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Debate

Adding Insult to Injury: The COVID-19 Crisis Strikes Latin America

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ABSTRACT

This article takes on the task of historicizing the global crisis that unfolded after the outbreak of COVID-19, focusing on its particular dynamics in Latin America. It proposes a distinction between a first phase — an unmitigated crisis that lasted until the end of 2020 — and a second phase in the period since then, that is defined by managed crisis and lukewarm economic recovery. The first phase showed a profoundly fragmented local state response, the breakdown of capital's 'normal' capacity for reproduction, and a disarticulation of the world order. As of 2021, a different kind of crisis has been evident: the response has been more emphatic and more effective in re-establishing accumulation and a weak and fragile international order, but at a cost to legitimacy whose full extent is yet to unfold.

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a profound crisis for global neoliberalism. Unlike the climate crisis, which is unfolding gradually, the pandemic hit hard and fast in an already fragile global environment. In Latin America, the COVID-19 pandemic hit a region that was going through a crisis with multiple layers and variegated temporalities, playing out against the background of a global economic slowdown stemming from the 2008 global financial crisis. The sequence of the collapse of the US subprime market in 2007, the Euro zone crisis of 2009–11 and the subsequent stagnation of world trade impacted the region most significantly by bringing an end to the commodity boom after 2012 (Tooze, 2018). The crisis of COVID

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adds insult to injury in Latin America, coming after almost a decade of stagnation with the decline in the terms of trade, and it is shaped and amplified by two key long-term characteristics of the region: the highest global levels of inequality and record high levels of informality in the labour market (ILO, 2020).

In a nutshell, in the early 2000s Latin America became a 'global exception' to neoliberalism (Anderson, 2011) by virtue of experiencing limited and variegated processes of 'counter-neoliberalization' or 'post-neoliberalism' (Ruckert et al., 2016; Yates and Bakker, 2014), such as a modest decline in inequality (Lavinas and Fritz, 2015; Lustig et al., 2013). This 'Pink Tide' swept through the region, with candidates who espoused an anti-neoliberal rhetoric winning elections across most countries for more than a decade (the most notable exceptions being Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru; see Gaudichaud et al., 2022; Grigera, 2017; Webber, 2017). The wave coincided with the culmination of a long cycle of social protest against neoliberalism (associated with prominent social movements such as the MST in Brazil,[1] Mexico's Zapatistas or the *piquetero* movement in Argentina) that had begun in the mid-1990s, and also with a significant rise in the prices of primary commodities that started in 2002. This commodity boom — especially significant for a region with a heavy dependence on primary exports — began to decline in 2012, setting the stage for a long downturn and, in many cases, overt crises.

This backdrop of conjunctural shifts that preceded the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 was accompanied by a set of long-term traits that played a defining role in the particular path that the COVID-19 crisis took in Latin America. These were the record levels of inequality, the high degree of job informality, and the peculiar dynamics of social conflict and legitimation crises. Predictably, the pandemic has contributed to the shifting and deepening of these traits just as it has been shaped by them.

High inequality within countries is a distinctive and prevalent feature of the region, with many countries characterized by large disparities of income, consumption levels, access to education, land and basic services (Frankema, 2008; Gasparini et al., 2011). Taken as a whole, the region is the most unequal in the world.[2] The rates of labour informality are also high in Latin America, particularly for women. At 53 per cent (excluding agriculture), the region's rate of informality is double the OECD average (ILO, 2018: 18), although this figure is still significantly lower than the African estimate of 71

1. The Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra — MST).
2. Strictly speaking, sub-Saharan Africa as a sub-region has higher inequality than Latin America as a whole. However, Latin America has higher 'excess inequality' (that is, inequality above the level expected of a country with its GDP per capita). In terms of the pandemic, the comparison is less relevant given the relatively low known incidence of COVID-19 in Africa.

per cent and similar to rates in Southern Asia (59 per cent). In Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa women are more exposed to informal employment than men (ibid.: 76). Despite the modest decline in informal labour during the Pink Tide, the key fact remains that more than half of the workforce has limited access to social security and a variety of social services, since many countries opted to develop 'citizenship through employment' during the post-war boom rather than providing universal social services (CEPAL, 2020). In what follows, we will see how these elements contributed to the exacerbation of unequal health and social security provision in the region during the pandemic.

