precarious economic situation caused by the termination of Section 936. Both of these developments propelled Puerto Rico

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into a depression starting in 2006. For 11 of the past 12 years, the island has endured negative growth rates.

With tax revenue depleted by the depression, successive Puerto Rican governments increased their reliance on municipal bonds to balance the budget and pay for essential public services, even as they sought to control costs by imposing austerity. Out-migration increased markedly as the economic crisis wore on, particularly among skilled and educated workers. The exodus further reduced the tax base.

As investment capital dried up, government officials worked with Wall Street financial firms to aggressively market bond issues. Puerto Rico quickly amassed a staggering debt, which tripled from \$25 billion in 2000 to \$74 billion by 2016. The government also had unfunded public-employee pension obligations of nearly \$50 billion. Almost half the bond debt was acquired during the tenures of governors Luis Fortuño (2009–13) of the New Progressive Party, which advocates statehood, and Alejandro García Padilla (2013–17) of the Popular Democratic Party, which favors maintaining commonwealth status.

On June 29, 2015, García Padilla shocked the bond market when he announced that Puerto Rico lacked the financial resources to meet its debt obligations. In April 2016, he warned that the island's fiscal situation was "more dire than at any other point in its history" and it might be forced to choose between honoring its commitments to bondholders and continuing to provide residents with essential services. Congress acted quickly— to protect the bondholders.

On July 1, 2016, President Barack Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). The act established the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), known in Puerto Rico as *la junta*. The law gives the board, whose members are appointed by Congress and the president, broad powers over the local government's fiscal and economic policies.

The FOMB has the authority to order the government to implement its recommendations. It can block the enforcement or execution of certain contracts, executive orders, and "any territorial law or regulation that is inconsistent with [PROMESA] or fiscal reform plans." The junta's seizure of the Puer-

to Rican government's fiscal powers was the third shock that befell the island before Hurricane Maria.

Paul Ryan, then the speaker of the US House of Representatives and one of the architects of PROMESA, justified the legislation by asserting that Puerto Rico "paved the way for this disaster with decades of irresponsible policies like overspending and fiscal mismanagement."

Likewise, President Donald Trump has regularly disparaged Puerto Rican politicians as incompetent and corrupt, a theme he has returned to since the hurricane. On October 23, 2018, he claimed that "inept politicians are trying to use . . . disaster funding to pay off other obligations."

ERODING INFRASTRUCTURE

Puerto Ricans were stunned by the severity of the devastation that Hurricane Maria left in its wake. But the great loss of life and massive destruction cannot be explained solely by Maria's wrath. Puerto Rico was woefully unprepared to protect itself from the fearsome power of a Category 4 hurricane. Well before Maria, its physical and human infrastructure was in a state of severe disrepair. For over a decade, the government and public corporations curtailed spending for maintenance of critical systems, particularly the electrical grid.

In 2009, the Fortuño administration pushed through the draconian Special Act to Declare a State of Fiscal Emergency in an effort to reduce the mounting budget deficit and prevent further deterioration of its credit rating. The measure was Puerto Rico's first attempt to impose a severe neoliberal austerity program in order to shrink the state bureaucracy. Government funding was slashed by 20 percent. Tens of thousands of public employees were dismissed, wages were frozen, union contracts were suspended, and worker benefits were curtailed. Many Puerto Ricans took part in demonstrations against Fortuño's regressive policies.

García Padilla followed suit, cutting spending on physical infrastructure as well as the already stressed human infrastructure: education, health and hospitals, sanitation, and nutrition services. He increased the sales tax and imposed a new tax on services which had a disproportionate impact on the working and middle classes. About 50 percent of the revenue from these taxes was used to

*Puerto Rico has been
undergoing systemic
depopulation.*

service the debt. The government also cut investments in roads, water-treatment facilities, public schools, and other critical infrastructure from \$2.4 billion in 2012 to \$906 million in 2017. The university budget was slashed by 20 percent.

Although the combined Fortuño and García Padilla austerity measures failed to reduce the debt, they increased unemployment, income inequality, and poverty while reducing public services for the most vulnerable members of society. After years of systematically defunding its physical and human infrastructure, Puerto Rico was highly vulnerable to a catastrophic storm like Hurricane Maria.

A COLONIAL ECONOMY

On the surface, Puerto Rico may have appeared to be a modern Caribbean society that could withstand and recover quickly from a major hurricane. But Maria ripped off the thin veneer of modernity and exposed the fault lines in contemporary colonialism.

For over 120 years, Congress has denied Puerto Rico self-rule and the authority to control its political economy. Since Puerto Rico is prohibited by the United States from filing for relief under Chapter 9 of the federal bankruptcy code (which is intended for municipalities), it enacted its own bankruptcy law in 2014. The bondholders sued Puerto Rico, and the US Supreme Court sided with them in 2016, ruling that federal law superseded the Puerto Rican bankruptcy law. However, the PROMESA bill contains a provision (Title III) that allows the FOMB to file a petition for debt restructuring in federal court on behalf of Puerto Rico.

The limited fiscal autonomy that Congress had unofficially conferred in 1952 was stripped away by PROMESA. Since it is not sovereign, Puerto Rico cannot join the International Monetary Fund, enter into international treaties, or obtain emergency lending or development funds from multilateral lending institutions.

Because Puerto Rico has no voting member in the US Congress, the federal government enacts policies that literally have life-or-death consequences for Puerto Ricans without their consent. This form of colonialism has saddled Puerto Rico with an economy that is on life support, dependent on continuous infusions of American corporate capital and federal transfers.

In 1947, Puerto Rico initiated a successful “industrialization by invitation” development program, dubbed Operation Bootstrap, which attracted hundreds of US-owned factories to the island.

In order to sustain the confidence of investors, the Puerto Rican government had to prioritize corporate profitability. Acting through self-financed state-owned corporations, it established a modern infrastructure that offered private firms subsidized services vital to their operations.

Between 1947 and 1963, the island's annual GDP growth rate was 6.6 percent, which exceeded that of the United States. The economy continued to grow rapidly over the next decade, increasing at an average annual rate of 7.7 percent from 1964 through 1973, and reaching an all-time high of 13.8 percent in 1971.

During the Cold War, Puerto Rico was portrayed as an “economic miracle” and used in a global ideological campaign against communism and the nonaligned movement. The territory was held up as proof positive that small, labor-abundant, open economies could develop industrially under American tutelage. However, as the historian Gordon Lewis has pointed out, Puerto Rico's industrialization was the result of “artificial advantages” that flowed from its colonial status.

Its growth was possible because corporations investing in Puerto Rico were beneficiaries of preferential federal tax legislation, as well as low wages, industrial subsidies and incentives, and other inducements including tax exemptions granted by the Puerto Rican government. An array of other “artificial advantages” accruing to Puerto Rico because of its status as a colony facilitated growth, such as the common currency and customs system, unrestricted emigration to the United States, and billions of dollars in federal transfers: Medicaid, Social Security, and veterans pensions, direct aid (such as nutrition assistance), and subsidies for the Puerto Rican administration's operations.

Unemployment was kept at tolerable levels because robust labor markets in the United States attracted Puerto Rican workers. The government sponsored this migration. During the “Great Migration” of 1950–60, 470,000 Puerto Ricans left the island.

However, the rapid pace of postwar economic growth could not be sustained. Growth plummeted to 1.7 percent annually during the 1973–77 recession. By the mid-1970s, Puerto Rico was no longer an internationally competitive site for American manufacturing capital. Many labor-intensive firms relocated to newly industrializing countries where they could enjoy higher profit margins thanks to much lower wages.

The removal of surplus population through emigration, along with federal transfers and subsidies, prevented Puerto Rico's social fabric from unraveling and allowed local elites to maintain the fiction that they were effectively managing the economy. Yet it was not only successive local administrations that were reluctant to extricate the island from a flawed development model. The federal government was unwilling to grant Puerto Rico the autonomy it needed to formulate alternative approaches.

But Puerto Rico was developing into a political embarrassment for the United States. The increasing unemployment and poverty on the island, the growing exodus of Puerto Ricans, and heightened political agitation over economic and social inequalities revealed deep problems in the once valued colony. The *New York Times* commented in 1976 that the "heady days of 'Operation Bootstrap,' when Puerto Rico was hailed as a model for developing small countries, are definitely over."

During this period of economic decline and political tension, Congress enacted Section 936 in 1976 to promote investment by different industrial sectors. The provision induced capital-intensive companies to invest in Puerto Rico by allowing them to retain profits free of federal taxes. Manufacturers of electronics, medical devices, and particularly pharmaceuticals took advantage of the tax exemption and flocked to the island. However, these heavily capitalized firms had a marginal impact on manufacturing employment since they essentially replaced the more labor-intensive firms that had abandoned Puerto Rico.

In series of reports starting in 1978, the US Treasury Department concluded that the tax provision was depriving the federal government of billions of dollars in tax revenue, while the firms benefiting from the incentive failed to generate sufficient employment to justify their gains. Twenty years after Section 936 was enacted, Clinton ordered a 10-year phaseout of the law. Investments in manufacturing dwindled.

The termination of Section 936 signaled the beginning of the end of Puerto Rico's manufacturing-based economy and forced the government to rely on debt financing to generate the revenue it desperately needed to sustain its operations. But non-stop borrowing and subsequent defaults prompted the credit-rating agencies to steadily downgrade Puerto Rican bonds until the island government was locked out of the credit markets. Its economic fate would be decided by the FOMB.

DRACONIAN DOWNSIZING

In October 2018, more than a year after Maria, the FOMB released a fiscal plan to put Puerto Rico on the path to financial solvency. The junta will downsize the public bureaucracy, close and consolidate hospitals, privatize public corporations, eliminate worker-protection legislation, and make other changes that will transform Puerto Rico's economy and society.

According to the FOMB, "increasing labor force participation and job creation may be the single most important reform for long-term economic well-being in Puerto Rico." Law 80, which imposes penalties on employers that dismiss workers without cause, is anathema to the junta. To increase the workforce, the junta asserts that Puerto Rico will need to become an "at-will employment" jurisdiction.

The FOMB also maintains that generous social welfare benefits contribute to the low labor participation rate, since "working in the informal sector and collecting transfer benefits" can "result in higher effective income than working in the formal sector." Thus, the junta proposes welfare reforms that will reward "citizens who participate in the formal economy." The fiscal plan also calls for a 10-percent cut in the public pension system and a 30-percent cut in funding for public services.

The labor-market reforms proposed in this plan are so unpopular that the legislature, controlled by the pro-statehood party, has refused to approve enabling legislation. However, in October the FOMB certified the fiscal plan over the opposition of Governor Ricardo Rosello. "This is not a fiscal plan for economic development, this is an austerity plan," Rosello complained. While he conceded that the plan will generate savings, Rosello said that the "money will be available to bondholders, but to the detriment of the most vulnerable of our people. This is simply unfair."

One key institution targeted in the junta's austerity drive is the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), an island-wide, 11-campus system with nearly 60,000 students. The FOMB's plan for the university will cut its allocation of government funding by \$211 million, about a third of its budget. The system will be consolidated into fewer campuses, tuition doubled, fees increased, and student enrollment cut. The teaching staff will be reduced as well.

These cuts will gut the university system, erode its ability to conduct research, and result in fewer graduates prepared to teach in the public schools

and work in government agencies or business management. By doubling tuition, the junta will radically diminish the university's capacity to continue serving as one of the key channels of upward social mobility for Puerto Rico's poor.

The assault on the university system offers an insight into the FOMB's plans for Puerto Rico's economy, particularly its human capital needs. UPR educates the vast majority of the island's public-sector employees, including health professionals. The FOMB envisions a streamlined or "right-sized" state that will provide fewer public services, an economy in which public corporations are dismantled or privatized, and a low-wage private sector that will need far fewer educated workers for management positions.

Three successive governments have reduced public-sector employment and reformed labor laws to decrease wages and weaken job protections. Even under the best-case scenario, Puerto Rico will experience negative growth for at least several more years, so employment prospects for educated workers are dim.

The situation for Puerto Ricans will deteriorate further when federal transfers are reduced in five years and hurricane-related funding is exhausted. The austerity measures will lead to further emigration of the most skilled and valued workers.

The FOMB is restructuring capitalist development in the colony as it conducts an experiment in social engineering. Whatever economic model lies in Puerto Rico's future, it will be based on extracting more value from a vulnerable labor force. Acting as the federal government's fiscal enforcement agent, the junta's task is to create a new technocratic state that will ensure Puerto Rico subsidizes its continued colonial subordination. The costs of maintaining the colony must be borne by its inhabitants.

Although many economists argue that the FOMB's fiscal plan will not generate economic growth for some time, it is virtually certain that it will remain in place until a settlement has been reached with the hedge funds and institutional investors that hold most of Puerto Rico's debt. But forcibly aligning the labor market to the needs of US business interests, as the government reduces vital public services, is politically risky and can generate resistance. The proposed changes are so drastic that any democratically elected govern-

ment that implements them will lose legitimacy and popular support.

EXODUS

Hurricane Maria accelerated the exodus of Puerto Ricans that began in 2004 when the economy started to contract and the government began dismissing thousands of public-sector employees. After 2010, as the US economy recovered from the Great Recession, out-migration intensified. Economic and social conditions had become unbearable for many Puerto Ricans mired in joblessness and poverty, with a dilapidated infrastructure and rapidly deteriorating public health-care and school systems. In April 2010, the official unemployment rate was just shy of 17 percent, and almost half the population was living in poverty.

During the past decade and a half, the numbers of Puerto Ricans migrating to the United States exceeded the numbers that left during the "Great Migration" of the 1950s. The Pew Foundation has reported that between 2005 and 2015, about 446,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland. By 2015, the population had declined by more than 10 percent from its peak of 3.8 million in 2004.

An estimated 130,000 people, almost 4 percent of the population, migrated to the mainland between July 2017 and July 2018, with the largest numbers leaving in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The Center for Puerto Rican Studies estimates that between 2017 and 2019, Puerto Rico may lose 14 percent of its population, about 470,000 people.

For the first time in its history, Puerto Rico has been undergoing systemic depopulation. Currently, more Puerto Ricans live in the United States (5.4 million) than in Puerto Rico (3.2 million), and the growth of the US resident population will easily outpace that of the island. Puerto Ricans are leaving because they envision a dystopian future for their homeland.

The social and economic impact of the post-Maria exodus on Puerto Rico's future economic growth will be serious. College-educated and skilled Puerto Ricans are leaving in unprecedented numbers. A rising death rate among an older age distribution together with a declining fertility rate will further shrink the population. There is little prospect for a sustainable economic recovery given the continued depletion of the island's hu-

*The idea that Puerto Ricans
are a divided nation has
been debunked.*

man capital: its teachers, doctors and health care professionals, engineers and technicians, and experienced managers.

The FOMB's policies further encourage out-migration. Many of the measures enacted by both the junta and the local government create oppressive labor-market conditions that will spur young people to leave the island. The huge contraction of the public-sector workforce has reduced employment opportunities. The attack on UPR and the public education system discourages young families from staying in Puerto Rico. In short, a ruthless austerity regime has been imposed to achieve fiscal solvency and to promote the migration of Puerto Ricans who will have no role in the restructured economy envisioned by the junta.

TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

The Rosello administration was roundly criticized for failing to prepare for Hurricane Maria and for its incompetence in staging the emergency response. However, the strongest criticisms were directed at the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), which was excoriated for its handling of the crisis and held responsible for hundreds of deaths. Investigations conducted by the Government Accounting Office, FEMA itself, and independent agencies concluded that FEMA's response ranged from incompetent to negligent. (Trump was an exception, congratulating FEMA for doing "an unappreciated great job.")

By contrast, when Hurricane Harvey hit the Houston area a month before Maria struck Puerto Rico, FEMA had quickly deployed more personnel and allocated greater resources to Texas. Three months after Maria, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that it was "deeply dismayed by the United States' lack of response to effectively protect the human rights of the Puerto Rican people." When criticized for the federal government's bungled emergency relief effort, Trump blamed Puerto Ricans, tweeting: "They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort."

In fact, rather than waiting for government assistance, Puerto Ricans reacted quickly. Throughout the island, residents organized relief and recovery campaigns. They established self-managed Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (Mutual Aid Centers or

CAMs) that pooled resources and raised money to meet the urgent need for food, water, and medical supplies and for recovery and rebuilding. Faced with what organizers called "the collapse of the state and the abuses of FEMA in post-Maria Puerto Rico," they also set up "discussion spaces to generate critical thinking and the understanding that we are facing a political disaster that is even more dangerous than the natural disaster." Technologically savvy Puerto Ricans established the Red de Apoyo Mutuo (Network for Mutual Assistance) to serve as an independent platform for the CAMs and diaspora organizations to "communicate, collaborate, and coordinate their decentralized activities."

Puerto Ricans in the United States organized a nationwide emergency assistance campaign to help the people on the devastated island as soon as the hurricane struck. Community-based advocacy organizations raised substantial donations and collected vital supplies for shipment to the island. Puerto Ricans in the diaspora responded more immediately and effectively to the crisis than the federal government did.

This post-Maria community response has been groundbreaking in its scale and also because it was organized outside the spaces controlled by the local government and federal agencies operating in Puerto Rico. The unmediated and spontaneous engagement between Puerto Ricans on the mainland and on the island may also be a bellwether of a new form of anticolonial activism. The closer connection between the diaspora and the colony made possible by new social media technologies has transformed the scale and frequency of Puerto Rican transnational interaction.

REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

The flow of people, knowledge, and supplies managed by autonomous organizations was focused on hurricane-recovery efforts, but also offers a glimpse of a more sustainable and resilient Puerto Rico with diminished reliance on US capital and the federal government. This novel form of cultural politics is quickly dismantling the artificial divisions that historically have been manufactured by Puerto Rico's political leadership to segregate *boricuas* residing in the United States from those on the island.

The idea that Puerto Ricans are a divided nation, and that they constitute two linguistically and

*Maria exposed
the fault lines in
contemporary colonialism.*

culturally separate peoples, was always questionable—but now it has been debunked. Nowhere is the fallacy of a divided nation more evident than in the way the diaspora community has embraced the hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans who have sought refuge and a new life in United States. Hurricane Maria revealed that Puerto Ricans in the colony and in the diaspora embrace a common national identity. Puerto Rican identity is defined by distinctive cultural and linguistic attributes and by the shared history of a colonized and racialized people.

However, the current crisis has generated unprecedented migration, a virtually complete collapse of the local economy, and harsh austerity measures that are creating a dystopian level of precarity not experienced since the 1930s. This has led to the realization that the viability of Puerto Rican society and its distinctive way of life is threatened. Growing numbers of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and on the island believe that the old colonial arrangement is untenable. A new political arrangement with the United States is necessary—one that acknowledges Puerto Rican national identity as unbounded by geography.

But colonialism denies the residents of Puerto Rico the political means to redefine the terms of their association with the United States and shape the future of their island nation. The diaspora community, dispersed throughout the United

States, also lacks the political power to shift federal policy.

Puerto Ricans migrate between one identity as colonized subjects, with its embedded tropes of inferiority, and another racialized identity that is denigrated and marginalized in the American white-supremacist social order. One of the most persistent colonial representations of Puerto Ricans is that they are a “dependent people” incapable of surviving on their own. But instead of falling into hopelessness and fatalism in the days and months following Maria, Puerto Ricans displayed activism and resilience—refuting this degrading depiction.

Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora are more skeptical now than ever about the statehood and commonwealth parties’ fanciful claims that they alone can persuade the United States to ease its colonial control over Puerto Rico. If Washington chooses to revisit the long-standing colonial formula, it will do so for two reasons. First, Puerto Rico is inconsequential to American economic and geopolitical interests, and too costly to sustain. And second, popular activism, resistance, and self-sufficiency will permanently damage the credibility of the island’s ideologically bankrupt political parties. Hurricane Maria exposed the failings of the current colonial system and has created new space for the people to reimagine Puerto Rico’s political future. ■

“[L]abor-market reintegration is a complex and uneven process for return migrants.”

Return Migration and Social Mobility in Mexico

JACQUELINE MARIA HAGAN AND JOSHUA T. WASSINK

Let's begin with a tale of two migrants. Martin grew up in San Miguel de Allende, a small colonial city and popular tourist destination in the heart of Guanajuato state in central Mexico. Although Martin completed only a few years of formal education, he learned from his uncle and father the craft of designing the aluminum star-shaped lampshades for which local artisans are known. By 1995, he was in his early twenties and Mexico was in the throes of its third financial crisis in a decade. Fearful of being unable to find a stable job outside the family business, Martin said good-bye to his wife and three young children and joined the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who sojourned north each year during the country's great migration of the 1990s and 2000s.

Social Mobility Today

Sixth in a series

The US economy was booming, producing a strong demand for foreign workers—particularly in occupations that Americans were gradually abandoning, such as construction, light manufacturing, and low-wage services. Martin easily found an entry-level job in California's commercial construction industry. Impressed by the initiative Martin demonstrated—showing up early and asking about how to do things—his boss gave him more responsibility and increased his wages. During his 11 years working for the same contractor, Martin rose from general laborer to framer, eventually becoming a master carpenter and earning \$100 a day. He sent most of his earnings home to his wife, who used the money to purchase land and pay for their three children's education.

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During his years working in the United States, Martin acquired technical skills through informal learning, observation, and trial and error. He also learned English by watching television and acquired customer-service skills through interactions with coworkers, management, and clients.

When he returned home in 2003 at the age of 40 to reunite with his wife and children, he opened a small sundries store, but it was unsuccessful. Next, using the skills he acquired in the United States, he started his own taxi service catering to English-speaking tourists. When we last visited Martin in 2018, his daily earnings had climbed to \$100–\$200 a day. He had purchased a Toyota Camry and expanded his business, driving English-speaking tourists in San Miguel de Allende to other places where he guides them through historic sites.

Now consider Victor, who was born in an agricultural community with an established history of out-migration to the United States. Not yet having started a family and in search of adventure and opportunity, he migrated without authorization at the age of 18 to join friends in Chicago. Like Martin, Victor had joined Mexico's great migration and easily found work in the booming US construction industry.

For the next 12 years, Victor became part of a circular migration flow between Mexico and the United States, traveling north to work as a carpenter and framer for a spell and then returning home to spend time with family. During those years he worked various jobs typically held by immigrants in the US construction and hospitality industries. Like Martin, Victor moved up from general laborer to foreman, earning \$35 an hour.

In 2012, still relatively young at 32, Victor had his migration career cut short when his mother became ill and he returned home to care for her.

He found little demand for the sophisticated construction skills he had acquired in the United States. Lacking the financial resources to hire someone with such skills, most residents in Victor's rural town built their own homes with techniques learned from family and friends.

Unwilling to leave his parents and community to look for work in a city where his skills might be recognized and rewarded, and with little savings to launch his own business, Victor found an assembly-line job at a General Motors factory an hour away by bus, earning an entry-level wage of 1,500 pesos per week, the equivalent of approximately \$75. When we visited Victor in 2017, he expressed frustration with the monotony of his job and the limited mobility in an industry that has thrived under the flexible rules of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

HOMeward BOUND

Often referred to as a “nation of emigrants,” Mexico is now experiencing unprecedented return migration. The pull of family, improved economic conditions in Mexico, and increased immigration enforcement in the United States, both at the border and in the interior, has led more and more migrants like Victor and Martin to return home. Between 2005 and 2014, 2.4 million Mexicans returned from the United States, double the figure from the previous decade. In 2017, about 226,000 people were deported from the United States, roughly two-thirds of whom were Mexican.

Net migration between the two countries is now below 0, meaning that more Mexicans leave the United States than enter, preferring to settle back home in Mexico. This is a major change in a historically circular system.

Migration can create new opportunities for Mexican workers who have lived and labored abroad. They can accumulate savings and acquire new technical, social, and language skills that they may then mobilize in the Mexican economy to improve their prospects. Yet as the cases of Victor and Martin show, reintegration into local labor markets is a complex and uneven process that depends on a variety of individual and contextual factors. Ten years of fieldwork—interviewing migrants and observing work sites in Mexico—has shown us how divergent labor market experiences among return migrants result from the mobilization of new resources acquired abroad as well as local economic factors that shape returnees' prospects.

First and foremost, opportunities for economic mobility are shaped by patterns of inequality in highly stratified societies like Mexico. Indeed, most working-class migrants like Victor and Martin left their hometowns in response to limited opportunities there.

Second, migrants' ability to transfer resources acquired abroad when they return depends on the economic and spatial characteristics of their home communities. Urban areas with diverse industrial sectors provide greater opportunities to invest new resources than rural areas.

Third, the types of work that migrants find after returning are frequently determined by the occupations and skills they acquired both before migrating and while abroad. Because women and men generally work in different occupations, their labor market reintegration patterns are often distinct as well.

NARROWING OPPORTUNITIES

Mexico has a small, well-educated professional class at the top and a much larger class of workers with little schooling at the bottom. The latter are concentrated in the informal labor market, a sector that includes a loose conglomeration of independent workers and small firms that are not formally registered, regulated, or taxed. Workers in this sector have no social security, employer health coverage, or other benefits.

Historically, Mexican workers with little schooling were able to achieve economic mobility in one of two ways. They could form small agricultural and manufacturing businesses, which offered an opportunity to maximize returns on skills that less-educated laborers often accumulated in the home and over years of informal sector work. Or they could rise via occupational mobility, through the ranks, which might lead to higher earnings and promotions. These mobility pathways were protected by Mexico's long-running economic policy of import substitution, which insulated domestic enterprises from large multinational competitors. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Mexico experienced robust economic growth under this model, averaging an annual increase of about 6 percent in gross domestic product.

In the 1980s, Mexico began a dramatic move away from import substitution and toward greater global integration and neoliberal economic policies, which culminated in 1994 when NAFTA took effect. This trade agreement ushered in a wave of multinational firms that established manufac-

turing plants throughout Mexico. Exposure to foreign competition undercut domestic entrepreneurs, who were no longer protected by state subsidies. NAFTA also reduced occupational mobility among workers with little schooling, since large manufacturing plants primarily offered low-skilled assembly-line positions with limited opportunities for advancement.

The rapid decline in labor-market mobility for less-educated Mexicans was exacerbated in 1995, when Mexico ended a strategy of currency manipulation and allowed the peso's value to fluctuate on the global market. The inflation rate was 52 percent in 1995, 28 percent in 1996, and remained above 10 percent for the remainder of the 1990s. As the share of good manufacturing jobs eroded and huge multinational assembly plants flattened the occupational structure, real wages entered a free fall.

In an effort to increase economic mobility opportunities among the most disadvantaged, Mexico introduced a series of educational reforms that included the construction of new schools in poor and rural communities. In 1992, the federal government enacted the National Agreement to Modernize Basic Education, which subsidized tuition payments for families with children in lower-secondary school (grades 7–9) and made completion mandatory for all students.

These reforms had unintended consequences. As a growing proportion of Mexican youth from poor to modest backgrounds completed nine years of schooling, matriculation beyond the lower-secondary level became increasingly dependent on parental social class. Without additional help to pay tuition, which is required to enter high school (*la preparatoria*)—including public schools—children of modest means rarely advance beyond the subsidized portion of their education.

Although the reforms extended education for many, they did not ensure an increase in social mobility. As the population's overall educational attainment rose, so did employers' expectations, increasing the credentials required of new employees. Those with some secondary schooling can now qualify for low-wage service jobs or work in one of the many manufacturing plants located in Mexico's expanding industrial parks. Although these jobs offer formal-sector health benefits, pension plans, and some employment stability, they come at the cost of monotonous assembly-line work, low entry wages, and limited opportunities for mobility, as Victor's experience illustrates.

Because of such retrograde conditions, scholars generally view self-employment as the primary upward-mobility pathway available to Mexican workers with little schooling and low levels of social and cultural capital. In the 1990s, even more turned to it in response to the contraction of skilled wage labor.

Successful entrepreneurship among workers with little schooling could disrupt Mexico's entrenched class structure and provide them with increased autonomy and opportunities for higher earnings. However, insufficient savings and inefficient credit markets constrain start-up prospects for most such workers. With limited access to loans, they must set aside a portion of their earnings to accumulate the funds for tools, work space, vehicles, and other necessary capital outlays. These long-term strategies are inherently unstable due to the uncertainty of informal-sector jobs and limited insurance markets for coverage in the event of the kind of unexpected expenses that often destabilize low-income households.

A GREAT MIGRATION

By the mid-1990s, more and more Mexicans were heading north in response to the rapid deterioration of economic opportunities at home. This exodus would become known as Mexico's great migration. From the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, about 400,000 Mexicans entered the United States each year. The number of Mexicans living in the United States nearly tripled, from 4.3 million in 1990 to 11.7 million in 2010, and more than half were unauthorized.

During this period, the profile of Mexican migrants shifted dramatically. The financial crises of the mid-1990s that punctuated the process of economic liberalization in Mexico not only displaced rural workers who had long sojourned in the United States on a temporary basis; they also uprooted small producers and workers in urban areas, especially those in industries vulnerable to sudden contractions, like construction. For them, the United States offered the promise of high wages and upward mobility.

Like Victor and Martin, many of these new migrants remained firmly embedded in Mexico through transnational ties to family and community. These strong ties, coupled with the Great Recession and increased border and workplace enforcement in the United States, triggered the return process for millions of Mexicans from 2005 to the present day.

A growing body of scholarship on Mexican return migration has found that US work experience is associated with higher odds of both upward and downward occupational mobility and entry into self-employment. In other words, labor-market reintegration is a complex and uneven process for return migrants. We argue that these divergent pathways result from three sets of interrelated factors: the resources that migrants are able to transfer and mobilize in their home communities (human and financial capital); migrants' demographic backgrounds (their gender, life-course stage, and education); and the context of return—that is, whether migrants return home voluntarily or due to formal deportation orders.

FINDING A FIT FOR SKILLS

Technical skills learned in the United States can open doors to upward occupational mobility in the Mexican labor market, especially in industries like residential and commercial construction and auto repair, where learning takes place informally, on the job, through social interactions with coworkers, close observation, practice, informal mentoring, and trial and error. This is a matter of interpersonal rather than institutional experience.

The ability to transfer these technical skills is largely shaped by the local characteristics of the communities to which migrants return and the gender of the returnees. Because construction and auto repair are thriving industries in the United States and Mexico, considerable experience abroad can be channeled into comparable industries upon return, but location makes a difference. Residents in poor rural communities lack the resources to hire someone with technical skills, opting instead to fix their own cars and build their own homes.

