

The Guillermo O'Donnell Democracy Award and Lectureship was established in 2017 to honor the distinguished career and pioneering intellectual leadership of the late Guillermo O'Donnell. This award recognizes outstanding scholarship in democracy studies or meritorious public service promoting democracy. The 2022 lecture was given on May 6 by Maxwell A. Cameron, University of British Columbia.



O'Donnell's Parable

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by **Maxwell A. Cameron**

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I speak from the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tlseil-Waututh First Nations. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples is ongoing throughout the Americas. I acknowledge, as a settler, the damage inflicted by colonialism and the need for reconciliation. This can only occur, I believe, within the framework of a strong constitutional democracy.

This award has special meaning for me because I can fix the date that I became a political scientist. It was the moment when, as an undergraduate, I first read Guillermo O'Donnell's *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*. From that day forward, as Luis Tonelli once said, I did not want to be *like* O'Donnell, I wanted to be O'Donnell! David Collier had edited *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, which led me to Berkeley, where I was fortunate to enjoy the company of an extraordinary cohort of graduate students working under David's mentorship. When I returned to Canada to teach at Carleton University, I took a detour into the NAFTA debate. It wasn't until 1996–1997, during a fellowship at the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame,

that I finally had the chance to meet Guillermo. I attended his seminar on democratic theory, and that set me on the path to today's talk.

I found Guillermo full of surprises. I remember him complaining that institutionalism had gone “too far” in political science. Here was someone who more than anyone else had shaped my thinking about institutions . . . and he was saying we had gone too far! He was interested in democratic theory, which, as a student of Max Weber, he insisted had to be realistic and sociologically grounded. I liked that. He had just written a brilliant critique of theories of democratic consolidation, which suggested much of the existing literature was “teleological.” That was a surprise, since I assumed O'Donnell would be a major contributor to that literature. And he taught us to think of democracy, liberalism, and republicanism as three distinct traditions, often mutually reinforcing but sometimes in tension. Liberalism, in particular, he argued, was counterintuitive outside the established democracies of the northwest quadrant of the world.

One of the most vivid lessons that Guillermo taught us came in the form of a parable. I would like to use this parable to think about the ways in which our understanding of democracy has

evolved since the transitions in the 1980s, through the debate on consolidation and delegative democracy in the 1990s, to Latin America's left turns from 2000 and early 2010s, and finally to our current moment of polarization and democratic dysfunction.

I hasten to add that I don't claim O'Donnell would agree with anything I am about to say, and I regret he is not here to subject my argument to his incisive criticisms. Instead, I draw on a forthcoming book titled *Challenges to Democracy in the Andes: Strongmen, Broken Constitutions, and Regimes in Crisis*. I have edited this book with Grace Jaramillo and a terrific group of collaborators, and Lynne Rienner is publishing it a little later this year.

So, let me begin with "O'Donnell's parable." He asked us to imagine two cities (Guillermo and his wife, Gabriela Ippolito-O'Donnell, loved traveling in Italy, and I imagine he had in mind places like Florence, or perhaps Siena with its fresco the "Allegory of Good and Bad Government" in the Palazzo Pubblico). There is a Hobbesian war of all against all in one of the cities, a war caused by tensions between the rich and poor. After years of suffering and destruction, the citizens come together and agree to stop killing each other. Guillermo called this a "mediocre bargain," but he did not mean to imply that it was unimportant. Because once the bargain was reached, the denizens of the city returned to their daily lives, and then something marvelous happened: agriculture grew, commerce expanded, the arts and culture thrived, and political associations multiplied. In short, the city flourished. Seeing this, the second city decided to adopt the institutions of the first.

Now, the question Guillermo asked the class was: Would the result be the same? Would the second city flourish just like the first? This is an important question. As a master teacher, Guillermo didn't directly answer it, but left us to think it through.

One answer to the question comes from a certain kind of liberal institutionalism. Francis Fukuyama might be considered one of its leading advocates. In this view, institutions confer benefits on

societies, and societies compete with one another to capture these benefits by importing better institutions. Some societies win out over others. In this view, the winners are typically "the West," whose institutions confer benefits unattainable to societies organized on the basis of "non-Western" habits and customs. Despite withering critiques of modernization theory—not least by O'Donnell—much credence was given to this Eurocentric view by the end of the Cold War. The West had won. It was, according to the hubris of the time, the shining city on a hill for all others to emulate.

