

Notes on Some Troubled Democratizations, and Some Deficits in Social Justice^{*}

Laurence Whitehead
(Nuffield College, Oxford)

1. LASA performs many valuable functions, one of which is to direct attention to the “big issues” preoccupying all those concerned with underlying trends in the region. In the past such themes have included dependent development, bureaucratic authoritarianism, the debt crisis, transitions to democracy, and the reform of the state. This time, and in my opinion very appropriately, LASA President, Susan Eckstein and the Programme Committee have chosen to highlight “Democratization and Social Justice”, with an interrogation mark. Like the earlier themes this one is potentially so vast that it could encompass more or less everything we can study about contemporary developments in the region. As always, the actual texture of Latin American realities is so dense and varied that it may seem an impertinence to try to condense it all into one or other of these loose frameworks. Any discussion we can carry on at this level of abstraction must draw on a vast stock of implicit knowledge (and assumptions) about the social processes underway in

• Paper for discussion at the LASA Panel FEA 13 on “Democratization and Social Justice?”

the sub-continent. The great majority of LASA panels are concerned with assembling and cross-checking various interpretations of much more specific themes and experiences that could validate or undermine any claims we can make here. Evidently there is a continuing demand for opportunities to stand back from all that complexity, and reflect more abstractly on selected analytical themes, but this can only be excused if what must be left unsaid in this panel connect with can be heard in the conference as a whole.

2. There may be more than one way to interpret Susan's choice of title and speakers for this panel. My interpretation is "now that the region has generally achieved the transitions to democracy you were advocating, what can you answer to those critics who said you were turning your backs on social justice?" That blunt formulation is certainly mine, and not hers, but anyway it seems a good question, and has helped me to organise thoughts for these notes.
3. In the 1980s there were thought to be good reasons, both analytical and political for highlighting the distinction between the establishment of a democratic political regime and the satisfaction of popular aspirations, including desires for social justice. It was considered essential to challenge the widespread tendency to conflate "democracy" with "the

good society”, a tendency understandably accentuated by the polarising experience of mobilisation against authoritarian rule and its injustices.

4. In the Americas democracy has long been a term charged with positive associations, so there is bound to be a degree of contestation over the definition of the term, since that relates to who can appropriate its benefits. Nevertheless, in theoretical terms, recent contests have been over a relatively restrictive and precise range of alternative definitions, nearly all of which excluded – or at the very least pushed to the margins – many concerns that are necessarily central to most discussions of social justice,. For example, can we speak of establishing a modern democratic regime in a society still characterised by widespread illiteracy? Historically this has been a serious question, with some well-respected democracies confining votes to literates, and others granting universal suffrage (while some used literacy tests as a covert form of discrimination against social groups they wished to disfranchise for other reasons). By the 1980s there was both a practical and an analytical consensus in Latin America (and more generally) that a democratic electoral regime involves universal suffrage. This ignored the old radical tradition, which had argued that those without the capacities for exercising political autonomy should not be enfranchised, since they would vote at the behest of their masters. In theory, it would have been possible to advocate universal suffrage, but only in

conjunction with a mass literacy drive and other reforms (e.g. land redistribution) to free all voters from the status of dependency, but that was not part of the consensual definition of the term in the 1980s. Instead a “minimum” or “procedural” definition was advocated, and accepted. Implicitly or explicitly this was justified on grounds such as that if illiterates got the vote then they could press their representatives to provide them with education; that waiting until illiteracy was eradicated before establishing full democracy would be playing into the hands of the authoritarian elites; that in any case experience in South Asia and elsewhere showed that a partly illiterate electorate could nevertheless sustain a worthwhile system of democratic institutions; and that in Latin America, at least, it was radical demands for confiscatory land reform and socialist literacy campaigns that had paved the way to authoritarian repression in the first place. The underlying theme was that the best was the enemy of the good. These mostly pragmatic considerations were bolstered by more theoretical arguments about democracy as an institutional system based on structured bargaining within an agreed framework of rules, and about the centrality of elite compromise, especially if a new regime was to be established by consent and maintained without extra-constitutional conflict.