The following sections briefly examine the nature of crises from a theoretical standpoint, before turning to the two distinct periods that can be identified in the COVID crisis. The first was a moment of 'open crisis' during 2020, when the suspension of activities — presented as the only adequate policy response to the pandemic — led to mounting tensions and increased suffering. This section examines the nature of the lockdowns in a global context, and the inequalities of health provisioning in the region. The second period was a moment of 'managed crisis', catalysed by a lukewarm economic recovery and vaccination programmes, but one that still lingers on in a compounded crisis of legitimacy This section discusses evidence of this dimension of the crisis, including the impact on the dynamics of protest and the political system. The article concludes by pointing towards aspects that appear peculiar to the region and by inviting further comparisons that might help us to better understand these elements in a global context.

THE VARIEGATED NATURE OF CRISES

How can we conceptualize the nature of a crisis on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic? And, more specifically, its impact in a region (Latin America)? What kind of crisis are we talking about? Mainstream economists 'deny that crises are inherent in the social form of capitalist production' (Clarke, 2016: 5). Analyses that focus on a region are particularly prone to the externalization of crises: because the region is viewed in isolation, rather than as a part of a greater whole, they are seen as 'external shocks' (e.g. García-Herrero, 2021; Singh, 1993). They become external as the consequence of an ill-defined totality.

This article builds on a theoretical foundation which recognizes crises as an essential and ineradicable feature of global capitalism. This conceptualization has been reflected in a number of different theories of crisis, all of which provide a wealth of insights and can shed differing degrees of light on this particular case. There is, however, an important qualification to be made: the premise that capitalism is inherently crisis-ridden has not always been matched by a full engagement with the disruptive dimension of crisis as a category. In other words, there has been the risk of a functionalist turn in the recognition that capitalism, being crisis-dependent, resorts to regular cycles during which inefficient enterprises are weeded out, job structures are downgraded and other forms of capital restructuring take place (for a critique, see O'Connor, 1981). This risk is also present in approaches that designate crisis as a by-product of a transition between modes of accumulation, or a shift in the hegemony of global powers, such as the *ex post* readings of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the 'strange non-death' of neoliberalism (Crouch, 2011; also see Tooze, 2018, among others).

However, the fact that capitalism goes through 'a constant process of crisis and restructuring' (Clarke, 1991: 14) should not make us overlook the disruptive potential of crises. Otherwise, there is a risk of hypostatizing crisis as a formal category of society, independent of its specific social basis and content (paraphrasing Adorno in his critique of the sociology of conflict). In other words, we should reinstate, conceptually, the 'destructive potential represented … by the threat of the total annihilation of life on earth' (Adorno, 2000: 67) and the (revolutionary) potential to break capitalism as we know it. Crisis (after medical discourse) is used to describe a situation 'in which it is decided whether or not the organism's self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery' (Habermas, 1988: 1) — and the COVID-19 crisis has shown some of the self-destructive potential of capitalism. We thus must avoid overlooking the indescribable suffering which is inseparable from large-scale crisis.

When a crisis enters into 'crisis management' phase — as I will argue has happened since 2021 — restoring the full conceptual meaning of crisis implies 'appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' (Benjamin, 2006: 391). Restoring the moment of danger in a crisis means, at the same time, historicizing the crisis: we cannot restore the history of a crisis without carrying out this exercise. There is thus a pressing need to historicize the long unfolding crisis compounded by COVID-19. To do this, we must distinguish between a first phase of open disruption or unmitigated crisis, that lasted until the end of 2020, and a second phase of managed crisis and limited recovery in the period thereafter. The first phase showed a profoundly fragmented local state response, the breakdown of capital's 'normal' capacity for reproduction, and a disarticulation of the world order. As of 2021, we have witnessed a different kind of crisis: while the response has been stronger and relatively effective in re-establishing accumulation and a weak and fragile international order, the cost has been a crisis in legitimacy whose extent remains an open question. The remainder of this article presents this dynamic as seen from Latin America.

DEEPER INTO THE CRISIS

Latin America is not unaccustomed to crisis. Like Asia, it has been through more crises than most of the global economy. Just since the mid-1970s it has experienced the debt crises of the 1980s, the banking and currency crises of the second phase of neoliberalization in the 1990s (particularly in Mexico in 1995 and Argentina in 2001), and the long downturn after the end of the commodity boom in 2012.[3] However, given its origins, characteristics and dimensions, the COVID-19 crisis offers few points of comparison with these previous crises. It is not a problem with foreign debt as in the 1980s, nor does it have the dynamics of the crises of the 1990s. In terms of pandemics, the current context is very different from that of the so-called Spanish flu of 1918 which broke out towards the end of World War I. Nor are parallels with the two world wars relevant since, unlike Europe and some other parts of the world, Latin America did not suffer from indebtedness (but rather enjoyed a growth in credit) or from the massive destruction of fixed capital followed by a unique process of reconstruction. The response to COVID-19, which took the form of a huge effort to place production and circulation 'in hibernation',[4] while maintaining a high level of activity in a few specific sectors (health, connectivity and other essential services), is genuinely singular.