Such skills are more in demand in urban areas with a diverse industrial base and a large pool of customers. In some cities, wealthy Mexican residents and American expatriates will pay a premium for contractors skilled in American-style home design. Likewise, auto repair provides opportunities for migrants to put new technical skills to use. Mexican mechanics traditionally repair broken parts, but Mexican migrants working in US auto shops often learn to diagnose problems with computers and then order replacement parts. When they return, migrants can mobilize these new tech-

nical skills to gain increased responsibility and potentially higher wages.

We have observed that experience working in the US auto industry can also lead to a job in one of the many auto parts and auto manufacturing plants in or near the León-Celaya-Silao corridor, where General Motors, Mazda, Honda, Pirelli, and other foreign companies have operations. Mobility within these companies is difficult without formal education and expensive in-house training. But when migrants with little schooling are able to demonstrate sophisticated skills learned abroad (having acquired some basic knowledge of electrical engineering and diagnostic technologies), and these skills are recognized by employers, they are sometimes given better-paying positions. Because industries like construction and auto repair are male-dominated, such technical skills are most commonly found among male returnees.

Both men and women return with nontechnical skills, including English-language competence and various social skills. In large cities with sizable service sectors, customer-relations and organizational skills are commonly rewarded, and English-speaking staff are paid more or given more responsibility. English-language skills are also

at a premium in large cities that cater to international business travelers or tourists. In urban settings and tourist destinations, return migrants often find work as waiters, retail clerks, taxi drivers, and guides.

There are few opportunities for migrants to apply their English-language skills and customer-service savvy in rural hamlets and small towns. There is simply no demand for services in these local economies. In some cases, we observed that migrants who returned to rural communities subsequently relocated to urban areas where their skills would be in demand.

Take the case of Abela, a woman who migrated to the United States and was a live-in domestic worker in New York City for several years. When we interviewed her in 2010, she told us that she had left her rural hometown for San Miguel de Allende, where she found a job selling furniture to wealthy American expats, earning twice as much as her coworkers who spoke only Spanish. In a subsequent interview, Abela's employer acknowledged his preference for female return migrants in

Return migrants are more likely than non-emigrants to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

retail work because of their command of English and customer-service skills.

START-UP CAPITAL

Numerous studies have found that return migrants are more likely than non-emigrants to engage in entrepreneurial activities, and that sometimes their micro-enterprises can facilitate local economic development. Savings accumulated abroad are critical to the establishment of new businesses in Mexico, where access to bank loans is limited. Returnees who bring home a few thousand or even a few hundred dollars can start a small business. For migrants like Martin, who financed his taxi service with his US savings, possession of some financial capital is essential to getting a nascent enterprise off the ground.

But savings alone do not guarantee a venture's success. In numerous interviews with self-employed return migrants and work-site observations, we found that the long-term success of a business also relies on the transfer and application of new technical, social, and English-language skills learned abroad. Sometimes these business ventures create new economic niches that can expand possibilities for local development by providing jobs for local residents.

Consider Martin, the taxi driver whose narrative opened our essay. With his English and customer-relations skills he carved out a new niche in the San Miguel de Allende market, which is geared toward expats and tourists. Or consider Miguel, a carpenter who used his savings and carpentry skills acquired in the United States to open a woodworking business specializing in housing and American-style cabinets for return migrants.

Demand for technical, English-language, and customer-service skills is most concentrated in large urban areas with dynamic industrial bases and large, diverse populations. New technical skills give entrepreneurs an edge over local competitors, while diverse domestic and international clienteles value interpersonal and language skills. In rural areas with high poverty rates and small populations, economic activity is largely limited to agricultural production and small-scale manufacturing. In these areas, return migrants can invest anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars in small manufacturing operations, agricultural enterprises, or modest retail stores, but

opportunities to mobilize new social and technical skills through entrepreneurship, or to play a role in local development, are limited.

LEFT ON THE MARGINS

Not all Mexican migrants achieve economic mobility when they return home. The same factors that motivate many migrants to travel abroad—long-term marginalization and limited educational attainment—often shape their labor-market experiences upon return.

Unlike their younger peers who traveled abroad in search of new opportunities and experiences, older people with little schooling commonly joined Mexico's great migration in response to decades of low wages and blocked mobility in their home communities. They have lower levels of schooling relative to younger cohorts who benefited from Mexico's educational expansion, and they face discriminatory hiring practices and employer preferences that favor young, physically fit, and more attractive workers.

In the United States, these low-skilled migrants experience little occupational mobility. Most remain in low-skilled gateway jobs as farm laborers or low-wage service workers, finding few opportunities to learn new skills. When they

return to Mexico relatively late in life, with little education and few marketable skills, they commonly resort to what we call "survivalist self-employment," engaging in subsistence enterprises, such as ambulatory food vending, that exist on the fringes of the informal economy and function as a desperate alternative to joblessness. Workers who fail to match their US occupations with Mexican ones are also at a disadvantage, as the case of Victor shows. Unable to transfer construction skills to his small rural hamlet, he was forced into low-wage work in an auto factory an hour from his hometown.

Deportation can also disrupt return migrants' prospects for labor-market reintegration, especially if they have not reached their earnings goals abroad. The United States has a long history of mass deportations, and most of these operations have targeted poor working-class Latino migrants, especially Mexicans. In 2016, for example, Mexicans constituted almost three-fourths of the 340,000 people removed from the United States. For these predominantly male migrants, returning

*Mexico is now
experiencing unprecedented
return migration.*

home can involve numerous psychological, economic, and social hardships.

Labor-market reintegration can also be hampered if deported migrants are unfavorably received by their host governments, employers, and educational institutions—as is the case in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica, where they are often criminalized and stigmatized. In Mexico, the government has taken a more neutral stance toward returnees regardless of whether or not they were deported.

Given this neutral reception, deportees adapt to economic conditions over time, our longitudinal research shows. Some, especially younger return migrants, even experience modest to substantial labor-market mobility. Although deportation disrupts financial accumulation abroad, involuntary returnees can still deploy new skills upon return.

ON THEIR OWN

Today's return migrants are coming home to an evolving economic and political situation in Mexico. The economy has experienced modest but sustained growth since 2010, and by all estimates is projected to continue growing at an average yearly pace of 3 percent through 2020. However, the recovery slowed in 2017 and optimism has given way to uncertainty following the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president, the renegotiation of NAFTA at Trump's insistence, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador's victory in Mexico's 2018 presidential election.

Much of Mexico's economic gains since 2010 resulted from its neoliberal model of economic development—one that is export-oriented and based on cheap-labor assembly operations run by multinational manufacturing corporations. Under NAFTA, free trade in the region certainly increased. In 2017, the United States received 81 percent of Mexico's exports, including vehicles and auto parts, electrical machinery, plastics, and furniture, among other items.

While US demand for exports propped up the Mexican economy, it has not translated into higher wages or improved working conditions for Mexican workers. This is because enforcement of NAFTA's labor rules and protections was left to the discretion of each country. The future for many of Mexico's low-wage workers, especially those in manufacturing, the country's most dynamic and profitable sector, will depend on the impact of NAFTA's replacement, the United States Mexico

and Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA)—if it is ratified by all three countries—as well as the social welfare policies of Obrador, who took office in December.

The new trade agreement includes enforceable labor reforms in all three countries. Mexico has agreed to enact laws that give workers the right to form genuinely independent unions, and to extend antidiscrimination protections for women. American auto assembly operations in Mexico will have to incorporate more US car parts to escape tariffs, and about 40 percent of those cars must be made by workers earning no less than \$16 an hour—almost four times Mexico's minimum wage for a full day's work. While this provision of the USMCA may boost wages for some Mexicans, it could also reduce employment in manufacturing if corporations decide to relocate some of their production centers from Mexico to the United States and Canada.

Members of Mexico's largest social class—those living and working in poverty—are hopeful that their new president can transform Mexican society. A longtime fixture of the political left and former mayor of Mexico City, Obrador has pledged to end corruption and drug violence, and to increase spending on social programs for the poor. Thus far, however, he appears to be taking a more centrist approach, aiming for a strong private sector and well-regulated free trade with Canada and the United States. Although he was previously critical of NAFTA, Obrador has publicly expressed support for the USMCA. And while he has promised to ensure migrants' safety and to build additional shelters for return migrants in border states, he has yet to detail any policies to support the labor-market reintegration of deportees and others.

Historically, Mexican governmental institutions have played a negligible role in helping migrants rejoin the work force. Instead, they have focused on policies to engage with the diaspora abroad and encourage remittances. Despite a few symbolic efforts to assist today's returnees, the government continues to leave the work of reintegration in the hands of returnees, families, communities, and market forces. For most return migrants, without support from the government and employers, social mobility will depend on their ability to successfully invest the human and financial capital that they accumulate in the United States in strategies such as starting businesses in their local communities. ■

“[T]he Venezuelan displacement crisis is a crucial test of the liberal immigration policies that have been adopted across Latin America.”

The Regional Response to the Venezuelan Exodus

LUISA FELINE FREIER AND NICOLAS PARENT

One day in May 2018, Annicary Torres was in tears as she hung up her scrubs and stethoscope, knowing that she would probably never work as a doctor again. She told the journalist Stephania Corpi that this was the day she decided to leave Venezuela—after treating an eight-year-old child who weighed four kilograms (less than nine pounds). She would not let that happen to her daughter.

Thousands are leaving the country every day to escape the political and humanitarian crisis that has shaken every aspect of their existence. Venezuelans have been facing severe food insecurity for years; according to Caritas, only 3 percent of households can afford three daily meals. The inflation rate had soared to 1.37 million percent by the end of 2018, according to the International Monetary Fund. In other words, if you are paid in bolivars, your money is worth close to nothing.

In a recent National Survey on Living Conditions, 94 percent of respondents said that their income is insufficient to cover their living costs. Some 7.3 million households—more than 16 million people, or nearly half the population—were enrolled in the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) subsidized food system in 2018, a 22 percent increase from the previous year. (CLAP is notorious as a vehicle of corruption and a reward system for Maduro’s supporters.) Increasing poverty and food insecurity have resulted in 32 percent of babies under six months of age and 49 percent of pregnant women suffering from moderate to severe malnutrition.

These conditions sparked more than 10,000 protests in 2018, which were met with repression

and lethal state violence. Emigration rates are skyrocketing. Hundreds of thousands have sold all their belongings to pay for bus tickets to neighboring countries. Others set out on foot, some leaving behind their parents and children. This has become the largest international forced displacement of people in Latin American history.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Venezuelan exodus to other Latin American countries increased by close to 1,000 percent between 2015 and 2017. A joint report issued in November 2018 by IOM and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said 3 million Venezuelans had left the country since the beginning of the crisis. They acknowledged that this estimate is conservative, since official data can be incomplete and often do not account for migrants with irregular status. Other sources estimate that the exodus had already surpassed 4 million people by the end of 2017 and is closer to 5 million or more today.

According to IOM and UNHCR, as of November 2018 the countries hosting the most Venezuelans were Colombia, with more than 1 million, and Peru, with over 600,000. More than 222,000 Venezuelans were officially registered in Ecuador, 130,000 in Argentina, 100,000 in Chile, and 85,000 in Brazil.

The scale of Venezuelan displacement is comparable to the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015, according to Matthew Reynolds, UNHCR’s regional representative for the United States and the Caribbean. But the international attention given to the Venezuelan crisis lags far behind in terms of both media coverage and financial support.

Although most countries in the region have recently adopted legislative frameworks that would allow for the recognition of Venezuelans as refugees, they have largely opted to respond to the in-

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flux with special visa schemes that provide varying degrees of protection. Still, by international standards countries across Latin America have been generous in their reception of Venezuelans. Despite the increasing numbers, most are upholding open-door policies.

Initially, foreign policy drove these generous responses. But the rise of xenophobic sentiment across the region has increasingly turned the Venezuelan exodus into a domestic policy issue—one that requires regional cooperation.

WAVES OF DISPLACEMENT

According to a 2017 Freedom House report by Tomas Paez and Leonardo Vivas, there have been three notable phases of Venezuelan emigration since the charismatic leftist Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999. The first phase, beginning in 2000, was marked by a middle-class outflow of entrepreneurs and students whose primary destinations were the United States and Europe. Their decisions to emigrate typically resulted from factors including growing insecurity, political tensions, nationalization of various industries, and social polarization following a failed coup attempt in 2002.

The second phase, starting in 2012, came after the collapse of a Latin American commodities boom and Chávez's reelection to a fourth term as president. As the economic crisis began, political repression increased while shortages of food and medicines emerged. In this phase, migrants' profiles were more varied, representing both middle- and lower-income social strata. Destinations also diversified: Venezuelans continued to migrate to the United States and Europe, but some also started settling in nearby countries such as Colombia, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.

Following Chávez's death in 2013 and the election of his chosen successor Nicolás Maduro, conditions in Venezuela significantly worsened. The third and current phase of Venezuelan emigration started in 2015 as the humanitarian crisis spiraled out of control. Alongside crippling inflation and aggravated food and medicine shortages, political violence rapidly escalated.

Maduro holds on to power through repression, including the imprisonment and forced disappearances of dissidents. At the same time, crime and looting have become rampant. Forced displacement is now widespread across all social groups, regardless of income, education, or employment status. Given these conditions, the definition of

refugee status laid out in the Cartagena Declaration of 1984 and subsequently adopted by nations across the region should apply to Venezuelans.

A RIGHT TO MIGRATE

A wave of democratization swept the region in the 1980s, leading to a human rights revolution. The Cartagena Declaration made groundbreaking advances, expanding on the 1951 Refugee Convention, a UN treaty responding to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

The Cartagena Declaration was signed in the context of the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to Mexico, at a time when memories of the forced exile of tens of thousands of South American political opponents of the region's dictatorships—many of whom returned and became active in politics—were still fresh. It defined refugees as people (including large groups) forced to flee their country “because their lives, security, or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.”

Latin American governments have since made a concerted effort to better align their domestic policies with the Refugee Convention, its 1967 protocol, and the large body of regional protection instruments including the Cartagena Declaration. Brazil took the lead in 1997, incorporating the expanded refugee definition in its domestic legislation. Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay followed suit.

The “pink tide” that rolled across the region at the turn of the twenty-first century, when left-of-center presidents were elected in a number of countries in Chávez's wake, was conducive to the spread of rights-based immigration and refugee policies. The progressive regional political climate saw the adoption of new laws and policies rooted in the protection of international migrants' human rights. This was a clear rejection of the restrictive approach to immigration inherited from the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.

Argentina led the way in 2004, when President Néstor Kirchner's government replaced the nation's dictatorship-era 1981 migration law. The new law was the first in the world to enshrine the “human right to migrate.” Although this right re-

mains vague in legal terms, it embodies a revolutionary view of migration.

In 2008, Uruguay and Ecuador, both under leftist presidents, made similar moves. Uruguay further expanded on the principles of the Argentine law, while Ecuador's new constitution guarantees migrants' human rights as well as the right to migrate. In addition to formally recognizing freedom of movement, it states that Ecuador strives toward universal citizenship, which will grant migrants the same rights as nationals.

Also in 2008, the intergovernmental Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was established. Its constitution stipulates the right of all South American citizens to move freely across the continent, reflecting principles espoused in a 2002 agreement among the members of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR).

Rights-based migration policy and the right to migrate were enshrined in a 2013 law enacted by President Evo Morales's socialist government in Bolivia. Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela have also reformed their immigration laws since 2004, to varying degrees.