5. One way of characterising these discussions in the 1980s would be to say that most hoped for “transitions” to democracy in Latin America were still viewed as uncertain and problematic. There was believed to be a narrow line between a relapse into authoritarian rule, if the risks of transition seemed too threatening to elite interests; and lurching beyond democratic institutionality into a radical variant of authoritarianism, if the excluded majority became fully mobilised. But if these twin dangers could be averted until an inclusive system of institutional representation became established, then it was plausible to suggest that in due course the transition would pave the way for stable and accountable democracy, conditions under which the postponed problems of social injustice could eventually be tackled in an orderly manner. This final consideration was often not so clearly articulated as the more urgent part of the argument, but it lurked in the background, and probably provided some comfort at least to those who, having been exposed to socialism or Marxism earlier in their careers, felt uneasy about their switch from a more “substantive” to a more “formal” (one might even say “bourgeois”) conception of democracy.
6. But now almost a decade has past since the last clearcut “transition” from authoritarian rule were initiated in Latin America. (Chile, Panama and Paraguay all began their transitions in 1989. I do not include the Central American peace process here, because it could be argued that

democratization preceded pacification; and I do not include Mexico because the beginning of its transition has never been clearcut). From the perspective of the late 1990s earlier fears about the stability of these transitions seem overblown. Instead, concern is focussed on the price that had to be paid to secure their durability. From the standpoint of September 1998 that semi-concealed premise ("that in due course the transition would pave the way for conditions under which the postponed problems of social injustice could eventually be tackled in an orderly way") requires much closer critical scrutiny.

7. In the brief format of these notes I have selected the following topics for comment:-
 - i) Which aspects of a broad "social justice" agenda are most likely to be addressed by the strengthening of democratic institutionalities, and which aspects seem less responsive to that process? (Para 8 below)
 - ii) given the current prevalence of rather downbeat expectations of what democracy can deliver (a "low intensity" or "depoliticised" vision of democracy, according to some commentators) what conceptions of social justice are likely to prove politically "marketable" in present conditions, and which face dismissal as "utopian"? (Para 9)

- iii) does current regional experience suggest much association between the solidarity of democratic institutions, on the one hand, and the capacity to promote worthwhile forms of social justice, or the other? (Para 10).

 - iv) according to the predominant official discourse of the 1990s, the only really effective way to promote social justice in Latin America in the long run is by pressing ahead with an elaborate agenda of liberalising and pro-market reforms. How solid are the links in that argument, and how does it relate to processes of democratization? (Para 11).

 - v) under conditions of heightened international integration, and the erosion of state autonomy and authority, can even the most well-institutionalised democratic regimes do much to promote worthwhile improvements in social justice at the national level? (Para 12).
8. Obviously not all aspects of a broad “social justice” agenda are equally affected by the prevailing form of political regime. At one end of the spectrum, many features of social injustice are connected with the high incidence of extreme poverty in parts of the region. Malnutrition, lack of basic shelter or healthcare, economic marginalization, can all be considered both products of and producers of severe social injustice.

But theorists of democratic transition in the 1980s and analysts of democratization in the 1990s are more or less of one accord in minimising the connection between the establishment of a democracy and the reduction of extreme poverty. Other variables are invoked to explain variations in the poverty head count, and at best it is argued that democracy may be indirectly supportive of them. (However, Amartya Sen's influential arguments about the strength of the linkages to be found in parts of Asia probably deserve more of a systematic hearing in Latin America)

At the other end of the spectrum, it is stressed that even people living in severe poverty stand to benefit from the modest improvements in civic rights that are expected to accompany democratization. The right to have your vote counted honestly, the right of petition, the right to organise and to communicate freely, these are also aspects of social injustice that are of value in themselves, and that can be directly associated with political regime change. Admittedly, this is a rather abstract claim, and ethnographic evidence points to a more complex reality, but the principle is clear – some aspects of the social justice agenda can be directly connected to the contemporary discourse of democratization, while others cannot.