Capital Accumulation in Hibernation

Viewed from the early days of the pandemic, in March 2020, the prospects for any developing economy were grim — or, to be more precise, even grimmer than for OECD countries. Among other factors, dependence on international commodity markets (which experienced an initial sharp fall in prices), relatively smaller public sectors and a limited or adverse access to international financial markets were some of the constraints facing economies as they tried to suspend accumulation without endangering social reproduction. Moreover, historically high levels of precariousness in these countries, including poverty and informal jobs, and a smaller share of jobs that could be done remotely from home,[5] pointed to proportionately more vulnerable populations. Some analysts added the economic importance of tourism and remittances[6] to this list (e.g. Djankov and Panizza, 2020: 13), as well as the measures needed to mitigate the problems of a large agricultural sector.

The main question facing governments was not so much *whether* to place production and circulation into hibernation, but *how* to do it. In the event, 'during the first months of the pandemic, governments mostly adopted

3. Although the region went through the first phase of the global financial crisis in 2008/09 relatively unaffected.
4. Or as Stevano et al. (2021b) put it, COVID-19 triggered a crisis of production and reproduction.
5. For speculation (some of it wild) on the technical potential for working remotely, see for example, Berg et al. (2020); Bonavida Foschiatti and Gasparini (2020); Gottlieb et al. (2021); ILO (2020).
6. Remittances did not decline substantially and actually grew in 2020 in many Latin American countries (CEPAL, 2022a: 147). See also Dinarte et al. (2021).

Table 1. The Pre-COVID-19 Fiscal Picture in Latin America

	Debt/GDP	**Balance/GDP**	**Primary/GDP**	**S&P Credit Rating**
Argentina	88.7	−2.7	1.1	CCC−
Brazil	89.5	−6.9	−1.4	BB−
Uruguay	67.4	−2.7	−0.2	BBB
Mexico	53.4	−2.6	0.9	BBB+
Colombia	52.9	−0.9	1.8	BBB−
Chile	27.9	−2.1	−1.6	A+
Peru	26.7	−1.4	−0.1	BBB+
Emerging markets	53.2	−5	−3	N/A

Source: Levy Yeyati and Valdés (2020: 103); figures are from IMF Fiscal Monitor April and October 2019.

similar policies in mostly the same sequence at mostly the same time — the two middle weeks of March 2020' (Hale, 2021). As we will discuss below, this is surprising, given the constraints outlined above, and particularly puzzling in Latin America where, in many cases, restrictions were put in place before virus transmission reached the region.

Although gloomy predictions of the loss of 20 to 30 per cent of GDP proved to be false (some of these numbers were inflated to undermine lockdowns),[7] the contraction of GDP in 2020 reached a global average of 3 per cent. For Latin America it was significantly higher, at a non-weighted average of 7 per cent, with some countries such as Peru, Cuba and Panama contracting by more than 10 per cent, and economies in the Caribbean shrinking an average of 14 per cent (leaving aside Guyana's unique 45 per cent oil export-based growth). Some countries which are heavily dependent on tourism did reach the lower levels of the predictions, with Antigua and Barbuda recording contractions of 20 per cent of GDP (CEPAL, 2022a: 138; IMF, 2021: 5).

This shows that both expectations and the initial unfolding of the first phase of the crisis pointed to *a catastrophic impact on capital accumulation*. As a point of comparison, the global financial crisis caused a 1.8 per cent contraction of GDP in 2009 and — beyond crises in individual countries, such as Argentina in 2001, or Cuba in the special period — one has to go back to the debt crisis of the 1980s to see similar falls in GDP in Latin America (CEPALSTAT, 2022).

In terms of states' room for manoeuvre in subsidizing the temporary halt in production, Latin America's freedom of action was limited, particularly when compared to that of OECD countries. Table 1 shows the fiscal picture pre-COVID: debt as a percentage of GDP is lower than the OECD average of 109 per cent,[8] and the same is true for the deficit figures. However,

7. For instance, Gottleib et al. (2020: 1) predicted: 'Overall, a *realistic lockdown* policy implies GDP losses of 20–25% on an annualized basis' (emphasis added). See also Clark et al. (2020).
8. See OECD statistics at https://oecd.org

the structural weaknesses of emerging economies already mentioned, their credit ratings, and the hoarding of credit by OECD economies placed serious constraints on the fiscal capacity of Latin American states.