This wave of new laws and policies on migrants and refugees, promulgated by leftist governments, makes Latin America truly distinctive. There are various explanations for the legislative shift from closure and securitization to an emphasis on migrants' rights. First, human rights discourses remained prominent in the aftermath of the democratization that occurred across the region. Second, regional integration processes led to a more liberal outlook on migration. Third and perhaps most importantly, it made sense for leftist governments, in the context of mass emigration from their own countries to North America and Europe, to condemn the restrictive policies of the United States and the European Union and champion a more progressive approach to managing migration.

PUT TO THE TEST

The trend of policy liberalization occurred during a period of limited migration within the region. In the past few years, however, the political scene has changed with the rise of the new right. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru have all undergone a shift from left-wing to right-wing presidents, leaving Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela as the last remnants of the pink-tide era. The Venezuelan displacement crisis is a crucial test of

the region's liberal immigration policies in this new political environment.

According to their own laws, most Latin American countries ought to recognize Venezuelan migrants as refugees. Venezuela's crisis meets three of the Cartagena criteria: generalized violence, massive violations of human rights, and other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order. Refugee status would prevent countries from sending Venezuelans back home until the situation has significantly improved, and would broaden their access to public services such as health care and education.

Yet only a small fraction of Venezuelans file asylum claims. Many do not know that they can apply for asylum. Others do not want to be recognized as refugees because they feel it comes with a stigma attached, or might limit their freedom to return home even for visits.

Still, asylum applications by Venezuelans have almost tripled each year since 2014. Their numbers worldwide totaled 375,012 from 2014 to 2018. In 2018, 156,700 Venezuelans had applied for asylum in Peru by the end of October, 72,722 in the United States by the end of June, and 65,846 in Brazil by the end of September, according to the latest data compiled by UNHCR.

Latin American governments are processing only a very small number of these applications. From 2014 to 2017, Peru ruled on just 971 cases, accepting 239 and rejecting 548 (applying only the 1951 refugee definition). The large number of pending claims—whether due to a lack of capacity, deliberate policy or both—leaves many Venezuelans without adequate protection.

Official statements by the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as well as a formal request by five South American nations for the International Criminal Court to investigate whether Maduro's actions qualify as crimes against humanity, refer to the Cartagena criteria. In private conversations, many officials and representatives of international organizations share the assessment that the forced displacement of Venezuelans meets the Cartagena definition.

Yet the political cost of being the first and potentially the only country to recognize this publicly could be high. Governments in the region have responded rather gingerly to the question of whether Venezuelans qualify as refugees under Cartagena, and instead have adopted alternative visa regimes. They fear that applying the Cartage-

na standard could lead to a further influx of Venezuelans, putting more stress on already underperforming public services and stirring up more xenophobic sentiment. This has led to a consensus in the region that Cartagena does not apply to Venezuela's displacement crisis.

Venezuelans have found other means of at least temporarily regularizing their situation. In the first waves of emigration, many sought to secure their status in other Latin American countries through existing channels for visa and residency applications. The MERCOSUR Residency Agreement of 2009 allows citizens within the trading bloc—comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela—to apply for a temporary residence permit of up to two years in any member state.

As the Venezuelan exodus increased in late 2016 and early 2017, governments in the region began implementing special legal arrangements. Colombia started issuing Border Mobility Cards in February 2017, allowing Venezuelans to travel freely between both countries. In January 2017, Peru became the first country to devise what the UNHCR terms “alternative legal stay” residency schemes, offering Venezuelans the right to work and study with a one-year Temporary Stay Permit. Colombia followed with a Special Stay Permit granting temporary residence to Venezuelans who arrived between July and December 2018.

In March 2017, Brazil granted Venezuelans temporary residence for a period of two years. In April 2018, Chile started issuing a special one-year residency permit called the Visa of Democratic Responsibility. Argentina and Uruguay have been more generous, granting visas under the MERCOSUR Residency Agreement despite Venezuela's suspension from the bloc in 2016.

These programs have been plagued by problems including long wait times, collapsing online registration systems, high application costs (especially in Chile and Ecuador, which effectively restrict visa access to members of the Venezuelan elite), limited information available to migrants, and lack of communication between state agencies. In some cases, as in Peru, the alternative visa regimes have already expired. While Venezuelans can still enter and apply for refugee status in Peru, in practice their applications are not being decided, which leaves them with limited protection.

DOMESTIC MISGIVINGS

Despite these shortcomings, the regional response generally has been well received by the international community, and indeed is generous by comparison with European policy responses to the Syrian refugee crisis since 2015. Some experts had initially expected more restrictive moves, predicting that the newly elected conservative governments would embody anti-immigrant sentiment and enact protectionist policies such as those recently ascendent in Europe and the United States.

While the responses of Latin American nations to the Venezuelan displacement crisis fall short of full implementation of their progressive laws, especially regarding the Cartagena definition of refugee status, it can be said that the migration policy liberalization of the pink-tide era has not been undone. This may be explained by the fact that foreign policy considerations initially drove regional responses to the Venezuelan displacement crisis. Conservative governments that openly criticize Maduro's socialist regime have been the most

welcoming to Venezuelans. Countries still aligned with Maduro, notably Bolivia and Ecuador, until very recently denied the existence of a migration crisis in Venezuela.

As the numbers continue to rise, however, the exodus is having an increasing domestic impact in host countries. Signs of xenophobia first flared up in countries bordering Venezuela.

In August 2018, Brazilian protesters in the northern border town of Pacaraima burned down a temporary settlement, prompting 1,200 migrants to return to Venezuela. A few hundred kilometers south, in the city of Boa Vista, the lynching of a Venezuelan migrant who had allegedly murdered a local resident during a robbery also drove hundreds to return in September. A state of emergency has been in effect in Brazil's northern border state of Roraima since February. The part of the border near Boa Vista, the state capital, was temporarily closed on August 6.

In Colombia, a planned relocation of migrants by the municipal government of Bogotá drew fierce disapproval from locals in August. About 500 migrants living in an informal settlement were offered the opportunity to move to a temporary camp set up at a soccer field. Local residents blocked entry to the site, claiming that the migrants would bring diseases and insecurity to the area.

The scale of Venezuelan displacement is comparable to the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015.

Although few instances of violence inspired by xenophobia have been reported in Peru, a September survey conducted by the newspaper *El Comercio* and the polling firm Ipsos found that 55 percent of Lima residents had negative views of Venezuelan immigration, with 46 percent citing “loss of employment” as a major concern. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they had heard discriminatory comments about Venezuelans.

Conversely, an October survey conducted by Click Report in Ecuador found that just 10.5 percent of Ecuadorians considered Venezuelan migration as the most important problem facing the country. Ecuador is effectively a transit country that Venezuelans quickly pass through on their way to settle in Peru, Chile, and Argentina. According to the Interior Ministry, 800,000 Venezuelans had entered Ecuador in 2018 through late November, but 700,000 did so only in transit. In Peru, however, 80 percent of the 600,000 Venezuelans now settled in the country arrived in 2018 alone.

Even so, Ecuador’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility on August 8 declared a state of emergency in the northern provinces of Carchi, Pichincha, and El Oro. Extra migration control and security personnel were deployed in the border zones, along with doctors and social workers. On August 19, Ecuador announced new regulations requiring all Venezuelans seeking entry to show a passport.

Peru quickly followed suit, announcing on August 25 that Venezuelans would be required to present a valid passport upon entry rather than the national identity card that had previously sufficed. A few days earlier, the Peruvian Interior Ministry issued a decree changing the rules for Temporary Stay Permit applications. The deadline for entering Peru was moved up two months, to October 31, and the deadline for submitting applications was brought forward by six months, to December 31. Venezuelans denied a permit would no longer have the right to appeal, and would be required to leave Peru within 30 days.

Although domestic political concerns have prompted some governments to impose entry barriers for Venezuelans, in many cases the judiciary has played an important role in upholding liberalized immigration laws and policies. Brazil’s Supreme Court overturned the Boa Vista border closure a few hours after it was announced. In

Ecuador, just five days after the government announced its new regulation requiring Venezuelans to produce a passport upon entry, a court in Quito annulled the rule.

A Peruvian court also temporarily suspended Peru’s passport requirement, finding that the policy was flawed since it was based on the fact that Venezuela had been suspended from MERCOSUR. The court, noting that Venezuela had been suspended as a result of its “rupture of the democratic order,” ruled that Peru had an international responsibility to leave its borders open to Venezuelan migrants and refugees.

However, politicians may see political advantage in catering to xenophobia. After mass demonstrations in Buenos Aires in response to proposed austerity measures, Senator Miguel Ángel Pichetto called for the expulsion of four foreign nationals, claiming with little evidence that they were agitators inciting social unrest. The Network for Refugees and Migrants in Argentina condemned his call to deport the migrants—two Venezuelans, a Paraguayan, and a Turk—and accused him of stirring up xenophobia.

But President Mauricio Macri indicated in early November that migration policy changes were under consideration, and that visas would be contingent on offers of employment. These changes would be in line with Macri’s attempt in 2017 to modify Argentina’s widely praised 2004 immigration law. His decree, which was ruled unconstitutional, would have allowed for expedited deportations of undocumented migrants.

Deportation has also become a growing concern in Chile, where the government recently started to repatriate approximately 1,600 Haitians. Migrant rights groups have argued that this potentially amounts to forced deportation and risks setting a precedent for the eventual deportation of Venezuelans. Given that Venezuelans are theoretically eligible for refugee status under the Cartagena Declaration, this would constitute a breach of the principle of nonrefoulement, which bars repatriation of migrants who face persecution or other threats to their safety in their country of origin.

The October 2018 victory of the far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil’s presidential election may lead to further restrictions on the entry and movement of Venezuelans. Bolsonaro has indicated that he envisions two possible responses to the

*Forced displacement is
now widespread across
all social groups.*

Venezuela crisis: revoking the 2017 Migration Act or building refugee camps at the border.

TIMID STEPS

Given the mounting numbers of Venezuelan migrants and the resulting domestic pressures, Latin American governments are not prepared to deal with the exodus on their own. They have timidly turned toward regional cooperation.

The first notable instance of this was the establishment of the Lima Group under the leadership of then-Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski. At their first meeting in August 2017, the group's members—Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru—signed the Lima Declaration, which expressed concern over the breakdown of democratic order in Venezuela, called for free elections and the release of political prisoners, and demanded that humanitarian aid be allowed into the country.

While the displacement crisis was not the Lima Group's original focus, an October 30 meeting in Bogota included discussion of measures to facilitate both permanent status for migrants and their transit across the region. But the group did not reach any conclusions or make any commitments.

Although the Lima Group describes itself as noninterventionist, and its members have made it clear that they do not wish to consider any military response to the Venezuelan crisis, the group positions itself in opposition to the Maduro regime. As an apolitical alternative, Venezuela's former ally Ecuador initiated the "Quito Process." Eleven Latin American countries—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay—September 4 signed the Declaration of Quito on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Citizens in the Region.

The declaration stated the signatories' commitment to combat discrimination, intolerance, and xenophobia against Venezuelans, and to protect them against human trafficking and smuggling. They pledged to ease entry and documentation requirements to make it easier for Venezuelans to regularize their status: refugees would be allowed to apply for residency with expired documents and without passports. Regional cooperation would focus on information sharing, primarily to support high-inflow countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru within the framework of the Andean Community of Nations.

The second Quito meeting on November 22–23 was also attended by UN agencies, along with representatives of the United States and European nations. Intergovernmental agencies have become increasingly involved in the regional response since mid-2018. In May, IOM and UNHCR established the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.

In December 2018, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock indicated that \$738 million was needed for a new response plan led by IOM and UNHCR. It is intended to reach 2.2 million of the projected 3.6 million displaced Venezuelans in 2019, with funds allocated to countries based on the extent to which each has been affected by the crisis.

This budget is extremely small compared with UNHCR's appeal for \$5.5 billion in funding to help Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon continue hosting Syrian refugees. But the increasing gap between the amounts that UNHCR has sought to raise through such appeals and how much it has actually received suggests that even this modest funding target may not be met.

Coordination of the regional response to the Venezuelan exodus is still far from becoming a reality. Bolivia has declined to send representatives to meetings on the crisis—an indication that Morales's government still places greater importance on foreign policy alignments than on humanitarian considerations. The new populist governments in Brazil and Mexico could make things even more complicated. At a meeting of the Lima Group in Peru on January 5, Mexico declined to sign a joint statement urging Maduro to cede power to the opposition-controlled National Assembly and allow fair elections. While Brazil continues to reject Maduro, the country pulled out of the new UN global migration compact on January 8 as Bolsonaro took an outspoken nationalist approach to the issue.

There is little evidence to suggest that the Venezuelan crisis will abate any time soon. A survey conducted by Consultores 21 in the third quarter of 2018 found that 38 percent of Venezuelans want to flee the country. The Brookings Institution recently published a report estimating that the exodus will total as many as 8 million people. The groundwork for regional cooperation has been set. But the Latin American response will have to move out of the conference room and into the lives of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. ■

“The heterogeneity and decentralized character of the protest movement is proving to be its greatest strength and weakness.”

Ortega Faces a New Nicaraguan Opposition Movement

COURTNEY DESIREE MORRIS

Since April 2018, Nicaragua has been engulfed by a wave of popular unrest that represents the greatest political crisis the country has experienced in 40 years. From April to October, hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets. They demanded the resignations of President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, and called for early elections.

The protests began on April 18, after Ortega announced a plan to reform the struggling social security system by increasing employee contributions and reducing payouts to pensioners by five percent. The public outcry was immediate. Demonstrating retirees were joined by university students, many of whom had protested the government's mishandling of a massive wildfire in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve on the Caribbean coast earlier in April. Riot police and pro-government paramilitary forces attacked student protesters barricaded in universities and churches and fired live ammunition rounds into crowds. By the end of the first week, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights reported 43 confirmed deaths and hundreds more wounded.

The Ortega administration claimed that the protests were being infiltrated and manipulated by narcotraffickers, gang members (*pandilleros*), and juvenile delinquents who were receiving arms, funding, and tactical support from right-wing elites in collusion with the United States. During her daily televised address, Murillo called the protesters “tiny groups that threaten peace and development with selfish, toxic political agendas and interests.” She and Ortega did not mention the killings of nonviolent protesters. They refused to

order the police to stop attacking the demonstrations. Protesters retaliated by paralyzing the country with weekly marches, building *tranques* (roadblocks) to keep the police and paramilitary forces out of communities and universities sympathetic to the uprising, and using social media to counter the administration's narrative.

Ortega eventually rescinded the social security reforms. But this gesture proved to be too little, too late. The protests were expressing something much larger, as more than a decade of accumulated grievances over the regime's abuse of power, manipulation of the electoral process, and co-optation of institutions exploded.

As the protests spread across the country, the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP) and the Catholic Church called for the restoration of peace and order. The church agreed to serve as a mediator in a dialogue between the protest movement and the administration. Representatives of various sectors of civil society including labor unions, the women's movement, human rights organizations, student activists, *campesinos* (farmers), religious leaders, and black and indigenous activists agreed to participate, forming the Civic Alliance along with private-sector representatives. But the May talks collapsed within days. While members of the Civic Alliance called for an end to the repression, the government insisted on the removal of the *tranques* as a precondition for negotiations. When this did not occur, the regime withdrew from the talks.