Beyond this very general assertion, it is essential to keep in mind that within the limits set by the new rules of the political game the claims of social justice will be open-ended, and will vary in structure and salience according to the preferences of the electorate. Thus, in some countries group rights of one form or another have been propelled to the foreground by popular demand. In Brazil for this reason the claims of the landless have recently reoccupied the political agenda to an unexpected degree. In others, physical insecurity and the absence of a reliable justice system have emerged as the central themes of public policy. Sometimes gender issues take centre stage. All these, and others not listed, are plausible components of a broad “social justice” agenda. All of them can be taken up and processed through the democratic political system, not only in ways that contribute to the eventual strengthening of overall social justice in the society, but also in ways that institutionalise injustice (for example when an unreliable penal regime is made even harsher, or when the rights of one group are strengthened to the detriment of other equally valid claimants). In short, there can be no neat one to one equivalence between establishing democratic institutions (however “substantively”) and achieving social justice outcomes. There is no escaping disaggregation here.

9. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable and generally unexpected reality that in most of Latin America the persistence of a multiplicity of acute forms of

social injustice has generally coincided, for a decade or more now, with a more or less stable and routinised operation of democratic governance. This observation either leads to the drastic conclusion that the region's new democratic leaders are totally insulated from the social aspirations of their constituents, or it indicates that the justice most people seek is in some way – slowly, partially, distortedly – being processed by the institutions in place. Insulation, distortion and delay can all be plausibly invoked to weaken the postulated linkage between democratization and social justice, but of course they all imply that some linkage is also to be expected. Following from that line of analysis, then, we may need to reflect on what characteristics of the region's neo-democracies mesh with what facets of the contemporary understanding of justice to produce at least a fragile modus vivendi between the two.

This relationship can be considered from the institutional side. As very broad generalizations here it can be said that public policy priorities to date have emphasised rewriting of rules of the political game; stabilising the economy in a climate of state shrinking; and preserving social peace without unnecessary resort to overt coercion. This would clearly be a fairly demanding agenda in any society. In those characterised by severe inherited inequalities and injustices, and especially in those with a previous tradition of “populist” political mobilization and incorporation, such an agenda has been especially difficult to pursue. So instead of

raising expectations by promising to right past wrongs, the emphasis has generally been on dampening down “unrealistic” expectations, conciliating formerly antagonistic interests, and reducing the stakes involved each time one elected government gives way to another. This is not to say that all grievances concerning past mistreatments have gone unattended – a range of Truth and Justice enquires testify to the contrary. But on the whole, and compared to the earlier history of democracy in the region, these neo-democracies have been low key, down beat, and demobilising. The emotional intensity of previous crusades for social justice has been conspicuous by its absence.

This generalization can be connected to a second, even more broad-based and approximate, which concerns societal perceptions about the nature and possibilities of justice. In many countries it seems clear that the failings of populism and the traumas of authoritarian rule were very sobering in their impact on social expectations, and that for large sectors of opinion that sobering effect is not just transitional. Anyone who witnessed the intensity of feeling that accompanied demands for redistribution and equitable participation in, say, Chile before 1973, or Argentina pre-1976, or in Bolivia in the lead up to 1985, must be impressed by the contrasts evident in those countries throughout the 1990s. But if the claims of social justice no longer legitimise demands for expropriation or quasi-insurrectionary strike action (to take the most