The initial fiscal response varied in size and composition among countries, although the types of measures were broadly similar (Alberola et al., 2021). In 2020 Peru and Chile launched big fiscal stimulus programmes, as did Argentina and particularly Brazil (despite being more fiscally constrained). Others were significantly more cautious (CEPAL, 2022a). A comparison of the scale of interventions around the world shows marked differences. By May 2020, the packages of G20 countries averaged 4.6 per cent of GDP, not counting funding support (1.7 per cent) and credit guarantees (3.4 per cent), which were also substantial (Alberola et al., 2021). The packages were 6 percentage points higher than in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Australia and the United States had packages amounting to well over 10 per cent of their GDP. In contrast, so-called emerging economies (including Latin America) spent on average 2 per cent of GDP.

Regardless of scale, the specific measures were broadly similar. The packages were mainly composed of job subsidies for formal salaried workers (along with other job-related benefits such as paid leave and furlough, unemployment insurance and temporary bans on layoffs), and transfers of cash and food. However, the effective coverage of these policies in Latin America differed from the OECD countries: precarious workers represent a higher proportion of the workforce in Latin America, and they had less coverage and suffered a heavier impact from lockdowns (Lavinas, 2021).[9]

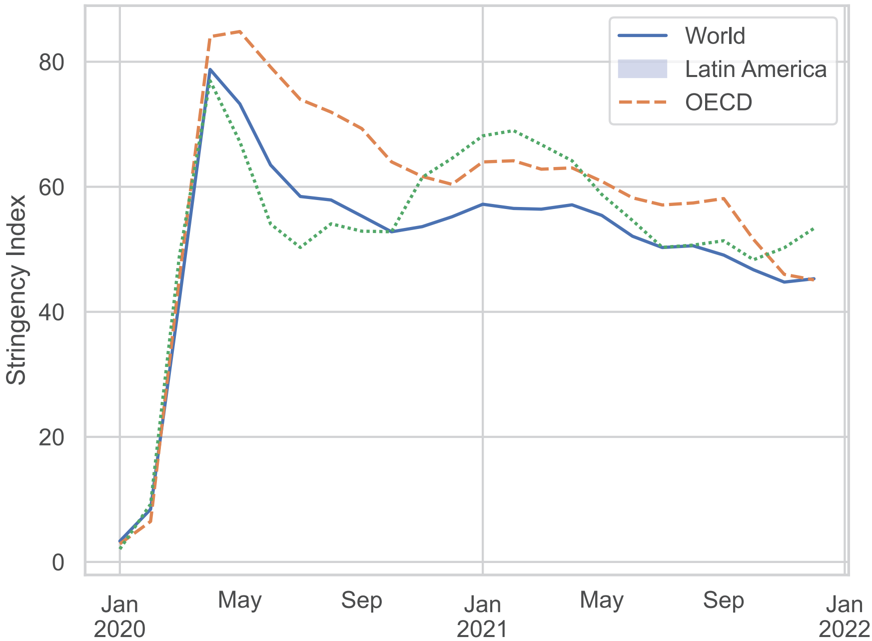
Stringency in a Hot Climate

Given that expectations of the consequences of the global COVID-19 crisis did not fully materialize, and given that the capacity to respond to such consequences was limited in Latin America, it seems all the more puzzling (at first impression) that the region was subject to some of the most severe containment measures. Levy Yeyati and Valdés (2020) go so far as to suggest that labour precarity correlates positively with *de jure* and *de facto* severity of the measures.[10]

If we look at policy restrictions using what has become the standard index — the Oxford Policy Tracker stringency index (see Hale et al., 2021) — we

9. The notion of citizenship through formal jobs in Latin America has a long-standing history dating back to the post-war period, with less than 35 per cent of countries in the region providing unemployment insurance (Blofield and Filgueira, 2020).
10. They add: 'indeed, in a curious pattern that seems unique to Latin America, the duress of the virus containment phase again correlates negatively with the degree of political stability: unstable countries are imposing the most stringent lockdowns' (Levy Yeyati and Valdés, 2020: 109). However, this statement is unsubstantiated.

Figure 1. Average Stringency Index per Month for World, OECD Countries and Latin America