In July, the Ortega administration launched a “clean-up operation” (*Operación Limpieza*) to remove the *tranques* and “restore order and free movement throughout the country.” Later that month, the National Police declared street demonstrations illegal and warned that anyone who organized them would be arrested. The ruling party,

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the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), passed sweeping legislation that expanded the definition of terrorism to include a broad range of activities resulting in death, injury, or property damage when the intent is “to intimidate a population, alter the constitutional order, or compel a government or an international organization to perform an act or abstain from doing so.” Since July, more than 500 people have been arrested on terrorism charges. Public demonstrations have, for the most part, ended.

The government quickly declared the operation a success and now claims that Nicaragua is on the path to “normalization.” The cost of its “clean-up” effort was high. The United Nations, the Organization of American States, and Amnesty International report that more than 300 people were killed (national human rights organizations put the death toll over 500); about 2,000 wounded; and more than 400 political prisoners. By year’s end, some 40,000 Nicaraguans had fled to Costa Rica, fearing reprisal for their participation in the protests. The evidence suggests that the vast majority of the violence was perpetrated by police officers and pro-government paramilitary forces that resorted to kidnapping, arson, torture, and sexual violence.

Following the clean-up operation, the government escalated its repression of civil society organizations and journalists. In December 2018, lawmakers stripped five prominent human rights groups of their legal status, alleging that they had perpetrated “terrorist acts, hate crimes, and a failed coup attempt.” Days later, riot police raided and occupied the offices of *Confidencial*, a center-left online magazine and media organization that has been a longtime critic of the Ortega administration.

Until last April, Nicaragua was widely considered the safest country in Central America and one of the few that had managed to avoid the surge in organized crime in the region. The country had experienced modest but steady economic growth under Ortega. Despite widespread reports of repeated electoral fraud, he appeared to enjoy popular support.

The Ortega regime and its supporters argue that the protests were a soft coup attempt engineered by a conspiracy of Nicaraguan right-wing elites, the US government, and nongovernmental organizations. Many on the international left have taken up this framing of the current crisis, using a Cold War political lexicon that does not adequately ac-

count for how the terrain of Nicaraguan politics has changed. Ortega evolved from revolutionary to *caudillo* (strongman), and the FSLN from a revolutionary party to Ortega’s personal vehicle for power. In November 2016, he won a third consecutive term in an election marred by voter abstention and widespread fraud.

The protests were not a spontaneous eruption; they were the culmination of developments a decade in the making. The movement is a complex, ideologically heterogeneous assemblage of diverse political actors representing the right, the left, and the (for now) politically unaffiliated. This is not an Astroturf uprising, but an organic political movement driven by well-established grievances with Ortega’s rule.

Many of the most visible figures have long been critical of the regime’s relentless assault on the nation’s fragile democratic institutions and civil liberties, and its violations of the human rights of women, the press, *campesino* movements, and black and indigenous communities. But the most conservative sectors of Nicaraguan politics, civil society, and the private sector are attempting to claim leadership of the movement and thwart this opportunity to provide a democratic leftist alternative to *Danielismo*.

THE CAUDILLO’S RETURN

Ortega first came to prominence in 1979 as a leader in the Sandinista revolution, which overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza García, ending the longest-ruling family dynasty in the hemisphere. Ortega later served as president from 1985, leading the war effort against the US-backed Contra rebels, until losing the 1990 election to the conservative opposition leader, Violeta Chamorro. The struggle against Somoza and the Contra War resulted in approximately 50,000 deaths.

The FSLN made political history when it quickly recognized the 1990 election results, marking the first peaceful transfer of power and the beginning of a democratic transition. But as he ceded power, Ortega vowed that the FSLN would continue to “govern from below” by proceeding with the project of social transformation initiated under the Sandinista revolution.

After this stunning defeat, however, Ortega began to pivot away from the utopian ideals of the revolution, toward an increasingly pragmatic, individually driven *caudillo* approach to politics. Over the next 16 years, he steadily assumed control over the party structure, driving out dissidents

and formalizing a system of patronage designed to enforce and reward personal loyalty to him rather than to the party's original ideals. The FSLN retained a strong presence in the National Assembly, which Ortega used to pass legislation that weakened both the liberal opposition and former Sandinista militants who had founded a new leftist party, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS).

In 1998, Ortega brokered what is infamously known as “the pact” with then-President Arnaldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party, granting Alemán immunity from corruption charges while allowing him to maintain political influence after leaving office. In exchange, Ortega negotiated a change in electoral rules that would make it easier for a presidential candidate to win an election in the first round and avoid a runoff. The pact also granted him immunity from prosecution while in office. He was then serving as a member of the assembly while battling allegations that he had sexually abused his stepdaughter, Zoi-lamérica Narváez Murillo, for years. To many, the pact demonstrated just how far Ortega had strayed from his revolutionary roots to engage in the same practices of corruption, backroom negotiations, and *caudillismo* that have historically defined Nicaraguan politics.

This devil's bargain paid off for Ortega. In 2006, he won the presidential election with only 38 percent of the vote, far less than he garnered when he lost in 1996 and 2001. Since returning to power, Ortega and Murillo have orchestrated a systematic effort to consolidate control over the executive branch, the National Assembly, the courts, and the electoral council. They have pushed through laws granting the executive increased authority over the army and the police and additional powers to make judicial and civil service appointments, as well as overturning presidential term limits.

The Ortega-Murillo family also sought greater control over civil society by vilifying opposition-affiliated NGOs and attacking independent media outlets. (In addition to overseeing the content of state media, the family owns several radio stations.) The administration carefully shaped the public narrative by transmitting information through its own channels and marginalizing the traditional media. By the beginning of his third consecutive term, Ortega had not held an open press conference in more than a decade. Murillo, who is widely considered to be the “power behind the throne,” crafts the regime's public image and serves as the primary spokesperson for the party.

CANAL TO NOWHERE

In June 2013, the National Assembly approved Law 840, which granted a \$50 billion concession for the construction of an interoceanic canal to HKND, a Chinese company owned by an obscure billionaire named Wang Jing. It was introduced and passed in three days without public or legislative debate, or any comprehensive studies of its impact on the environment or on local communities. If completed, the canal, intended to be three times the size of the Panama Canal, would be the largest infrastructure project in modern history.

Domestic critics of the law pointed out that the National Assembly granted the concession without prior consultation with the affected parties or an open bidding process. Within days, environmental groups, human rights organizations, and black and indigenous activists filed 31 constitutional challenges against the law. The Supreme Court dismissed them all.

The law effectively grants HKND sovereign control over the canal's infrastructure and property for 50 years, with the possibility of a 50-year extension at the end of the concession. It also gives the government broad powers to expropriate private property and constitutionally protected Afro-descendant and indigenous communal lands along the canal's projected route.

There has been no demonstrable progress on construction since a groundbreaking ceremony held in December 2014 in Brito, a Pacific coastal town. Ortega has not spoken publicly about the canal in several years, and it appears unlikely that it will ever come to fruition. Nevertheless, Law 840 remains on the books, and critics argue that it has set a troubling precedent. But the anti-canal movement was an important example of resistance that would inform the 2018 protests.

POWERFUL FRIENDS

Despite systematically dismantling the nation's democratic institutions, Ortega retained popular support until the protests began last spring. A survey released in January 2018 found that 73 percent of respondents approved of his administration. This reflected three key factors: Ortega's alliances with the two most powerful sectors of Nicaraguan society, the Catholic Church and the private sector represented by COSEP; the use of patronage to ensure loyalty from his base and party leadership; and sustained economic growth fueled by subsidized oil from Venezuela.

While Ortega continued denouncing the evils of neoliberalism and free trade, he maintained the economic arrangements he inherited from his right-wing predecessors, carefully working with multilateral financial institutions and implementing market-based development policies. Upon returning to office, he established a warm relationship with the business community. He attracted foreign investment (particularly from Russia and China), allowed the expansion of free trade zones, and encouraged partnerships between the state and the private sector. COSEP was a loyal supporter of the administration and continued to defend it until the protests erupted in April.

The same was true of the FSLN's relationship with the Catholic Church. Ten days before the 2006 presidential elections, the assembly passed a ban on abortions even in cases where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest or it threatens the life of the mother. This finally won Ortega the support of the church and his former archenemy, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. Dozens of women have died in hospital waiting rooms as doctors, fearful of losing their medical licenses or facing criminal charges, refuse to treat those with life-threatening complications. Hundreds more have died from botched clandestine abortions. This was part of a "family values" platform on gender violence and reproductive rights that represents a significant erosion of the feminist movement's gains over the past 30 years. But the protests have profoundly damaged Ortega's relationship with both the private sector and the church.

Ortega was able to retain his popularity until last year largely thanks to social programs that significantly improved the lives of the nation's poorest citizens. Within days of his inauguration in 2007, Ortega made public education at the primary and secondary levels free and compulsory, established a free lunch program for low-income students, and launched a series of infrastructure projects that put people to work and brought electricity and roads to isolated rural communities. Other poverty-reduction programs included providing poor rural families with access to credit through microlending.

The state distributes benefits through the Life, Community, and Family Cabinets (formerly called Citizens' Power Councils)—neighborhood committees that exercise discretionary oversight over

these antipoverty programs. Critics argue that access to the programs is dependent on demonstrating loyalty to the ruling party. When I visited Bluefields on the Caribbean coast in 2017, many activists complained that the government excluded families who were not party loyalists from the distribution of zinc roofing material.

These social programs were fruits of Ortega's relationship with the leftist government of Venezuela. The day after his inauguration, Ortega signed an agreement to make Nicaragua a member of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), an intergovernmental organization founded by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to promote social, political, and economic ties among Latin American and Caribbean nations. Ortega and Chávez became close allies.

Chávez promised that Venezuela would provide Nicaragua with all the subsidized oil it needed "for the next hundred years." ALBA agreed to deliver 10 million barrels of crude oil, refined products, and natural gas annually. Chávez also extended generous low-interest loans. By 2008, the Nicaraguan government had generated approximately \$225 million from sales of the oil. Ortega retains tight control over these funds with no government oversight. It is widely understood that the administration has used them to shore up its social programs.

In the past few years, Nicaragua's economic outlook darkened with a global fall in oil prices and a loss of external aid as Venezuela descended into its own democratic and humanitarian crisis under Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro. This raised the question of whether Ortega would be able to maintain voter loyalty if he could no longer fund the popular social programs. If he were to face a political challenge, would he rely on brute force to stay in power? Nicaraguans and the rest of the world learned the answer last April.

ORIGINS OF AN UPRISING

The emergence of the protest movement took many observers by surprise, but not those of us who have been working in Nicaragua since Ortega returned to the presidency. Some of its most visible figures have been decrying Ortega's power grab for more than a decade. This group of dissidents is a diverse, heterodox assemblage of social actors representing a broad swath of civil society.

The protests were not a spontaneous eruption; they were a decade in the making.

The new bloc comprises five key groups: Sandinista dissidents, the women's and feminist movement, environmentalists, *campesino* canal opponents, and black and indigenous activists. The first group includes former Sandinistas who either left or were expelled from the FSLN in the 1990s and early 2000s after they became critical of Ortega's bid for control of the party. Some founded the MRS as a democratic alternative.

Feminist activists, many of them former Sandinistas, turned against the Ortega administration following the passage of the total abortion ban and the erosion of women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, criticizing the state's indifference to widespread sexual and gender-based violence and an epidemic of underage pregnancy as a result of rape. In response, the government has waged a long defamation campaign against members of the feminist movement, accusing them of witchcraft, pedophilia, lesbianism, and destroying the traditional family. These activists were among the first to experience the full brunt of the Ortega family-party-state's assault on civil society.

Environmentalists joined the growing movement against the regime particularly following the passage of Law 840. They developed strong alliances with *mestizo* (mixed-race descendants of Spanish settlers and indigenous peoples) *campesinos* whose properties and livelihoods are directly threatened by the canal project. These alliances coalesced in the Council for the Defense of the Land, Water, and Sovereignty. Francisca Ramírez, a *mestiza campesina* activist from La Fonseca, a rural community on the Caribbean coast, became the most visible face of this movement. By 2017, it had organized nearly 90 marches to the capital, Managua, demanding the repeal of the canal law.

In the weeks following the law's passage, black and indigenous activists and local leaders from the coast filed one of the first lawsuits alleging that the granting of the canal concession to HKND violated their communities' rights to free, prior, and informed consent. In 2015, black and indigenous activists from Bluefields testified before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington. They accused the Ortega regime of violating their collective multicultural rights and undermining regional autonomy by dismantling local governing bodies that refused to reject black and indigenous land claims in order to facilitate the canal project. (In 1987, Law 28 redefined the

country as a multicultural nation-state, recognized black and indigenous communities' historic land claims, and created two autonomous regions on the Caribbean coast.)

As the anti-canal movement coalesced into a national political alliance among diverse sectors of civil society, the Ortega administration sent pro-government paramilitary groups to harass and attack the *campesinos'* marches. Human rights activists were subjected to state-sponsored smear campaigns designed to discredit them as "criminals" and "delinquents." They reported receiving death threats and being denied travel visas and employment opportunities; their family members were harassed and arrested on false charges. In 2017, Global Witness ranked Nicaragua as the second most dangerous country for human rights defenders in the hemisphere, behind Honduras. Ramírez is currently living in exile in Costa Rica.

Although these disparate groups have joined in opposition to the Sandinista party-state, their analyses of the origins of the crisis are distinct, shaped by their overlapping and diverging political interests. Nevertheless, the development of this new coalitional politics and the state's repressive response to it reveal the connections between earlier forms of dissent and the current protest movement.

Defenders of the Ortega regime on the international left have tended to ignore the political significance of these grassroots social causes. But the political crisis did not emerge in a vacuum; the April protests tapped into deep discontent with Ortega's long abuse of power. From the beginning of the uprising, activists have consistently argued that the movement is not loyal to either the left or the right, but fed up with the regime and party politics in general.

LEFT OR RIGHT?

In the months since the protests, the response of the international left has been deeply divided. While leading figures including the US academic Noam Chomsky and former Uruguayan President José Mujica condemned the crackdown as a betrayal of Ortega's revolutionary past—even his own brother, Humberto Ortega, called on him to end the violence—others have insisted that the protests were little more than a disguised attempt to enact regime change with US backing.

Given the long history of antidemocratic US intervention in Nicaraguan politics, concerns about meddling are not unwarranted. In 1856, William

Walker, an American mercenary, seized control of the government and declared the country a slave colony of the United States before being forced out the next year. US Marines occupied Nicaragua off and on from 1912 to 1933. The State Department played a central role in the rise of the Somoza dictatorship, which ruled the country for 44 years.

After the FSLN overthrew the dictatorship in 1979, Washington intervened once again. Ronald Reagan feared that the Sandinista victory would ignite similar revolutionary uprisings in other Latin American countries. The Reagan administration illegally provided military training, weapons, and funding to the Contras, a diverse grouping of right-wing, counterrevolutionary, and indigenous rebels. This long history of US intervention forms an important part of Nicaraguans' collective memory, as does the complicity of national elites (derisively referred to as *vendepatrias* or traitors).