Guillermo gave us another way of thinking about this problem. He argued that democracy was based on an "institutionalized wager." The wager was that every *ego* agrees to respect the rights and freedoms of every *alter* in return for every *alter* respecting *ego's* rights and freedoms. And this is institutionalized in the sense that the rights and freedoms entailed by the wager are legally binding. I would add that the specific content would need to be worked out in the practice of politics. Legal institutions alone, unless they are enacted in everyday political practices, may be insufficient to uphold the wager. Whether the city is originating or imitating, the agreement needs to be based on the hard-fought struggle, the reluctant acceptance, and the legal institutionalization of the wager.

In this view, the second city would not necessarily replicate the results of the first for three reasons. One reason is that the second city would not have the same experiences. Their citizens would not have reached the agreement on their own. They would not necessarily have tried and failed, and tried again, and through this process learned to trust themselves and each other. Another reason is that the second city would be seeking the benefits of the mediocre bargain, but those benefits were actually a side effect of the process of learning to live together without killing each other in the originating city. It is one thing to create institutions to solve a problem, and another to seek the benefits that follow such solutions. Third, institutions, like fine wines, cannot so easily be exported from one place to another, and, when they are, they

often function differently. Institutions are not merely abstract rules. They are given meaning by their embeddedness in the formal and informal practices that constitute a form of life.

“O’Donnell’s parable” is not a model. Every democracy is a mix of original and imitative institutions. The key takeaway is that the quality of democracy depends less on the choice of the abstractly best institutions and more on how these institutions emerge from the political struggle for democracy and whether through that process citizens learn to live together in all their diversity and pluralism.

Keeping in mind these two ways of reading O’Donnell’s parable, let’s now consider the literature on transitions. The horrific crimes of Latin America’s military regimes in the 1960s and ’70s gave rise to a painful revalorization of democracy. The facile dismissal of liberal democracy as bourgeois or merely formal gave way to an appreciation for democracy as the essential foundation of human rights and the possibility of a decent civil society. An eloquent example is given by Sergio Bitar, the first speaker in this lectureship and a former Allende government official. His reappraisal of democracy came during imprisonment in a camp after the Pinochet coup.

For the generation that negotiated transitions from authoritarian rule, democracy meant civilian rule with elections plus the human rights and political freedoms necessary for them to be meaningful. O’Donnell favored Dahl’s term *polyarchy*, and he distinguished the electoral components of polyarchy (fair and institutionalized elections and the rights to vote, run for office, and serve out one’s term) from the surrounding rights and freedoms (the rights of assembly, association, and freedoms of speech and press) necessary for elections to serve as an expression of the will of the people.

Polyarchy was an explicitly political regime. It did not imply the achievement of social or economic equality. That remained on the horizon, as a future possibility. Indeed, the transitions were often based on conservative pacts that both

limited the ability to challenge property rights and provided a measure of impunity to the military. Not everyone was included in the pact. In the political judgment of the most politically relevant actors, however, such compromises and exclusions were necessary.

Now, by the time most of the transitions from authoritarian rule were complete, Latin America had adopted, willingly or reluctantly, the neoliberal model of development. The simultaneity of transitions to markets and democracy, combined with the fall of the Berlin Wall, produced triumphalism and hubris among some observers who believed that liberal democracy could solve all of history’s problems. In this view, Latin America’s transitions represented a decisive victory for liberalism.

Such hubris was punctured immediately, however, by the appearance of what O’Donnell called “a new monster”—namely, “delegative democracy.” This was electoral democracy without checks and balances, where the ruler, having won a popular majority, would govern as they saw fit, unencumbered by constitutional niceties like an independent judiciary. This type of democracy was more majoritarian than liberal or republican. It was not modeled on the characteristics of democracy in the originating countries and did not conform to the theories of democracy produced by political scientists in these countries. In this context, O’Donnell issued his magnificent broadside against the consolidation literature, a literature that the transitions volumes had seemed to be teeing up. This led to the second major debate on democracy in Latin America.

O’Donnell insisted that Latin American democracies were not immature versions of established democracies. We should not hold up established democracies (or some abstraction or idealization of them) as the standard against which to assess all democratizing nations. We should not see the absence of key attributes in new democracies as evidence that they are progressing toward but just have not yet achieved full consolidation. Rather we should recognize the diversity of democratic regimes

and variation in the quality of democracy, which depends on issues not yet well theorized in democratic theory in the originating countries.