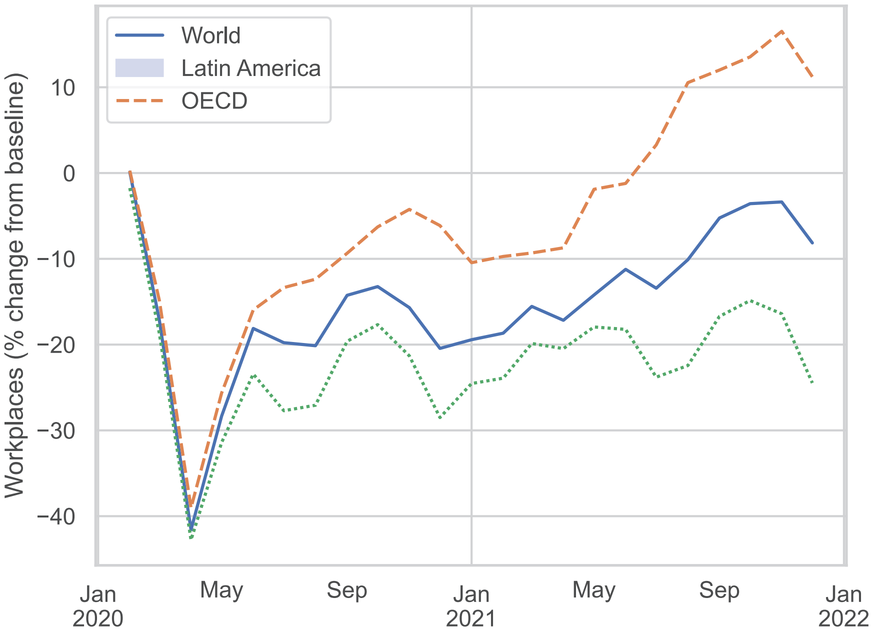


Source: Data from Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker)

can confirm that Latin America systematically imposed stricter lockdowns throughout the pandemic, and particularly during the first phase in 2020. The region's overall score of 72 during 2020 was above the world average of 60 and the OECD average of 59. In 2021 its scores drew much closer to those of the OECD countries (57.3 for Latin America and 57 for the OECD, compared to the global average of 51). On closer inspection, the only period in which the OECD average was higher than the Latin American score was between December 2020 and April 2021 (see Figure 1).

The country-by-country picture shows that most countries in the region followed a similar pattern, strongly diverging narratives notwithstanding. In 2020, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Peru had the strictest forms of lockdown, while Nicaragua had very few restrictions and Uruguay had the mildest and shortest ones. Brazil, despite the vociferous COVID-denialism of its president Jair Bolsonaro (Saad-Filho, 2020), had a stringency index of 70.1 in 2020 (mostly due to subnational measures), a number close to the region's average and well above the OECD's score. If this shows the states' attempts at *de jure* lockdowns, then the (limited and opaque) available data suggest that these measures were also made effective as a result of both

Figure 2. Google Mobility Data for 'Workplace': Average Percentage Change from Baseline for World, Latin America and OECD Countries

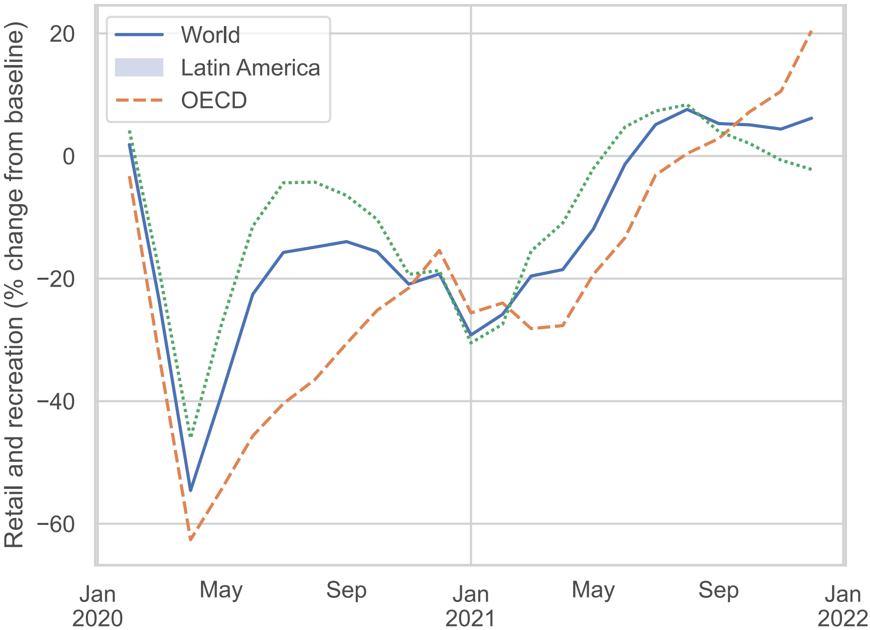


Source: Google (2022)

compliance and enforcement. Mobility data gathered by Google from users with 'Location History' turned on in their Google Location services, a non-default setting,[11] indicates that lockdowns were effective in reducing mobility in 'transit stations' and 'retail and recreation' spaces, while increasing mobility in 'residential' places (Google, 2022). Moreover, these 'changes in mobility' are systematically higher for Latin America than for the world and OECD averages (and this is consistently correlated, even replicating the bump in December 2020 to April 2021 for the OECD group). Interestingly, the 'workplaces' series shows a different pattern (see Figure 2), where the change in visits to workplaces from the baseline is systematically less dramatic in Latin America than in the world and OECD averages, and returns to — and surpasses — pre-COVID levels in mid-2021. This could be due to a wider range of 'essential' jobs (Stevano et al., 2021a) or to informality; this is difficult to interpret given the extremely limited information on how these 'places' are defined by Google. Finally, consistent with other sources, there is a sustained rise in mobility in all the place categories in early 2021 (see Figure 3). In sum, Google mobility data suggest that the changes stemming