extreme manifestations of the old syndrome) that does not mean all aspirations towards equity have been abandoned. As a result of liberalization it has evidently become more acceptable to demand justice in the form of equitable treatment for citizens and consumers, for example. Such demands express a much more privatized and non-conflictual understanding of entitlements, but they are still quite ambitious, and are at best still only erratically and imperfectly met. For example, it would be instructive to contrast the discourse of aspiring *ejidatarios* in Mexico in the 1970s with that of the *Barzonistas* of the 1990s. My hypothesis is that whereas the Mexican state under the Salinas technocracy could almost entirely shrug off the former type of claim for justice, it has now become far more vulnerable to the appeals of the latter. Of course, to become an aggrieved debtor in the 1990s it was necessary first to have some rightful assets and a reasonable income. Liberalization probably promotes the conception of justice most congenial to the middle classes, and marginalises some claims of the poor. But it would be rash to assume that the poor have no interest in prevailing "low intensity" interpretations of justice. It is not just the trivialising and individualising influence of the mass media that influences their outlook, (though that no doubt contributes). In many countries the poor were the worst sufferers from inflation when the aspiring welfare state proved unable to finance itself, and in many countries they have cast their votes for neo-liberal continuity,

disbelieving promises that more radical policies would deliver them greater distributive justice.

10. Latin America and the Caribbean is a vast and diverse sub-continent about which to generalise, so some geographical disaggregation may be useful as an antidote to the over-simplifications of para 9 above. After all, about a third of the states represented at the Summits of the Americas have unbroken records of democratic elections under civilian constitutional rule dating back to independence. Whether these are “fully consolidated” democracies is another debate, but countries like Belize and Barbados provide rather successful examples of democratization, and their experiences of managing issues of social justice can be usefully compared with those of more troubled neo-democracies. They inherited injustices and inequalities from colonial rule, but not from military authoritarian rule. Having secured independence by negotiation they seem to have a more inclusive and self-confident politics than in societies that have recently been cowed by repression. No doubt they still fall far short of most desirable performance on many social justice criteria, but not so badly as some of their neighbours which are just emerging from authoritarian rule. The Belize/Guatemala contrast is particularly noteworthy, but more generally the post-colonial Caribbean democracies show up favourably on the UNDP’s “human development index” (which includes various measures

of equity and participation). Controlling for per capita income, these uninterrupted democracies display evidence of high human development (perhaps a rough proxy for social justice), whereas on the whole the opposite is true for South American neo-democracies. However, it also needs to be conceded that in general these relatively equitable regimes do not seem capable of generating much sustained economic dynamism. Also, they have such small populations and are so weakly linked in the to the rest of Latin America, that their examples exert scant influence. If they are considered at all, outside their immediate vicinity, they are probably dismissed as too exceptional to learn from, as merely “getting by” at the margins of the international system.

Costa Rica provides a rather more serious challenge. Again, it is possible to debate whether or not we should call it a “fully consolidated” democracy, but an unbroken half-century of civilian constitutional rule provides some basis for assessing whether this regime type might make a difference in the delivery of social justice. Again, not everything Costa Rica has achieved in this area lives up to the highest standards of performance, but in relative terms – once more as confirmed by the human development index - the results are fairly positive. Again, it can be argued that the regime type is not the sole determinant of those results, and indeed that a favourable human development endowment may have contributed to the stability of the democratic political order.

Nevertheless, we have here another strand of evidence suggesting that a durable democracy could be conducive to social justice. (It would be possible to continue in this vein, invoking the more controversial example of Puerto Rico, and perhaps even trying to argue that redemocratization in Uruguay gave rise to another relatively solid democratic regime with fairly good equity indicators, but for now the most clearcut examples will have to suffice).