This led to O'Donnell's work on horizontal accountability. He stressed the importance of institutions that can and will hold themselves accountable. And it led to his critique of Schumpeterian electoral democracy, which he argued neglected the state and legal conditions that were necessary for elites to compete for the peoples' votes. In this second major debate, O'Donnell's work helped foreground aspects of the legal system and the state. The rule of law and horizontal accountability were necessary conditions for the functioning of any democratic regime.

It was precisely these elements of the political system that were missing in Peru and which enabled President Alberto Fujimori to close Congress, suspend the constitution, and rule by decree with broad popular support in 1992. It became clear to me, as a close observer of Peruvian politics at the time, that democracy could be destroyed not only by coups but also by the undemocratic behavior of democratically elected politicians. Liberal institutionalists framed the problem as the rise of "illiberal democracy" and suggested that perhaps democracy was less important than liberalism. But in Latin America and elsewhere, liberalism has often been aligned with authoritarianism. We needed to democratize liberalism rather than promote liberalism at the expense of democracy.

Just as we began to understand these issues, the terms of the debate shifted once again. Latin America's left turns, beginning with a wave of popular mobilizations and culminating in a "pink tide" of electoral victories for the left, produced a revolution in participation which included attempts at refounding republican institutions by means of constituent assemblies. We moved beyond an appreciation of the "delegative" nature of rule, as one subtype of democracy, to the realization that the democracies that had emerged in the pacted transitions of the 1980s were too exclusionary, insufficiently participatory, and, in many respects, colonial, patriarchal,

and racist. Without robust mechanisms of representation, many new democracies retained oligarchical features. The "mediocre bargain" needed to be updated. A familiar slogan of this period called for democracy itself to be democratized.

At the same time, the Bolivarian revolutions exposed the risks associated with the kind of concentration of executive power that can occur when Caesarist democrats or demagogues seek to undermine the separation of powers and perpetuate themselves in office. Bolivarian movements filled the void created by the collapse of formal or informal systems of elite pacts, but their greatest weakness lay in their failure to recognize the crucial importance of loyal opposition in any constitutional arrangement. They brought about inclusion, but often at the expense of democracy's surrounding rights and freedoms.

From the vantage point of liberal institutionalism, Latin America's left turns seemed like a return to the bad old days of populism and authoritarianism. Some scholars argued that these left turns were fine—provided the left was social democratic and market-friendly. But the "bad left" was authoritarian and statist. Others argued that certain outsider populists were responsible for the rise of a new post-Cold War type of hybrid regime, namely competitive authoritarianism. Both these literatures offered important insights. For example, Jorge Castañeda noted that it was precisely the old left that was most likely to have moderated under democracy precisely because of the experience of repression under military rule. The literature on competitive authoritarianism reminded us of the importance of a reasonably level playing field for the opposition. Or quite simply, the importance of opposition in any system based on alternation in public office.

But if I may borrow a phrase, our focus on populism has gone "too far." Leaving aside the fact that we lack a solid definition of populism, and that the concept is applied indiscriminately to diverse cases, all too often the literature on

populism holds up liberal democracy as the normative standard against which to assess Latin American experience.

As Joe Foweraker and I have argued, and in this we echo both Ernesto Laclau and O'Donnell, populism is almost invariably a reaction against oligarchy: the persistence of oligarchic modes of rule gives rise to populist mobilization. This does not prevent populists from accommodating to oligarchic modes of rule, or oligarchs from using populist mobilization. We know better than to expect coherence from populism. But I want us to think about the role of liberalism in all of this.

Representative government without strong and autonomous popular-sector organizations and parties is as oligarchic as it is democratic. Liberal democratic institutions have always functioned differently in Latin America because of inequalities and colonial legacies. Liberalism means something different in Latin America. The persistence of populism tells us that Latin America continues to suffer from deep inequalities, neglect, marginalization, informalization, and the absence of government intervention to provide for the welfare of the public—all issues exacerbated by COVID-19.

Is it hard to understand why voters might reject elites and support populist outsiders in a country like Peru, where people were literally dying because the rich were hoarding oxygen for profit before and during a pandemic? The careening, to use Dan Slater's term, between populist mobilization and oligarchic modes of rule has generated intense polarization, and this brings us to the current moment in politics.

Today, I believe the debate on democracy is entering into a fourth phase. The Bolivarian movements have largely run their course. Chile is writing a new constitution according to procedures intended precisely to avoid the mistakes of the Bolivarian constituent assemblies. A perhaps unlikely proposal to convene a constituent assembly in Peru would follow a similar path. *Autogolpes* are still possible—maybe even in the United States. The storming of the Capitol on January 6 of last year was an

attempted *autogolpe*. In two cases—Venezuela and Nicaragua—authoritarianism has derailed democracy completely. But a more widespread problem is democratic dysfunction caused by social-media-fueled, hyperpartisan polarization, disinformation, and corruption—including the corruption of common knowledge.

