

Conservative Autonomy Movements and the State in Latin America

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One of the lesser-noted consequences of Latin America's turn to the Left is that it has triggered protests by territorial actors who are now mobilizing in defense of the market. Not unlike neoliberalism itself, which was uneven in the costs and benefits it generated for distinct subnational regions, the repudiation of neoliberal reforms has also been territorially uneven, with important subnational jurisdictions seeking to preserve more market-oriented approaches. In some countries, territorial demands to protect the market from the Left turn have taken the form of conservative autonomy movements. In contrast to indigenous autonomy movements, which seek to defend communal models of governance and end centuries of abusive practices by elite-dominated states, these pro-market autonomy movements can be described as "conservative" because socioeconomic elites form their core constituency, because they occupy right-of-center space in the larger political system, and most importantly because they want autonomy in order to protect the regional status quo from national-level attempts at redistribution. The movements for autonomy in Bolivia's eastern *media luna* departments (Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz and Tarija) and in Ecuador's coastal city of Guayaquil are two salient examples.¹

How do conservative autonomy movements challenge the state? To challenge the state is to contest its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence or to seek to prevent or escape the implementation of its laws and policies. When we think of territorial challengers to the state in Latin America, we tend to imagine actors who deploy armed violence against the state, whether regional caudillos in the 19th century, Marxist-Leninist guerrillas in the second half of the 20th century, or the drug cartels of recent

decades. These actors are animated by the goal of taking over the state (either simply to control it in the caudillos' case or to transform society in the case of the guerrillas), or penetrating it sufficiently to permit the pursuit of illicit practices (in the case of the cartels).² Conservative autonomy movements challenge the state neither by trying to control nor infiltrate it, but by trying to get away from it, not necessarily in the literal sense of wanting to formally leave the state to create a new one, but in the less direct sense of seeking to vastly limit what state authorities can do in subnational territories. In proposals that go well beyond decentralization and federalism but that typically fall short of separatism, a variety of groups are articulating demands for autonomy that deserve to be considered among the most noteworthy of the contemporary challenges to the state's authority in Latin America.

In broader comparative perspective, some of what these conservative autonomy movements want does not pose fundamental challenges to the state, including the demand for the establishment of subnational legislatures and the type of subnational control over police forces that is common in Latin America's federal systems. In another sense, these movements might seem to be challenging specific governments (those headed by Presidents Evo Morales and Rafael Correa, for example) rather than the state *per se*. At the same time, other demands would provoke, if granted, fundamental changes in the traditional prerogatives of the central state. Unlike indigenous autonomy movements, which never controlled national governments, participants in conservative autonomy movements have lost influence at the center, fear that this loss of influence may well be permanent, and seek therefore to secure autonomy as

the only way to limit the authority of the central state in their territories.

First, reflecting their status as home to each country's most productive private sector activities, the *media luna* and Guayaquil movements have sought to secure for local use a much greater percentage of tax revenues derived from these activities. Frustrated by highly centralized budgetary practices and motivated by the belief that they are heavily subsidizing expenditures in other less productive regions, movement leaders have demanded that an autonomous region should be able to keep between one-half (Ecuador) and two-thirds (Bolivia) of the non-trade taxes collected in that region. If granted, such a concession would hamstring the central state's ability to implement redistributive legislation across the national territory. This potential is especially significant in Bolivia given the eastern location of the country's hydrocarbon resources.