11. There is an obvious selection bias towards users with smartphones. There are no published data on the exact criteria for classification of places, no data on sample size, etc.

Figure 3. Google Mobility Data for 'Retail and Recreation': Average Percentage Change from Baseline for World, Latin America and OECD Countries



Source: Google (2022)

from policy interventions were generally enforced or complied with during the first phase of the pandemic.

When analysing a crucial policy (such as lockdowns) the question of how the state can create certain '"correspondence" … between the object of policies and the subject' (Brand et al., 2022: 286) is particularly pressing. Internationally there was a strong policy convergence across 183 countries: they all imposed lockdowns almost at the same time. This 'contrasts with what would be expected if countries reacted according to the local epidemiological progression of the pandemic' (Hale et al., 2021: 532), and with advice from the World Health Organization (WHO) that measures be phased in as the disease spread. It is thus fair to ask how the combination of constrained economic and monetary space, high levels of inequality and a precarious labour market, set against the backdrop of fragile state power, gave rise to *the most stringent measures of mobility in the world* to prevent the pandemic. Was this simply a misjudgement, with Latin American states copying policies that originated elsewhere? This points beyond epidemiology as a key to understanding the policy response. My hypothesis is that this was an attempt to minimize the expected destabilizing effects on unequal and limited health systems, and (as we discuss below) an attempt to curb an upward cycle of social conflict. If this is the case, then rather than a 'colonized response', it was actually a response that 'corresponded' to local concerns of social stability, concealed under the camouflage of a WHO recommendation. In the public discourse across the region, this was presented as an attempt to put 'health above economic accumulation' during the different lockdown announcements — that is, an endeavour to respond to popular demands for proper healthcare.[12] Moreover, this state of exception also prepared the ground for increased surveillance and an extension of the state's repressive capacity, pre-empting a perceived increase in social conflict.

Unequal Epidemiologies

The pandemic hit a number of Latin American countries a few weeks later than Europe, with the first cases of COVID-19 being reported in Brazil towards the end of February 2020 (OECD and World Bank, 2020). Local transmission took longer. Based on official figures, the region appears to have been one of the hardest hit globally: with 8.4 per cent of the world's population it hosted 19 per cent of the global (reported) coronavirus cases and accounted for 31 per cent of deaths from COVID-19 (Schulte, 2022: 23). Peru and Brazil had the highest number of deaths per capita in the region, while Uruguay, Argentina and Chile were the highest ranking in terms of infection rates per capita (Dyer, 2021). Recent estimates of 'excess death' point to severe under-reporting in other regions (South Asia, North Africa, Middle East) but still find Mexico and Brazil to have had some of the highest levels of mortality per capita (Wang et al., 2022).

An initial look at the structural conditions that contributed to such high levels of vulnerability points towards population age (with 8 per cent of people aged 65 or older, compared to sub-Saharan Africa where that figure is 3 per cent); high levels of urbanization (81 per cent, plus megacities), and unequal urbanization infrastructure (with 21 per cent of the urban population living in slums or informal settlements);[13] low levels of digitalization and banking (66 per cent have access to internet, 45 per cent are unbanked); and limited access to healthcare (CEPAL, 2022b). In sum, 'vulnerability to COVID-19 is socially produced', as Schulte (2022: 23) rightly puts it, and is produced unequally between and within countries.

12. For presidential narratives from the region, see Resina (2021), who shows how varied these were and how difficult to predict solely from the ideological position of the respective parties.
13. Research has shown at length that some populations could not afford to observe mobility restrictions: essential workers, people living in slums and overcrowded housing, and informal workers (CEPAL, 2021).