Indeed, I would say that the “new monster” we face today is not just elected politicians who behave undemocratically. It is politicians—whether elected or not, because they are often the losers—who weaponize social media to deceive and gaslight the public in ways that politicize and weaken democratic institutions for corrupt purposes. This is a problem rooted less in institutions than in practices.

To some extent, polarization and politicization have always been a feature of Latin American politics—one has only to think of the late Douglas Chalmers's essay on the “politicized state” in Latin America, or O'Donnell's essay “State and Alliances in Argentina.” If we perceive the region to be more polarized today, that is in part because the Washington Consensus has broken down. The period of the Washington Consensus represented a specious depolarization of the region. The technocratic and managerial ethos of neoliberalism suppressed polarization at the expense of politics.

Today we are living through the “globalization of polarization.” One of the new aspects of the current polarization is the manipulation of social media by powerful and globally networked political and economic forces. I hasten to stress that polarization is not all bad. A measure of polarization is healthy in a democracy. It means that there are real choices, real alternatives on the table. When everyone clusters around the centre, politics is sapped of energy.

But the polarization we are seeing today is in large measure due to the radicalization of the right in response to the advances of progressive politics in many countries in the region. I'm thinking of the considerable gains that have been made in terms of awareness of gender discrimination, the advancement of rights of

sexual minorities. I am also thinking of the gains made toward inclusion through participatory innovations, the mobilization of Indigenous peoples, and consequently a new discourse on the rights of nature or *buen vivir*. Finally, I'm thinking of opposition to extractivism, and so on.

All of this is deeply threatening to privileged elites who are seeking to defend traditional hierarchies and power relations by attacking "gender ideology" or by using the fear of *chavismo* to defend the status quo. Now, the defense of traditional hierarchies is not a crime. The problem is that the meaning of democracy can become so contested that it becomes possible to destroy democracy in the name of democracy.

A case in point is Bolivia, where polarization in the years prior to the election in 2019 was driven by both the expansion of inclusion and the erosion of surrounding rights and freedoms, as well as violations of the constitutional order. This produced a backlash that led to the unconstitutional removal of Evo Morales from office. While this was celebrated in some quarters as a restoration of democratic rights and freedoms, the interim government was short-lived and repressive, which reinforces the point that the challenge is not simply to get liberal democracy back on track but rather to find ways in which deeply divided societies can agree on democratic procedures for resolving differences.

This is very hard to do when politicians lacking a sense of responsibility stir up anti-democratic passions, undermining democracy in the name of democracy. Let me give an example of such a demagogue. Consider the "Andean Trumpism"¹ of Peruvian presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori, who narrowly lost the presidential runoff election in June 2021 to Pedro Castillo.

She claimed, baselessly, that the election was stolen. You might say, sarcastically, "news flash—politician caught lying!" But she was doing more than lying, she was gaslighting.² She led a well-funded and organized effort to overturn an election based on the false claim that . . . the election had already been overturned! She mobilized an army of lawyers to challenge "systematic fraud," demanding the annulment of hundreds of thousands of votes. Her claim was that there was an international leftist conspiracy to deny her election. And the "evidence" she produced was that she lost by wide margins in the poorer rural areas of Peru (while she won by wide margins in Lima).

Peru's electoral authorities conducted a normal election, and neither local tribunals nor international observers found evidence of systematic fraud. And yet it cannot be said that Peru has institutionalized elections, because elections are no longer decisive. Decisiveness means that when the votes are counted the campaigning stops. Fujimori refused to accept her loss. Instead she used spurious allegations of wrongdoing to build a political movement in the streets, in the armed forces, and in the media, positioning herself as a bulwark against a geopolitical plot by international communism. Eighty-five percent of her supporters, and 65 percent of the country at large, came to believe that there were signs of fraud in the election.

Fujimori's behavior was not criminal, but the fact that it was widely supported by her political base and powerful allies in major institutions tells us either that some voters were ignorant and misguided or they were prepared to deny the right to vote to other voters—or both. The effort to deny votes was a kind of an attempt to deny reality. I use the term *denial* in this context in the same way we might talk of climate denial, or COVID denial, or science denial. It is an affront to the institutionalized wager.

¹ César Hildebrandt in *La Tercera*, June 13, 2021, quoted in *LAWR*, June 17, 2021.