The major post-authoritarian neo-democracies of South America can now be contrasted with this lengthy list of smaller but more solid and more equitable democracies. In most cases, after controlling for per capita income, their human development indicators are low. Gini coefficients of income inequality are particularly adverse, but the same applies to other social justice-related measurements, for example of literacy, malnutrition, and infant mortality. A decade or more after the transition from authoritarian rule it is still hard to find much evidence that democratization is producing overall improvements in equity for these countries as a whole. (Uruguay might count as a partial exception and Chile's fast growth has produced strong employment growth and a large reduction in extreme poverty, if not in inequality). But it is also important to note that some of the biggest deteriorations in social justice seem to have occurred, not in the post-transition countries but in Colombia and Venezuela, where much more longstanding democratic regimes are in

decay. Overall, then, geographical disaggregation complicates the picture, and casts doubt on some over ambitious generalizations linking regime change to social justice outcomes.

11. In the 1990s much official policymaking has been shaped by an alternative, and equally ambitious, theory. This links the promotion of social justice, not to regime type, but to the sustained pursuit of economic orthodoxy and market liberalising reforms. The general argument is that, at least in the long run, sound and successful integration in the international economy will provide the stability and resources that are essential if the inherited “social deficit” attributable to past decades of economic mismanagement is eventually to be cleared. If that seems to rely too heavily on “trickle down” or economic determinist forms of reasoning it can be bolstered by the argument that successful economic reforms go hand in hand with “reform of the state”, and that a more effective and accountable state can not only make better economic policy, but also better social policy. Whereas in other parts of the world this discourse of “good governance” enables western donors to side-step the question of democracy, in Latin America the adoption of market liberalising reforms coincides with a regional consensus on democratic government, so that there is at present no major conflict between pressing this argument and supporting democracy. Nevertheless, although all the terms in the equation can be

rendered consistent with each other, the question remains whether the postulated causal connections are reliable. In fact, each step in the argument is open to question.

To start with, in current market conditions there are good grounds for doubt whether unqualified integration into the international economy will indeed generate the stability and resources needed to address the inherited “social deficit”. Financial liberalization, in particular, seems to carry risks of instability that have been underestimated by many advocates of orthodoxy. In their defence they may argue that failure to participate fully in a globalising economy will make it harder to tackle problems of social injustice, and they can still point to examples of successful integration and sustained growth (such as Chile). However the counter-factual is easier to doubt when the global economy is performing badly. Chile’s good growth record since she pioneered economic liberalization has not so far been replicated by all the others (e.g. Bolivia) who followed a similar path. The next debatable proposition is that, even when integration makes it possible to address the social deficit, the extra resources will in fact be directed to that purpose. International integration creates its own momentum, and an array of associated interests, that may well absorb all the additional wealth it creates. That, at least, is the risk, unless democratic controls provide a counterweight. But a “low intensity” depoliticised democracy

may not contain very strong countervailing pressures in favour of social justice (or perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that only those aspects of the broad social justice agenda that served the interests of international integration would be likely to do well). The fact that the countries with the strongest democratic institutions and the best human development indicators are not generally leaders in international integration and are not usually the fastest growing economies, provides some evidence of tensions in this area. “Reform of the state” might in principle reduce these tensions by generating a greater administrative capacity to reconcile them, and manage them efficiently, but the evidence so far is that such reform processes are almost invariably quite hybrid. In the economic area they may be quite advanced, but in social policy matters they tend to lag. “State shrinking” usually still prevails over capacity enhancement, at least in those areas where increased fiscal expenditure would be required. In conclusion, then, while the insights of economic orthodoxy may have something to contribute to the promotion of social justice in Latin America, it has almost certainly been oversold. It is particularly underspecified in the area of democratic governance.