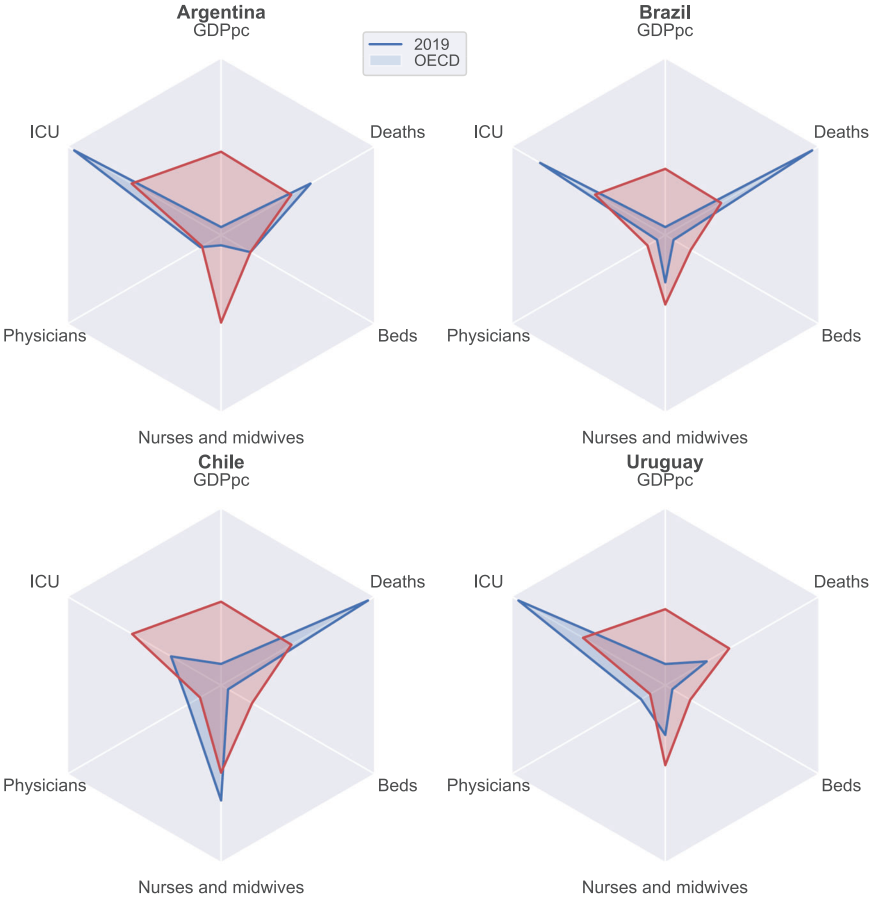
In terms of the health sector, while the region as a whole has on average two doctors per 1,000 inhabitants, Cuba, Argentina and Uruguay are comfortably above the OECD average of 3.5 (OECD and World Bank, 2020). Haiti, Honduras and Guatemala have the lowest rate at or below 0.3 doctors per 1,000 people. The disparity in availability of nurses is considerably greater: the regional average number of nurses per 1,000 people is one-third that of OECD nations (three versus nine). Cuba, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica have the highest nurse-to-population ratios, while Venezuela, Jamaica, Haiti, Honduras and Guatemala have nurse-to-population ratios below one. The region has an average number of hospital beds of 2.1 per 1,000 population, less than half of the OECD average of 4.7 (ibid.), but again some countries are above this average. There is a lower average number of intensive care (ICU) beds but, again, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina are above the OECD average. Public expenditure on health in the Latin American and Caribbean region is low, at 3.8 per cent of GDP compared to OECD countries' 6.6 per cent of GDP — but given an extensive private (including job insurance) healthcare system the numbers are not easily comparable (ibid.).

It is thus clear that overall regional figures mask large differences and are not specific enough to describe the failures of the health systems of some countries. Figure 4a shows that the profiles of the health system (doctors, nurses and ICU beds) in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile or Uruguay do not deviate significantly from the OECD averages — it is only GDP per capita and, in the case of Brazil and Chile, excess deaths, that show marked and consistent differences with the OECD. Figure 4b shows the striking differences with Bolivia, Mexico, Peru or Nicaragua whose health sectors are significantly weaker. Compared with OECD averages, excess mortality is as much as five times higher in these countries. Their health systems are generally more constrained: hospital beds per 1,000 population are only a fifth the level of the OECD, and (with the exception of Nicaragua) ICU beds are just one quarter (2 or 3 per 100,000 population vs 12).

Examining these numbers, the excess mortality levels of some of the 'big economies' of the region are puzzling to say the least. With the exception of Uruguay, excess mortality is more than double the OECD average, in some cases four or five times as bad.[14] Some analysts have attributed these results either to the low effectiveness of lockdowns or to the historical underfunding of health systems. The former argument is not credible given that lockdowns in Latin America seem to have been effective and more stringent than elsewhere. Additionally, the two countries with the shortest and least stringent lockdowns (Uruguay and Nicaragua) are at the antipodes of

14. The OECD average excess mortality is 9.75 per cent, while for Uruguay it is 7 per cent. For Chile, Brazil and Cuba the figures are 18, 23 and 24 per cent respectively; for Mexico 38 per cent, Peru 46 per cent and Bolivia 53 per cent. Data for Argentina after December 2020 are not available, so cannot be compared (data from ourworldindata.org).