Thus it is not surprising that the international left suspects the long arm of US intervention is involved in the current crisis. Some have pointed to the role of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which funded counterrevolutionary forces in the 1980s. From 2014 to 2017, the NED made 55 grants in Nicaragua totaling \$4.2 million, primarily to media and civil society organizations. But that was hardly enough to foment the kind of broad-based, popular democratic uprising that has taken place. Attributing the recent protests to the single invisible hand of the NED not only ignores the thousands of Nicaraguans who have been victims of the crackdown on civil society. It also radically mischaracterizes the Ortega regime.

Critics of the protests have pointed to the fact that emissaries of the Civic Alliance met with conservative US politicians including Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. These three Republicans have been vocal opponents of Ortega and played key roles in the passage of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act, signed by President Donald Trump in December 2018, which will limit the country's access to loans from international financial institutions. In a speech at Miami Dade College in November, US national security adviser John Bolton dubbed Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela a "troika

of tyranny" and announced the Trump administration's intention to impose economic sanctions on key figures in the Ortega regime.

Ironically, leftist critics of the protests and right-wing supporters converge in their use of a Cold War-era political discourse that frames the situation as an ideological battle. This characterization reveals a profound misunderstanding of the composition of the protest movement and its objectives. It is a fragile and uneasy political coalition that includes fervent anti-Sandinistas, disillusioned former FSLN militants, university students who consider themselves the heirs of the revolutionary legacy, and *campesinos* and black and indigenous activists whose political demands do not fit neatly into categories of the left or the right.

The heterogeneity and decentralized character of the protest movement is proving to be its greatest strength and weakness. Tensions have surfaced around internal ideological contradictions. Leftist activists have expressed alarm about student leaders' overtures to US conservatives and attempts by the Nicaraguan radical right to impose its own agenda. The lack of a common political vision beyond "Ortega must go" makes the movement vulnerable to co-optation. The diverse interests of less powerful groups including black and indigenous communities, feminist and LGBT groups, *campesinos*, and the labor movement are unevenly represented. Removing Ortega from office will not ensure a democratic political order that is attentive to the needs of minorities, women, and the poor.

While the government declares that everything is back to normal, conditions on the ground suggest that the nation's political situation remains in flux. Opposition leaders are shifting their focus to the international sphere, organizing public speaking tours and gatherings of Nicaraguan exiles in an attempt to pressure the regime to cease the repression, resume a national dialogue, allow human rights observers to return to the country, and agree to early elections. The protests signaled an irreversible crisis of legitimacy for the Ortega administration that has only been exacerbated by its repressive response. As Nicaragua approaches the 40th anniversary of the revolution's triumph, its future is precarious and uncertain. ■

Ortega began to pivot away from the utopian ideals of the revolution.

“A central feature of Bolsonaro’s pro-dictatorship campaign stance was the promise it represented of a return to the old social order and traditional values.”

From Truth Commission to Post-Truth Politics in Brazil

REBECCA J. ATENCIO

On January 1, Jair Bolsonaro was inaugurated as Brazil’s fifth president elected by popular vote since the nation’s transition from military to civilian rule in 1985. A former army captain and seven-term congressman from Rio de Janeiro, Bolsonaro has promised to continue the hard-right turn initiated by his predecessor Michel Temer. In 2016, Temer replaced Dilma Rousseff after her impeachment, which progressives describe as a parliamentary coup ending the 13 years in government of the left-wing Worker’s Party (PT) under the administrations of Rousseff and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.

The PT’s popularity had plunged after Dilma’s 2014 reelection due to a deepening recession, a massive corruption scandal implicating politicians from all the major parties, and rising crime rates in the urban centers. But popular approval for Lula, the party’s founder, held relatively steady. Had he not been sidelined by a questionable conviction on corruption charges, he likely would have won the 2018 election.

Bolsonaro, 63, unapologetically defended the brutal 1964–85 dictatorship and its legacies during his presidential campaign, breaking a decades-long taboo in Brazilian national politics. Of course, other factors contributed to the former paratrooper’s win, including widespread disdain for the PT, whose candidate, Fernando Haddad, lost to Bolsonaro in a runoff. (Bolsonaro took 55 percent of the vote.) Presumably some voters cast their ballots for Bolsonaro despite, not because of, his extreme views on the dictatorship, or his reputation for extreme misogyny, racism, and homophobia. His victory mirrors the rise of right-wing populists around the globe, especially Donald Trump—

a comparison that Bolsonaro himself has eagerly encouraged.

Nevertheless, Bolsonaro’s unconventional ascent to both power and celebrity has reopened debates over the dictatorship that only four years ago appeared to have been largely settled through a protracted reckoning process that culminated in a National Truth Commission (NTC) active from 2012 to 2014. His success raises a series of questions: To what extent was the 2018 election a national referendum on the former military regime and the legacies it left behind? Are apologists for the dictatorship now prevailing in the struggle over historical memory—and if so, what explains this startling comeback? And finally, what role have movements such as #EleNão (Not Him), an anti-Bolsonaro coalition led by women (notably women of color) and LGBT groups, played in championing both historical memory and human rights, especially related to gender and sexual minorities, in this populist moment?

RECKONING WITH DICTATORSHIP

The high stakes of Brazil’s 2018 presidential election can only be fully appreciated by tracing the history of the military dictatorship and the country’s subsequent efforts over the past three decades to reckon with its authoritarian past. The highly unconventional trajectory of the nation’s democratic transition, and particularly the long postponement of reckoning mechanisms that have become standard in post-authoritarian societies, left the door open for a politician like Bolsonaro to capture the presidency.

In 1964, the armed forces deposed President João Goulart and established a regime that would last 21 years. The military architects of the new regime maintained a shell of democracy: a rotation of presidents (all of them generals), some regular

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elections, and a functioning Congress run by two authorized political parties. But the regime was authoritarian to the core, which became blatantly apparent after the December 13, 1968, proclamation of its Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5), which suspended political rights (including habeas corpus) and marked the onset of the dictatorship's most violent period. Military as well as police forces—such as the notorious Doi-Codi intelligence unit in São Paulo—were responsible for the torture of thousands of regime opponents and for killing at least 434 people, nearly half of whom were forcibly disappeared.

The crackdown drew to a close by the end of the 1970s, when the AI-5 expired. President João Figueiredo, under pressure from a broad-based movement demanding amnesty for the remaining political prisoners and exiles, signed a 1979 Amnesty Law that also extended immunity to military and police torturers. The law was the linchpin of the military-controlled transition back to civilian rule, which would ultimately steer Brazil along a markedly different path than other countries emerging from dictatorship in the region. Unlike Argentina, which set the international standard by immediately instituting a truth commission in 1983 during its transition, Brazil waited over a quarter-century to take this fundamental step (though it was preceded by two reparations commissions that together paid out billions of reais to the dictatorship's victims). In 2011, the Congress finally passed a law authorizing the creation of the NTC. Rousseff, herself a former political prisoner and torture survivor, inaugurated the seven-member body the following year.

Ever since the transition, the Brazilian military has acted as an institutional obstacle to a meaningful reckoning with the dictatorship years; the case of the NTC was no different. From the moment that plans for a truth commission first began to coalesce, the heads of the armed forces used their considerable power to try to undermine the initiative. They even forced the government to soften the wording used in the initial proposal for the NTC by threatening to resign en masse.

During the two and half years of the NTC's investigation into the dictatorship, the military brass obstructed it at nearly every opportunity. They instructed personnel not to cooperate and refused to turn over evidence, claiming that all

the archives had been destroyed—which was later disproved when a significant cache of documents unexpectedly surfaced. Asked to conduct an internal investigation into human rights crimes on military bases and other premises during the dictatorship period, they peremptorily declared that they could find no evidence of wrongdoing. Individual military officers called to testify before the NTC were similarly uncooperative, with rare exceptions.

One of the few to provide new and actionable information was retired Colonel Paulo Malhães, who testified before the commissioners in March 2014 about his involvement in the torture of prisoners at a clandestine detention center in Petrópolis known as the Casa da Morte (House of Death) and the disposal of the remains of a disappeared congressman, Rubens Paiva. Shortly after his deposition, Malhães was found murdered in what appears to have been a staged home robbery.

The armed forces' stance toward the NTC merely continued their long-standing policy, dating back to the transition, of maintaining an outward silence—and when necessary, denial—with regard to the regime's repressive operations, while at the same time internally preserving their own version of history through instruction in the military academies and even by continuing to commemorate the anniversary of the coup every year behind closed doors. Rousseff attempted to eradicate these celebrations but they continue to this day, especially among the reserves and in military clubs for retired officers.

A few men who played key roles in the state violence scorned the code of silence and wrote self-exculpatory memoirs. One of the most notable was Colonel Carlos Brilhante Ustra, head of the Doi-Codi at the height of the repression. He published two such books, *Rompendo o silêncio* (Breaking the silence) in 1987 and *A verdade sufocada: A história que a Esquerda não quer que o Brasil conheça* (The suffocated truth: The history the left doesn't want Brazil to know) in 2006.

The latter title reflects the bitterness felt by the author and his colleagues as a result of the marginalization of the military's memory narrative in public discourse. Praised by many in the armed forces, Ustra's memoirs afford insight into the way many in the military prefer to remember the dictatorship: as a noble crusade that rescued Brazil's

*The delay in settling
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democracy from the evils of communism and the dissolution of Western and Christian values, especially traditional gender roles and notions of appropriate sexuality. The earlier memoir backfired on Ustra, however, by contributing to his conviction in civil court (a decision subsequently upheld on appeal in a federal court) for having tortured several members of a family who were able to turn the colonel's own words against him.

Despite the obstructionism of military leaders, the NTC report, issued in December 2014, broke new ground by declaring the armed forces as an institution—as well as 377 individual military and police officers identified by name—culpable of gross human-rights violations during the period of the dictatorship. It also made 29 recommendations that, had they been implemented, would have delivered a devastating blow to the military's memory narrative.

The very first of these advised the armed forces to admit their institutional responsibility for the abuses documented in the report. It also called for ceasing all commemorations of the 1964 coup within the ranks of the armed forces, revising the curriculum of the military academies to reflect the report's findings, and stripping officers cited in the report of all military honors. Most boldly of all, the report recommended initiating prosecutions of the approximately 200 named perpetrators who were still living.

As the legal scholar Marcelo Torelly notes, the report seemed to be a major step forward at the time of its release, insofar as it broke the military's veto power over how the state remembered the dictatorship period. Ultimately, even though none of the recommendations led to significant policy changes, the NTC and its final report still amounted to a direct challenge to the military.

Not surprisingly, the military brass, along with the ever-vocal clubs of retired officers, rejected the report in its entirety. So too did a former army captain and, until then, relatively obscure politician from Rio, Jair Bolsonaro. He devoted a number of his speeches as a member of the Brazilian Congress to hurling ad hominem attacks at the commissioners and Rousseff, denouncing the report's findings as lies, and calling for a new commission to investigate political crimes by leftists who engaged in armed struggle against the military regime. Neither Bolsonaro nor the regime apologists within the military were able to get much traction at first. But that would change with Rousseff's impeachment.

REVIVING THE RIGHT

With the release of its report, the NTC appeared to have settled the debate over the meaning of the 1964 coup and the ensuing brutal regime—and discredited the military's celebratory narrative once and for all. Yet the struggle over memory resumed as Rousseff's presidency was engulfed in spiraling economic and corruption crises, coming to a head during the April 2016 vote on her impeachment—on controversial charges of violating budget rules—in the Chamber of Deputies. It was broadcast on television and closely followed by much of the country.

From the outset, Dilma and her supporters had emphasized parallels between her predicament and the 1964 coup in order to make the case to the Congress and the public that the impeachment process was antidemocratic, a result of machinations by the conservative opposition to grab power in what amounted to a parliamentary coup. Those concerns were echoed by international observers, including representatives of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations.

Bolsonaro drew his own historical parallels, prefacing his vote for impeachment with an incendiary speech that flipped the national script for debating the dictatorship. After pronouncing it “a glorious day for the Brazilian people,” he castigated the left, declaring, “They lost in 1964. They lost in 2016.” He dedicated his vote thus:

For the family and for the innocence of school-children—an innocence that the PT never had. Against communism, for freedom. . . . In memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, nightmare of Dilma Rousseff. For the Duke of Caxias's Army, for the entire armed forces, for Brazil above everything and God above all, my vote is yes.

A few years earlier those words would have spelled political suicide for a presidential hopeful, but Bolsonaro calculated the timing and wording of his explosive declaration to achieve the maximum effect. The speech solidified his cult following among conservatives while harnessing widespread anger toward Dilma and the PT, especially among the white middle class.

Segments of the right had been openly nursing nostalgia for the dictatorship at least since the massive, nationwide antigovernment protests in June and July 2013, when they began agitating for military intervention to oust Dilma as president—a demand mainly relegated to the

fringes of the movement. With his impeachment speech, Bolsonaro brought this sentiment into the national mainstream, giving the right a relatively coherent narrative conflating the PT and Cold War-era communism as dangerous threats to the moral and political order that could be eradicated only with the help of the armed forces, embodied by Colonel Ustra and the Duke of Caxias, a celebrated nineteenth-century military commander and statesman whom the army still honors as its patron.

Bolsonaro gave the right a potent symbol in the recently deceased Ustra, one of the dictatorship's most notorious human rights abusers. Anti-Dilma groups ran with Bolsonaro's flamethrowing rhetoric, transforming Ustra into a pop icon almost overnight through viral hashtags on social media and profitable online T-shirt sales. Demand for the late colonel's 2006 memoir spiked: new editions sold out and the title made the national best-seller list. The sudden and unexpected popularity of the confirmed torturer made it clear that the spectacle of Bolsonaro's impeachment speech had launched a comeback for the military in the struggle over memory.

The dictatorship has a history of becoming newly meaningful in moments of national political crisis, most memorably in 1992 when the country was engulfed in another major corruption scandal, centered around President Fernando Collor. As the scandal deepened, people began to take to the streets. Many demonstrators found inspiration in the generation of 1968. A popular miniseries, *Anos Rebeldes* (Rebel Years), a fictional dramatization of the student movement and armed struggle against the military regime, was being broadcast at the time on Brazil's largest and most powerful television network, Globo.

The show made the dictatorship period relevant again. Young protesters interpreted the story as an allegory about the corruption crisis they faced and appropriated the old slogans and symbols as their own. They became known as *caras-pintadas* for the '70s-inspired face-painting that emerged as their trademark at political marches. Galvanized by the fresh meaning being given to the dictatorship era, these demonstrators pressured Congress to initiate impeachment proceedings that forced Collor's preemptive resignation.

In retrospect, the parallels between the 1992 and 2016 impeachment crises were uncanny even if the circumstances and ideological underpinnings were completely different. In the latter case, as the corruption scandal uncovered by the *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) investigation ballooned, many prominent politicians came under investigation, including Lula and others from the PT. Dilma notably was not among those charged, although she drew scrutiny for having chaired Petrobrás, the state-controlled oil company at the center of the scandal, from 2003 to 2010.

Amid these bombshell revelations and the deepening recession, parts of the middle class and the right became restive. Like the *caras-pintadas* before them, they found new meaning in the dictatorship. Only instead of taking their cue from the resistance movements of the period, the participants in antigovernment demonstrations throughout 2015 and 2016 drew inspiration from the coup and the military regime.

Whereas in 1992 it was a Globo miniseries that captured the zeitgeist in its nightly broadcasts over several weeks, crystallizing the new meaning of the past, almost a quarter-century later a single event achieved a similar feat for the resurgent right: Bolsonaro's speech in

favor of the impeachment of another president. Like Globo in 1992, Bolsonaro managed to make the military regime newly relevant, this time to a society shifting increasingly to the right of the political spectrum and with a message amplified on social media as well as through the popular cell-phone messaging service WhatsApp.