12. Finally, there is a broader case for questioning the capacity of Latin America’s neo-democracies – or even the most solid democratic regimes in the sub-continent – to deliver much social justice to their citizens

under the constraints of intensified global competition. The autonomy of the state – whether democratic or authoritarian – has clearly been eroded by multiple processes of internationalisation. Traditionally “social justice” referred to the establishment of equitable arrangements for co-existence within a bounded national community. This was weakly supplemented by various provisions to encourage “international social justice”, which essentially involved emergency transfer of resources to those in extreme destitution as a result of manmade or natural disasters. This old compartmentalization between the national and the international is increasingly difficult to sustain, as the pretence fades that the governments of poor countries can deliver on promises of universal welfare provision. Even Cuba, where the most sustained efforts have been made, at enormous cost, the illusion is foundering. In fact, not even the “model” democracies of Canada and Sweden have been capable of resisting these international pressures and preserving their welfare systems, so how can insecure neo-democracies emerging from bankruptcy and hyper-inflation be expected to achieve ambitious equity goals?

There is clearly a good deal of force in this argument, and yet it would be far too reductionist – indeed a return to the crudest simplifications of dependency theory – to conclude that “globalization” precludes all progress in the direction of greater social justice in all neo-democracies.

For one thing, some states are better placed to resist or deflect the pressures international integration than others. For example, within Brazil it is still largely federal and state level programmes, and domestic market pressures, which determine the distribution of resources within the society. International trade and financial flows remain modest in relation to domestic transactions, and there is not that much international migration. The story is quite different in various Central American and Caribbean economies, where remittances from overseas may even exceed total export earnings. In the latter case purely domestic programmes of redistribution or welfare provision may be largely ineffective as a means to address the social equity concerns of the citizenry, and indeed popular conceptions of what constitutes social justice may be shaped more by the view that emigration offers an avenue of individual escape from inherently rickety and unjust domestic structures. Of course there are various intermediate possibilities between the extremes of Brazil and Guatemala, but overall the logic of the world market is not sufficient to determine the scope for public welfare policies, although in all countries it obviously imposes a constraint. In addition, it would be quite misleading to regard traditional forms of welfare provisions as necessarily the central plank of any modern social justice agenda. Indeed, whatever their idealistic origins in Latin America such programmes were often captured or perverted by narrow sectional interests that were far from reflecting the claims of

social justice, more broadly understood. If international integration weakens the monopoly power of such interests, and forces a restructuring of welfare provision on more accountable lines, it may support rather than undermine the cause of social justice. In fact a broad social justice agenda will include a wide variety of elements some of which (indigenous rights, women's rights, the non—exploitation of children) may be promoted by international pressures, while others (trade union rights, public health care provision) are more likely to be downgraded.

13. Overall, then, these reflections lead toward the rejection of various over-simplified propositions, rather than the affirmation of any positive conclusion. The “transitions” literature may have marginalised issues of substantive social reform, but that was not inappropriate in the context of the 1980s and need not involve a permanent neglect of equity and justice issues in the study of democratization as a whole. The economic orthodoxy of the 1990s may have been too mechanical and unreflective in its treatment of equity questions, but again that was no an entirely inappropriate response to protracted economic emergency, and need not preclude at least some forms of progress on social justice issues of high salience to the electorate, once market economics has taken hold. “Globalization” (whatever the term may mean) acts as some kind of constraint on older forms of welfare provision, but does not constitute an

absolute bar to all forms of social reform. Stable, long-established democracies may in general register better human development performance and more inclusionary styles of welfare provision than more recent and insecure post-authoritarian regimes, but there is nothing inevitable about this association. Some democracies prize social justice more than others (e.g. Canada v. the USA, or Norway v. the UK) and even in the least favourable political settings there is scope for creativity on welfare policies.

Finally, a “broad social justice agenda” will contain a wide array of partially competitive ingredients. Indeed, some elements may even be incompatible with each other (a decent minimum wage, and jobs for all). Popular conceptions of social justice vary across time and space, partly moulded by elite organizations from the church to the media, but also partly shaped by the lessons of experience. At present most of Latin America seems resigned to rather minimalist expectations about what can be achieved through the political actions licensed by constitutional rule.

Under democratic conditions it is of course, the electorate, rather than the external analyst, who must select the elements to be emphasised in any given society.

Laurence Whitehead
Nuffield College, Oxford
12th September 1998