Second, and perhaps even more fundamentally, at the heart of each movement is a still more radical demand that subnational regions be allowed to pursue a different development model from that endorsed by the national government. In Santa Cruz and Guayaquil, for instance, movement leaders argue that they simply want to opt out of the return to statism at the national level, and to preserve the outward-looking, market-oriented economic policies that have served their regions well in the past. In the words of one pro-autonomy leader in Guayaquil, "we are asking the national government for nothing but the freedom to maintain our own successful economic system."³ Considering the extent to which Latin America's political history across the centuries has been shaped by recurring, radical and deeply contested shifts in *national* development models (from

mercantilism to liberalism to statism to neoliberalism to “21st century socialism”), this insistence on territorially-differentiated development models would disrupt one of the state’s core prerogatives: the ability to set and pursue a single national path toward development. Is a “one country/ two systems” outcome feasible and/or desirable in Latin America, and if so, what would it mean for the Latin American state?⁴

Whereas violence against the state is the exclusive tactic of most territorial challengers, the demand for territorial autonomy to defend market-oriented models has largely privileged social movement behaviors instead (although the most radical members of these movements have indeed engaged in violence, as in the take-over and sacking of central government institutions in Santa Cruz in the aftermath of Evo Morales’s victory in the August 2008 recall election). In Bolivia and in Ecuador, the leaders of conservative autonomy movements have coordinated signature gathering campaigns for autonomy referenda, organized regionally-specific work stoppages and hunger strikes, and presided over multiple public rallies and demonstrations that have brought out hundreds of thousands of supporters—all in the service of a demand for territorial autonomy. Particularly critical are the long-standing civic associations and business chambers that have emerged as the chief mobilizing structures upon which the movements have depended for financial resources and logistical assistance. Where violence has occurred or been contemplated, as in the September 2008 massacre of MAS supporters in the department of Pando or the April 2009 discovery of an armed cell in Santa Cruz, the response of the central state has been swift (President Evo Morales sent soldiers to capture and arrest Pando Governor

Leopoldo Fernández, and several of Santa Cruz’s civic leaders now face terrorism charges in La Paz or have fled into exile).

The embrace of social movement tactics also means that movement leaders have taken great care in how they frame the demand for autonomy, and their choices in this regard are of special interest for the broader debate over public goods provision by the Latin American state. In Santa Cruz and Guayaquil, for instance, the argument is that the direct provision of public goods by the central state, along with statism more generally, has disproportionately favored the highland regions surrounding the national capital (La Paz and Quito). More importantly, movement leaders claim that it is this very neglect of the central state that has enabled their subnational regions to achieve superior outcomes in the areas of health, education, and infrastructure. Ignored by the central state, regional leaders in Santa Cruz and Guayaquil believe that partnerships with the local private sector explain these better outcomes. According to this framing, a cross-regional comparison of standards of living in the highlands and lowlands offers a damning indictment of statism and a strong argument for more market-friendly approaches.

Conservative autonomy movements are rare, largely because they require the territorial separation of political power, concentrated in national capitals, and economic power, concentrated in a sufficiently dynamic subnational region that is not the capital. In most countries in Latin America, political and economic centers are conjoined in the national capital, and territorial autonomy is not an option for the country’s most powerful private sector interests when they come to oppose the development model adopted by the national government.

While we should therefore not expect full-fledged movements to emerge elsewhere, we are indeed seeing heightened tension between subnational and national governments over the correct approach to development. In Argentina, for instance, when President Cristina Kirchner attacked a major pillar of that country’s neoliberal model by proposing to increase taxes on agricultural exports, the move triggered a prolonged conflict with governors who successfully defended the status quo (and who mostly belonged to her own party). In Venezuela, victories by the opposition in some of the country’s most economically vibrant states and municipalities (e.g. Carabobo, Miranda, Zulia and Caracas) have set the stage for persistent conflicts between President Hugo Chávez and governors and mayors, many of whom favor more market-oriented policies. Thus, while conservative autonomy movements pose particular challenges to the state, in post-decentralization Latin America they do not exhaust the many significant ways that subnational and national officials are now engaging in territorial battles over their preferred models of development.