A crucial difference between the two moments is that by 2016 the NTC was supposed to have implanted human rights norms in the nation's political culture, deepened democracy, and dispelled the fantasy of simple military solutions to complex problems. What went wrong? Why did the truth commission's achievements dissolve so rapidly in a wave of right-wing nostalgia for the dictatorship? It was not for lack of effort on the part of the NTC, which had conducted about as thorough an investigation as was possible at the time and published a bold report with proposals for dismantling the vestiges of authoritarianism.

The problem was that the truth commission came too late. To be effective its proposals should have been implemented decades earlier, ideally

*Misogyny and pro-dictatorship
rhetoric intersected in
disturbing ways.*

during the transition years in the late 1980s. Instead, Brazil instituted no major memory policies or reforms of civil-military relations during the crucial period of the political transition to democracy. It took its first tentative steps in the form of two reparations programs beginning only in the late 1990s, followed by the NTC in 2012. Meanwhile, political leaders left the festering problem of civil-military relations long unaddressed. A civilian-led Ministry of Defense was not founded until 1999.

Although Bolsonaro's victory was the product of several interrelated factors and not just the consequence of Brazil's idiosyncratic path to what is often called transitional justice, it is also clear that the delay in settling accounts with the past came at a steep price. When political and other national crises erupted, authoritarian traditions that had been left intact reasserted themselves with a vengeance.

REBRANDING CAMPAIGN

Bolsonaro had defended the dictatorship and Ustra long before 2016, albeit without the public taking serious notice. The verbal attacks that he lobbed at the NTC while its work was in progress and in the wake of its final report were laced with a virulent misogyny that would become a defining feature of his image as a presidential candidate. The difference in 2018 was that the electorate was primed to be more receptive to his message due to a combination of circumstances.

There was widespread outrage against the PT and the political establishment over endemic corruption as well as growing fears about public safety in Brazil's major urban centers (issues that cut across the political spectrum). There was also resentment over progressive policies like the Bolsa Família cash-transfer welfare program and race-based affirmative action in the universities as well as a moral panic over questions of gender and sexuality, primarily on the part of conservatives. Bolsonaro was able to give the dictatorship period fresh meaning for voters troubled by such issues, especially those already predisposed to see the 1964 coup as a template for solving the problems of the present.

As a presidential candidate, Bolsonaro represented the absolute antithesis of the 29 recommendations contained in the NTC's final report. Not only did he reject the amply corroborated findings of the commission and mock the human rights norms it promoted; he also rebranded as his own the military regime's discredited ideology,

with its simplistic, authoritarian solutions to real and perceived social problems. He pointed to the dictatorship and its purported achievements of peace and prosperity as evidence that his proposals would work.

Bolsonaro promised to stack his cabinet with military men—a promise he has kept. He selected as his running mate Hamilton Mourão, a freshly retired army general who portrays himself as another Ustra protégé and has not shied away from public statements raising the specter of military intervention in national politics. During the campaign, Mourão voiced some opinions that appeared slightly less inflammatory than Bolsonaro's (for example, he claimed to oppose torture), but for the most part he added an exclamation point to an extremist candidacy.

In the runoff, Haddad was unable to effectively turn Bolsonaro's controversial positions on torture and human rights against him. Haddad attempted to draw attention to Bolsonaro's praise of Ustra, running a campaign ad that featured testimony about some of the colonel's most heinous deeds by Amélia and Janaina Teles, whose family had been persecuted by Ustra and successfully sued to have him declared a torturer by a federal court in 2008. It is unclear how effective Haddad's ad was in achieving its intended purpose of wooing undecided voters away from Bolsonaro with reminders of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the dictatorship he embraced. But its most immediate effect was to trigger a massive backlash by Bolsonaro supporters, who took to social media en masse to vilify Amélia Teles, a torture survivor, spreading false rumors that she had killed military officers during the dictatorship and barraging her with anonymous death threats.

Bolsonaro supporters also seized on an incident in which Haddad repeated a false torture accusation against Mourão, spinning the blunder as evidence that any critiques of the dictatorship were based on lies propagated by the PT. Bolsonaro, for his part, depicted the dictatorship's violence as a just war against communism. He portrayed the reviled and discredited PT as the real authoritarian threat.

A NEW WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Given the PT's inability to gain traction with its attacks on Bolsonaro's pro-dictatorship stance and the party's own perceived lack of credibility on the subject, it fell to civil society groups to take up the banner of human rights and historical memory.

Foremost among these was *Mulheres Unidas Contra Bolsonaro* (Women United Against Bolsonaro), a group that quickly drew some four million members after it was founded on Facebook in late August 2018 by Ludmila Teixeira, a black feminist organizer from the northeastern city of Salvador. The group belonged, as the social anthropologist Kia Lilly Caldwell points out, to a long tradition of black women's political activism in Brazil dating back to the 1970s resistance to the dictatorship.

Nonpartisan in origin, the group initially emphasized its opposition to Bolsonaro rather than its support for any other candidate, in order to attract the broadest possible group of followers. It included, according to its manifesto, a diverse assemblage of Brazilians and immigrants of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and ages. In the runoff, its opposition to Bolsonaro translated into support for Haddad by default. It was *Mulheres Unidas* that popularized the #EleNão (Not Him) and #EleNunca (Never Him) hashtags and convoked the nationwide and international #EleNão protests on September 29, 2018, in which tens of thousands participated.

As the number and diversity of the four million members of *Mulheres Unidas* confirmed, questions of gender and sexuality played a key role in the 2018 presidential election alongside the apparent referendum on the interpretation of the dictatorship. In fact, the two issues were closely intertwined. Bolsonaro's misogyny and pro-dictatorship rhetoric had intersected in disturbing ways long before the presidential campaign.

In a 2014 incident often cited during the campaign, he had dismissed a speech given by former human rights minister Maria do Rosario in praise of the NTC by declaring that she was "not worth raping." On multiple occasions, most notably in a speech before the Chamber of Deputies in October 2014, he mocked the NTC's final report as a "fairy tale written by seven prostitutes about their brothel madam in order to canonize her." This characterization of the commissioners as prostitutes and of Rousseff as their madam both feminized the NTC to devalue it and implied that its members (two of whom were women) were corrupt and immoral. Bolsonaro's taunting of Rousseff during the impeachment vote could be read in a similar light, since he excoriated the PT's violation of traditional gender roles (presumably an allusion to its LGBT-

friendly policies) and celebrated the torture Dilma had endured, including sexual abuse, as a political militant against the dictatorship.

In its manifesto, released on the eve of the nationwide #EleNão marches, *Mulheres Unidas* listed Bolsonaro's disdain for women, LGBT communities, and other marginalized groups, along with his pro-dictatorship stance, among its main reasons for opposing him. It also posited a connection between the legacies of dictatorship and the murder of Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes, who were executed in a political hit in March 2018 after Franco criticized a federal military intervention to combat crime in Rio. *Mulheres Unidas* and like-minded groups embraced Franco, a queer black woman from the low-income Rio community of Maré, as a symbol of their intersectional struggle against misogyny, racism, homophobia, and class discrimination.

These activists borrowed some of the strategies pioneered by human rights groups to memorialize the dead and disappeared of the dictatorship. In one notable example, they changed a street sign near the city assembly building in downtown Rio to Rua Marielle Franco. Grassroots initiatives to rename streets in homage to victims of human rights abuses had become common after 2014, when the NTC included in its proposals a recommendation to change all public place names associated with torturers and other dictatorship-era perpetrators. By creating a Marielle Franco Street, activists made a direct association between the repression during the dictatorship and contemporary violence.

Franco became a potent symbol to mobilize opposition to the candidacy and prejudiced views of Bolsonaro, who refused to comment on her murder or acknowledge that it had been carried out by a group associated with the police. Days before the first round of the presidential election, two male candidates from Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) tore down the Franco street sign and broke it in half, posting a video of themselves brandishing the pieces while wearing Bolsonaro T-shirts. In response, activists printed thousands of Rua Marielle Franco signs and distributed them at a rally. The city of Salvador officially renamed one of its streets in honor of Franco after Bolsonaro won the election.

*Bolsonaro managed
to make the military
regime newly relevant.*

Flávio Bolsonaro, one of the candidate's sons and himself a congressman, defended the act of symbolic aggression against Franco's memory, declaring that the men were simply "restoring order." This rejection of human rights memorialization practices echoed Jair Bolsonaro's own attacks on the NTC—and the vandalism itself was reminiscent of Bolsonaro's notorious impeachment speech in its blending of misogyny and authoritarianism. As for the two PSL candidates, both subsequently won their elections.

It is no accident that the main targets of Bolsonaro's ire, and that of his supporters, have been powerful women with strong identities as former political militants, human rights advocates, or both—foremost among them Dilma Rousseff, Maria do Rosario, Amélia Teles, and Marielle Franco. As a congressman and as a presidential candidate, Bolsonaro channeled the pervasive misogyny and machismo in Brazilian politics. His impeachment speech exemplifies how nostalgia for the dictatorship in his political rhetoric often equates with nostalgia for traditional gender roles and the promotion of conservative morality by Brazil's increasingly powerful Christian right.

This tendency has manifested itself elsewhere in contemporary Brazilian society through efforts to prohibit the word "gender" in schools, protests against the pioneering American gender theorist Judith Butler's November 2017 visit to Brazil, and attempts to close down art exhibitions and performances deemed offensive to traditional values. All of this is reminiscent of the dictatorship period, when censors and police were employed to ensure the strict observance of what the regime liked to call "morality and good customs." A central feature of Bolsonaro's pro-dictatorship campaign stance was the promise it represented of a return to the old social order and traditional values. Now that he has taken office, activists like the leaders of *Mulheres Unidas* are regrouping with plans to mount a forceful opposition to his agenda.

OMINOUS SIGNS

Does Bolsonaro's successful presidential bid signal that regime apologists, especially within the military, are currently prevailing in the struggle over historical memory in Brazil? Recent events do indicate a startling comeback—although champions of human rights memory, including recently formed groups such as *Mulheres Unidas*, are holding their own.

In light of Bolsonaro's victory, it is tempting to read Brazil's recent election as a referendum on the meaning of Brazil's experiment with dictatorship in the 1960s and '70s, one that revealed a nation profoundly divided on the subject. The outcome of the presidential race turned on numerous factors, but it is undeniable that Bolsonaro's pro-regime platform played a central role and even subsumed many other hot-button issues by proposing familiar-sounding authoritarian answers to ongoing challenges, especially urban violence.

The 2018 presidential election offers some important broader lessons, foremost among them the limitations of a truth commission in a post-truth era. Facts were less influential than appeals to the rage, fear, resentment, and moral panic that proliferate in moments of national political crisis. Bolsonaro proved to be a master of harnessing these emotions for his own political gain. The question now is to what lengths he will go in office to fulfill the grim promises he made to his right-wing supporters.

There are ominous signs that the armed forces learned a lesson or two of their own from Brazil's recent past. When Temer authorized the 2018 military intervention in Rio, army commander Eduardo Villas-Bôas reportedly sought assurances that the mission would never be subjected to a truth commission in the future. Although it's unclear whether such assurances were ever provided, there is little question that Brazil's culture of impunity remains intact and will only worsen under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. ■

Heat But Little Light: Peru's Memory Debates

ALBERTO VERGARA

The permanent exhibition at Lima's Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia, y la Inclusión Social (LUM, or the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion) begins with a schematic overview of the two terrorist groups that waged war with the Peruvian state during the 1980s: Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. At the top of the organizational charts are photos of Abimael Guzmán and Victor Polay, their respective leaders. Guzmán is dressed in suit and tie—he was a university professor, after all, albeit one intoxicated by Maoism. But the photo is controversial. Supporters of the armed forces argue that it would be more appropriate to use one that shows Guzmán in the striped prison garb of his post-capture appearances in 1992.

This ridiculous but apoplectic debate over a small photo at the start of a three-floor exhibition is hardly conducive to a public conversation that elucidates the terrible violence of the 1980s and early '90s, when tens of thousands were killed in a conflict that began in the rural highlands but by the end of the '80s had engulfed the whole country. Sadly, it is characteristic of most discussions about the period of violence: friction between the opposing sides of these debates gives off great heat but little light.

In April 2018, Edwin Donayre—a former commanding general of the armed forces, now a congressman—disguised himself as an elderly tourist and visited LUM in search of anything that might damage its reputation. Donayre joined a guided tour and fired off as many questions as he could in the hope of eliciting a hapless answer that he could secretly record and use to denounce the museum for advocating terrorism. When the guide blundered by replying that Guzmán—serving a term of life in prison—might be pardoned on humanitarian grounds, Donayre got what he wanted. He rushed off to make television appearances con-

demning LUM for harboring Shining Path sympathies.

Members of the *Fujimorista* parliamentary majority and its hangers-on—those loyal to former President Alberto Fujimori, who oversaw counterinsurgency operations during his decade in power from 1990 to 2000—immediately followed suit, saturating TV screens to echo Donayre's sentiments. The minister of culture, Patricia Balbuena, was called before Congress to answer for LUM. Some angry lawmakers demanded her resignation, while others sprang up to attack the museum. The minister kept her head down, muttering her apologies, and the guide lost her job.

This high-decibel pile-on was typical of the isolated, superficial controversies that emerge from time to time around the subject of the violence. Such scandals are incited by those whose mission is to derail reasoned debate by screaming about their grievances.

But why does the collective-memory agenda attract so little attention other than headlines over these sporadic commotions? The answer is fundamentally political, and has its origins in the collapse of Fujimori's government in 2000. Under the transitional regime of Valentín Paniagua, actors with an interest in controlling the public understanding of the conflict became locked in power relations that would shape the future debates.

The armed forces, a cornerstone of the Fujimori administration, were left licking their wounds. Effectively, they had been the "party" of the corrupt and authoritarian pairing of Fujimori and his intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos. Much of the high command ended up in prison, while others fled. When the transitional government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate crimes against human rights committed by both state and nonstate actors between 1980 and 2000, there were no military figures with opposing interests in a position to block it. Preoccupied with dodging jail, they were powerless to stop any political initiative.

The establishment of the commission was an *obsequio* (a gift) from the transitional government

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to the human rights community, as José Carlos Agüero, a researcher at the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, put it. It was not on Paniagua's agenda—in hindsight, he came to regard its formation with skepticism—and did not respond to any pre-existing public demand. Yet it laid the foundations for a memory infrastructure—a voluminous report published by the commission in 2003 with its own terminology and explanations for the violence; artistic and documentary displays; monuments, and so forth—that the anti-memory sectors could seek to boycott, but not bury.

What none of the factions managed to do was create a constituency. The commission lacked a solid base of support in society, and its agenda has not created much demand to this day. As one LUM official lamented, there was no sizable mobilization in defense of the museum after Donayre's devious ambush. Just a few weeks earlier, when the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, was engulfed in a similar controversy, 10,000 people came out to back it.