² Another example of a gaslighting Trumpian politician is Jair Bolsonaro, who "warned that Brazilians 'could not permit' the existing electoral system to remain in place and that there 'could not be elections that create doubts among voters,' citing unproven claims of electoral fraud"! See "Brazil: Bolsonaro Threatens Democratic Rule, Harasses Supreme Court, Signals He May Cancel Elections, Violates Free Speech," *Human Rights Watch Report*, September 15, 2021.

It did more than expose deep divisions in Peruvian society. We already knew there were deep divisions based on class, ethnicity, and geography. More importantly, it exposed a racist unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of an electoral majority based on votes from the south and central highlands, just as Trump challenged votes in Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia. And the same people who wanted to overturn a legitimate election now bitterly oppose the idea of a constituent assembly because it would violate the constitution.

It is not that there are different knowledges or cultures at work here; the difference is between knowledge and deception, culture and corruption. It is the function of institutions to enable citizens to distinguish between common knowledge and fake news. Without this distinction, neither our freedoms nor our obligations are even intelligible. But the institutions that create common knowledge have been assaulted with the aim of delegitimizing them for corrupt purposes. In Peru, as in the US, institutions survived, but just barely. And not before damage was done to the electoral authorities. Not before officials were subjected to threats and intimidation. Not before the politicization of the armed forces, the proliferation of hate speech, attacks on Indigenous peoples, and above all, not before a great shadow of doubt was cast over the electoral legitimacy of the winner.

In short, the threat to democracy today comes not just from coups, self-coups, or presidential aggrandizement. And it is less a consequence of institutional design than it is of political practices. It comes from demagogues who undermine the “institutionalized wager” for corrupt purposes.

Let me end by returning to O'Donnell's parable. I have been contrasting two pictures of democratization in Latin America over the past several decades. In one, Latin America adopted the liberal democratic institutions of the West,

which constitute the best, if not the only form that contemporary democracy can take. In this view, the persistence of populist authoritarians is preventing these institutions from functioning properly, and this is causing backsliding and autocratization and contributing to a global democratic recession.

Obviously, aspects of this picture are accurate, but I believe it is excessively pessimistic and it misdirects our attention from deeper problems. An alternative view, which I find both more hopeful and realistic, is that Latin American transitions to democracy in general marked a critical step toward O'Donnell's mediocre bargain, but the specific content of the institutions that would emerge was always contingent. The hope was that a strong agreement on the importance of the electoral components of the regime would anchor the surrounding rights and freedoms necessary for elections to be meaningful. On this point, the jury is still out.

Decades of democratic rule have allowed for significant progress toward more inclusive regimes and the expansion of citizenship.³ In some cases, it is precisely deeper processes of social democratization that have caused the unraveling of exclusionary pacts. This can contribute to undermining democracy, as in Venezuela. It can generate the kind of backlash and polarization that has occurred in countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. While on balance, the region is more democratic today than in the past, democratic deepening has intensified divisions that now threaten the core electoral practices of democracy.

I believe that O'Donnell's vision of a citizens' democracy—that flourishing city—remains the most promising prospect on our horizon, in Latin America and globally. But the history of democracy shatters any illusion of linear, progressive, institutional change or convergence. Democracy is always a struggle—Weber's “strong and slow boring of hard boards.” Its gains are

³ Diana Kapiszewski, Steven R. Levitsky, and Deborah J. Yashar, eds., *The Inclusionary Turn in Latin American Democracies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020).

hard-won and never fully secure. Beware of placing too much reliance on institutions and laws. They are the institutionalization of the wager, not the wager itself.

One final reflection is in order, to return to the land acknowledgement I made at the start of this talk. It is important to recognize that citizenship is always contested and exclusionary. The medieval and ancient cities that we associate with the origin of democracy excluded slaves and women. One could imagine another chapter in O'Donnell's parable. In this further telling of the story, the flourishing city might become so powerful and prosperous that it begins to occupy new territories. It displaces and then attracts populations from other cities. Perhaps citizens from the originating city move to other lands and bring their institutions with them. That is, indeed, how settler colonialism works.

In this further telling of the story, there would be a need for reckoning with harms inflicted on noncitizens, outsiders, future generations, and nature. For those excluded and marginalized, autonomy or even exodus might be preferred to acceptance of the wager. Yet I retain the belief that deepening democracy and expanding citizenship is the best path forward if our goal is to decolonize our institutions and break out of the picture of ourselves in which we are imprisoned.

But that, unfortunately, will have to be the topic of another talk.

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