Mapeando las interacciones entre desafiantes y agentes estatales en América Latina contemporánea

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Endnotes

- ¹ Kent Eaton, "Conservative Autonomy Movements: Territorial Dimensions of Ideological Conflict in Bolivia and Ecuador," *Comparative Politics* 43 (3) 2011: 291-310.
- ² Diane Davis, "Non-State Armed Actors, New Imagined Communities, and Shifting Patterns of Sovereignty and Security in the Modern World," *Contemporary Security Policy* 30 (2) 2009: 221-245.
- ³ Interview with Carlos Baquerizo, President of the Junta Cívica de Guayaquil, June 4, 2008, Guayaquil.
- ⁴ Benjamin Goldfrank and Andrew Schrank, "Municipal Neoliberalism and Municipal Socialism: Urban Political Economy in Latin America," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 (2) 2009: 443-62. ■

Introducción

En una región como América Latina en la que se observan evidentes manifestaciones de debilidad y/o precariedad estatal resulta relevante desarrollar categorías analíticas que nos ayuden a entender mejor los contextos sociopolíticos existentes y por ende los desafíos que enfrentan las autoridades y los y las ciudadanas comunes. En ese sentido es trascendental entender cómo la naturaleza, intereses y estrategias de los actores no estatales que desafían al Estado y, en contraposición a ellos, la reacción del Estado para preservar su capacidad infraestructural y su legitimidad, moldean el contexto sociopolítico existente (Feldmann y Luna 2012).

Imagine un barrio homogéneamente pobre y territorialmente segregado en las afueras de una de las grandes metrópolis de América Latina. Asuma que las instituciones estatales no están proyectadas eficientemente en esa área y que, por tanto, los agentes públicos que entregan servicios, como la policía, los profesores o los profesionales de la salud, están escasamente presentes. La infraestructura pública básica es mínima o simplemente inexistente. A pesar de estar geográficamente próximos, la localidad está funcionalmente aislada. Cite *Soleil*, un arrabal en la capital haitiana, Puerto Príncipe, ejemplifica esta situación: el débil Estado haitiano, pese a tener sede administrativa en la capital, casi no tiene presencia allí, por lo que la población está condenada a ingeniárselas para de alguna manera organizar la provisión de servicios públicos básicos, incluyendo la seguridad (Marcelin 2011).

Asuma ahora que después de cierto tiempo, la ausencia de la aplicación de la ley y la proximidad espacial del barrio con la ciudad, generan incentivos para que una

banda de micro tráfico de drogas comience a operar. En este segundo escenario, el Estado es "capturado" por un actor privado que desarrolla operaciones ilegales y que muchas veces termina *de facto* reemplazando al Estado, ya sea amenazando o cooptando a sus funcionarios. Con el tiempo, esta banda puede comenzar a participar en la provisión de protección social y servicios de bienestar con lo que consolida y legitima su presencia ante la población. La situación en muchas *favelas* de Rio de Janeiro ejemplifica esta situación: hay actores que desafían directamente al Estado, en particular traficantes de droga como el *Comando Vermelho*, que han tomado el control reemplazando al Estado. A pesar de su naturaleza violenta, ellos gozan de un alto grado de legitimidad entre los residentes (Arias 2006).

Finalmente, asuma que, por la razón que sea, los funcionarios estatales deciden entrar y "liberar" una zona que ha sido tomada por un grupo ilegal. Para tal efecto, ellos buscarán cerrar un trato con el actor que desafía su poder o alternativamente confrontarlo abiertamente a través de medios violentos en un intento de retomar el control y reintroducir el estado de derecho. Las redadas llevadas a cabo por la policía y los militares en Rio de Janeiro ejemplifican esta situación (Gay 2010; Koonings Kruijt 2007).

De este último ejemplo, conflicto entre el Estado y un desafiante, se pueden desprender tres escenarios adicionales. Primero, una situación en la cual la lucha entre el Estado y el desafiante perdura a lo largo del tiempo y consolida la violencia. Algunos barrios en urbes colombianas (Comuna 13 en Medellín) son ejemplos de lo anterior (Vargas 2009; Moncada 2010). Segundo, un escenario en el cual los funcionarios estatales locales llegan a un