But LUM's detractors also suffer from a lack of support. Although their outbursts receive television and radio coverage, they have consistently failed to mobilize the public. The Fujimorista-dominated Congress recently created its own memory program under the slogan "Terrorism never again," but its impact has been negligible. As in so many aspects of Peruvian political life, there is an unbridgeable abyss between society and institutions.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

However, this deficit of societal involvement does not imply denial or a lack of public interest in understanding political violence. A recent study by Arturo Maldonado and other researchers found that in comparison with Latin America as a whole, Peruvians are more concerned about political violence. Moreover, the critical and commercial success of books such as *La distancia que nos separa* by Renato Cisneros and *Los Rendidos* by José Carlos Agüero (roughly translated, "The distance that separates us" and "The surrendered ones"), and the many movies dealing with this period of violence, point to a society that at least shows promising curiosity even if it has yet to display a strong appetite for more active engagement.

The armed forces produced *En honor a la verdad* ("To honor the truth"), a historical text that seeks to provide a reasoned and documented account of the conflict. Unfortunately, it has gone mostly unnoticed. In my own teaching experience, I have found that many students—not only those in the humanities and social sciences—want to understand what happened to the country in their parents' youth, when bombs were exploding every day. The more than 100,000 visitors that LUM receives each year are another signal of interest. There is a palpable, if disorganized, desire to know.

Yet society remains at a juncture that satisfies neither pro- nor anti-memory partisans. It is charged with a live, chaotic curiosity that runs counter to the denialism that anti-memory actors espouse. But pro-memory advocates have failed to consolidate the civil activism they long for. Peruvian society, ever distrusting of its institutions, keeps a prudent distance. The memory professionals, with their jargon and categorizations, do not look likely to bridge that distance. Nor will the aggressive right-wing brand of politics that insists Peruvians need to know nothing more than the simple tale that once upon a time there were terrorists, but happily President Fujimori defeated them.

However, the national conversation about the period must proceed (and on my more optimistic days I believe that sooner or later this will happen). The enormity of what happened in Peru makes it a virtual obligation. But so far it has been impossible even to find common ground on what to call the era in question. Proposed names usually lead to another of those debates with lots of heat but little light—was it an "internal armed conflict" (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), a "period of violence" (LUM), or the "time of terrorism" (*Fujimorismo*)?

The demographic changes in Ayacucho—the impoverished south-central region where Shining Path arose, and the epicenter of the period's violence—comprise the starkest indicator of the conflict's grave consequences. Between 1981, when a population census was taken as the conflict was beginning, and 1993, when the bloodiest stage was over, Peru's total population increased. But Ayacucho's fell over the same period, from 503,392 to 492,507. The war was a demographic catastrophe.

More than 33,000 people have been formally recognized by the state as dead or disappeared.

So far it has been impossible even to find common ground on what to call the era in question.

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's estimate, the actual toll is 69,280. One must go back to the nineteenth-century war with Chile to find violence on a comparable scale in Peru. The proportions of the tragedy make it difficult to imagine that the public would not be interested in understanding such an episode.

The same can be said of the combatants in the conflict. How could anyone remain indifferent to Shining Path, a delirious movement as violent as it was ideological, whose leader and adherents claimed to be the culmination of millions of years of evolution? No less disturbing was the response of the armed forces, which operated in the Peru-

vian highlands without guidelines to distinguish the just from the aberrant.

Can there be an institutional space in which to hold a national dialogue about the conflict? Or, alternatively, will society shape its own unmediated conversation? Of course, both routes are possible. Should the stalemate between the pro- and anti-memory camps continue, institutionalization will remain a distant prospect. On the other hand, political actors could take the issue seriously and engage the country's chaotic curiosity with a platform of general historical interest that would contribute to the development of a more peaceful, free, and egalitarian nation. ■

Colombia's Other Dangerous Crop

ULRICH OSLENDER

Michael Taussig is not your average anthropologist. Based at Columbia University, Taussig has long been a polarizing figure in the discipline. His body of unconventional and often provocative work ranges over topics from devil worship, magical beliefs in capitalism and commodity fetishism, and shamanic healing to state terror in Latin America. He is described by some as a visionary; others loathe his seeming contempt for traditional scholarship. Taussig sees anthropology as storytelling, and he dedicates as much effort to the style in which he expresses his meandering thoughts as he does to the subject matter itself. Often blending fact with fiction, literary theory, and ethnographic description, deploying a language that is playful, enthralling, and always engaged, he has called his art of writing “fictocriticism.”

A constant throughout Taussig's work and life has been his long-term engagement with Colombia, a country he first visited in 1969 and to which he has returned every year since. Some of his best books are “set” in Colombia, such as *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (1987), in which he examines British colonial violence against indigenous population groups on the rubber plantations in the southern Putumayo region; *Law in a Lawless Land* (2003), a two-week diary documenting paramilitary terror in a small rural town; and *My Cocaine Museum* (2004), a sort of montage-ethnography set on the Pacific coast, where he playfully shows how cocaine has replaced gold as the most exciting, seductive, and evil substance in postcolonial times, while documenting the horrendous effects that coca cultivation (and cocaine production) has had on peasants living in the region.

His latest, *Palma Africana*, is again for the most part set in Colombia, this time in the northern swamplands of the Momposina Depression, where

Palma Africana
by Michael Taussig
University of Chicago Press, 2018

the monocropping of oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) pushed by aggressive agribusiness interests has clashed with more traditional peasant lifestyles. As is common in other parts of Colombia (Taussig documented similar pressures on the Pacific coast in *Law in a Lawless Land*), paramilitary forces at the service of large oil palm plantation owners threaten peasant communities, kill their leaders, and commit massacres to enforce agribusiness law and order. They also destroy farmers' crops, flood their fields, and block peasants' access to

what have been considered common lands. Paramilitary gangs were formally dissolved as part of a 2003–6 demobilization process negotiated with the administration of President Álvaro Uribe, but reinvented themselves in real life as criminal gangs (*bandas criminales* or BACRIMS). Taussig refers to them throughout the book as (X)paramilitaries—“(X) as in ex but not really ex”—to stress the continued existence and logic of paramilitary violence and terror controlled by capitalist interests.

In a nod to his earlier book's examination of cocaine as the “new gold,” Taussig presents the oil palm as the “new sugar”: “just as sugar . . . was to colonialism, so oil palm is the postcolonial equivalent in terms of economic, social, and ecological impact.” He doesn't provide much in the way of statistics on the importance of palm oil in global food chains beyond an estimate that by 2020 world production will have doubled since 2000, but he notes that it can be found in “half the packaged goods in your supermarket,” including most processed foods, potato chips, chocolate bars, ice cream, makeup, nail polish, you name it. It is also used in biofuel, of course. In this sense, indeed, “palm oil is an elixir from which all manner of being emerges. . . . An alchemist's dream.” Or, putting it differently: “you and I are becoming palm trees.”

In northern Colombia, the monocropping of oil palm required draining large parts of the swamplands and building dikes, entailing a radical reshaping of the local ecology—domination of nature, postcolonial-style. Local peasants' co-

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operatives that resisted change were terrorized by plantation owners' henchmen. Death threats and social cleansing (*limpieza social*) became part of everyday vocabulary. This is not the first time that peasant livelihoods were threatened in the region. Before the arrival of oil palm plantations in 2007, the swamp-dwellers were harassed by wealthy cattle ranchers who wanted access to their lands.

Taussig views these changing conflicts from Las Pavas, "a village of 144 houses" (did he count them all?) built on sandy soil on the idyllic-sounding "Island of the Papaya Grove" at the convergence of two of Colombia's largest rivers, the Cauca and the Magdalena. His beautiful ethnographic observations really bring this place to life:

Far off under a fierce sun I could see Efrain's adolescent daughter washing clothes in the shade of a crude thatch *ramada*. I could feel the thump of the clothes being beaten against some solid object, then the sound of the heavy wet material whacked as if to death, on and on. Her shadow was a silhouette sliding on the horizon as she walked back and forth over the clothes spread on the ground while we talked. Another daughter, face lined by the elements, was a silent witness to our meeting, shelling corn in her strong hands, the thumb, like a curved chisel, taking the brunt of the action.

*"You and I
are becoming
palm trees."*

Death is also vividly evoked, as in a detailed description of the slaughter and skinning of a cow. Ample photographs are included (and always commented on) to further illustrate what this rural place looks and feels like. One chilling photo shows an (X)paramilitary on horseback pointing a video camera at locals. The reader is left to wonder how this recording may be used against the peasants.

If my description suggests there is a straightforward narrative in *Palma Africana*, it is anything but. The entire text is split into sections headed by Roman numerals. There are no chapters or subheadings. That is because Taussig conceives of his book as a "serpentine text: detailed, anecdotal, montaged, and jumping through puddles of tedium." He says, "I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing as I go along . . . Things arise in writing as in a dream." Roughly half of the book, in fact, is dedicated to reflections on the "cut-up method" he has borrowed from the novelist William S. Burroughs.

This narrative strategy has multiple effects, which can be humorous at times, bewildering at

others, or annoying perhaps, depending on the reader's mood. Consider, for example, the sudden inclusion—out of nowhere—of a reflection on a Palm Sunday in Brooklyn, where Taussig saw African American children "carrying palm leaves clutched awkwardly to their chests," a tradition he links to "a Jewish custom signifying victory" that became "a sign of peace when Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey." The reader may wonder at how tenuously this fits in with the rest of the book, and be excused for thinking that Taussig might have been on acid or *yagé*, a hallucinogen found in Colombian Amazonia, as he wrote these lines.

But I'd say this is pretty much his point. Letting his mind go all over the place—quite literally—allows him to make connections that go beyond the usual denunciations found in NGO reports and academic writings on violence and terror in Colombia, which have long since lost their power to shock us as this violence has become horribly routinized. Taussig's question is always: How do I write about this? Where "this" is always something more complex and varied than our words seem to suggest.

Taussig enlists a varied group of illustrious travel companions on his serpentine journey (a colleague of mine commented, "I don't know why he always uses the same European writers"). As usual, Walter Benjamin figures prominently, this time in particular his reflections on the role of the storyteller in bourgeois society. There are also frequent allusions to Proust, Kafka, and various other authors. Roland Barthes and Heinrich Heine are invoked on multiple occasions, introduced early on like a duet of Orientalist dreamers getting carried away by the stereotypical magic of the bending, seductive palm tree.

Taussig sees a brother in arms in Barthes and is particularly enthralled by the "fictocritical" writing in the French theorist's autobiographical work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, "which, by the way, is also a serpentine book." The connection is the palm tree: Barthes, invoking a poem by Heine in which trees speak, calls it "the loveliest of all letters." Like Barthes, Taussig is "consumed with interest about writing" and what Barthes called "the pleasure of the text." One cannot help but think that *Palma Africana* could just as well have been titled *Michael Taussig by Michael Taussig*. Or would that be an upcoming title, perhaps? ■

December 2018

INTERNATIONAL

US-China Relations

Dec. 1—The presidents of the US and China, Donald Trump and Xi Jinping, meet in Buenos Aires on the sidelines of the G20 summit, the annual gathering of leaders of industrialized nations, and agree to a truce in an escalating trade war. Trump says he will hold off on a new round of 25% tariffs on Chinese imports that he had threatened to impose Jan. 1, and Xi pledges to increase purchases of US products. The 2 leaders set a 90-day deadline for reaching a comprehensive trade deal.

Dec. 5—Responding to a US extradition request, Canadian authorities arrest Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer and daughter of the founder of Huawei Technologies, China's largest telecommunications company. She has been charged in US federal court with defrauding banks in a scheme to circumvent US sanctions on Iran. In apparent retaliation, China within days arrests 3 Canadians, including a former diplomat, on charges of endangering national security.

BAHRAIN

Dec. 1—Six women are elected to the lower house of parliament, doubling their number in the 40-seat chamber. However, opposition supporters boycotted the election. The main opposition parties have been outlawed, including Al-Wefaq, which represented the Shia majority in a nation ruled by a Sunni royal family; its leader was sentenced to life in prison in November for allegedly spying for Qatar.

BANGLADESH

Dec. 30—The ruling Awami League wins a lopsided victory in violence-marred parliamentary elections, clearing the way for a 3rd consecutive 5-year term for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Candidates for the ruling alliance win 90% of contested seats, but opposition leaders assert that the vote was rigged after a campaign of intimidation and politically motivated prosecutions of government critics. Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been jailed since February on corruption charges.

CONGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF

Dec. 30—Widespread voting irregularities mar a presidential election to choose a successor to Joseph Kabila, who has held office since 2001. The election had been delayed for 2 years. Both opposition front-runner Martin Fayulu and Kabila's chosen successor, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, claim victory, but the national election commission delays the release of official results. The commission had postponed voting until March 2019 in 3 opposition strongholds, citing an Ebola outbreak.

FRANCE

Dec. 10—Following weeks of violent protests in Paris and across the country against his economic policies, President Emmanuel Macron addresses the nation, acknowledging the “anger and indignation” of those who view him as favoring the rich. He announces a package of tax cuts, a supplement to the minimum wage, and other relief for the middle and working classes.

INDIA

Dec. 11—In elections in 5 key states, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) suffers its worst electoral setback in years, losing over

100 legislative seats in the northern “Hindi belt,” long seen as a bastion for its brand of Hindu nationalism. The opposition Congress party unexpectedly wins in 3 states formerly controlled by the BJP: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. National parliamentary elections are to be held by May.

ITALY

Dec. 19—The populist governing coalition of the right-wing League and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement reaches a deal with the European Commission and agrees to reduce its planned deficit spending to avoid penalties for violating the Eurozone's fiscal rules. The government backs away from a confrontation after initially defying pressure to revise a 2019 budget loaded with tax cuts and spending increases that would have added to the national debt, already 1 of Europe's highest at over 130% of GDP.

POLAND

Dec. 17—Acceding to an EU demand, President Andrzej Duda signs a measure reinstating judges who had been ousted from the Supreme Court by a July law setting a mandatory retirement age, which was seen as a bid by the ruling Law and Justice party to fill the bench with loyalists. In October, the European Court of Justice ordered the Polish government to reinstate the judges. The European Commission, denouncing the purge as an affront to the rule of law, initiated a process that could have stripped Poland of its EU voting rights had it not backed down.

SYRIA

Dec. 19—Trump announces on Twitter that he has ordered the withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops remaining in Syria within 30 days. The announcement, which catches his own advisers by surprise, raises doubts about US objectives in Syria, such as eradicating ISIS and countering Iranian influence. It also exposes the US's Kurdish allies, who have led the ground war against ISIS, to attack by Turkish forces. Trump insists the troops can come home because the war against ISIS has been won, though many observers call that claim premature. Defense Secretary James Mattis Dec. 20 announces his resignation in a letter indirectly criticizing the president for undermining US alliances. Mattis says he will step down in 2 months, but Trump Dec. 23 announces that he will vacate his post by the end of the week.

UNITED KINGDOM

Dec. 10—Facing the prospect of almost certain defeat in Parliament, Prime Minister Theresa May postpones a vote on her unpopular compromise agreement to withdraw from the EU by a March deadline. May says she will try to extract further concessions, but EU officials have said they have no intention of renegotiating any of the key terms. May Dec. 12 survives a vote of no confidence brought by disgruntled members of her Conservative Party.

YEMEN

Dec. 13—Representatives of the Saudi-backed government and Houthi rebel forces, meeting for the 1st time in 2 years in Stockholm, Sweden, reach an agreement brokered by the UN to start a cease-fire in the Houthi-controlled port city of Hodeidah. Both sides promise to withdraw forces from the area, allowing the UN to use the port for delivering humanitarian aid. The 4-year-old civil war has put 14 million at risk of starvation. ■