Figure 4a. Public Health System Profiles of Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay Compared to OECD Averages, 2019

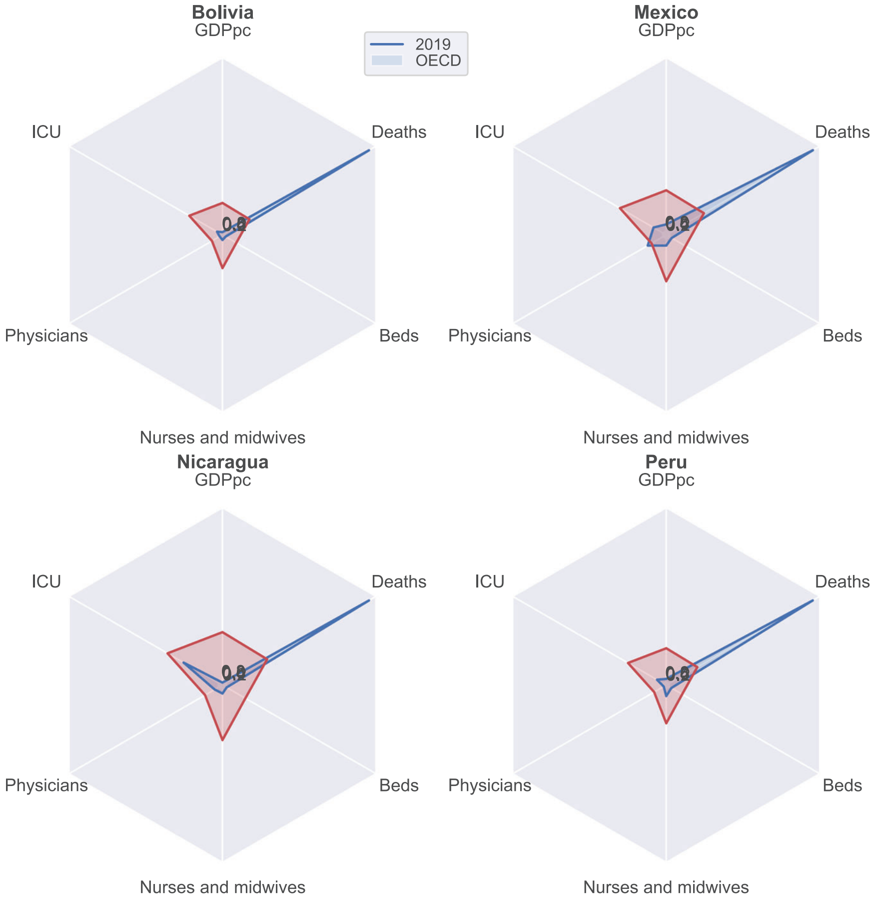


excess mortality. If we turn to the public health systems, as Figure 4 shows, the picture is very uneven between countries. Although it is arguably true that underfunding is key in cases such as Nicaragua, Peru or Mexico, the profile of health systems in the Southern Cone seems reasonably developed compared to OECD averages, particularly vis à vis per capita GDP levels.

I therefore contend that the fundamental — and missing — dimension that needs to be incorporated into the analysis of high levels of excess mortality is within-country inequality. Latin America's track record of inequality and segmentation of social policies extends to the variegated systems of public healthcare:[15] access to healthcare is severely stratified by income

15. This is not to romanticize OECD figures or dismiss the underlying inequalities of coverage and provision in those countries, but rather to highlight Latin America's exceptional levels

Figure 4b. Public Health System Profiles of Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru Compared to OECD Averages, 2019



Notes: GDPpc as a share of OECD GDPpc normalized to 10; ICU beds (per 100,000 population); physicians (per 1,000 population); nurses and midwives (per 1,000 population); hospital beds (per 1,000 population).
Sources: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME, n.d.); OECD and World Bank (2020); Wang et al. (2022); World Bank Open Data (https://data.worldbank.org/) for GDPpc.

to the point that 34 per cent of households in the region cover healthcare costs through direct out-of-pocket payments (CEPAL-PAHO, 2020). To further illustrate this point: in Brazil, 'for every five ICU beds fully equipped in the private sector there is only one ICU bed in public hospitals' (Lavinas, 2021: 84), although only 25 per cent of the population subscribes to a

of inequality. Stevano et al. (2021b: 3) point out that 'so-called "advanced economies", despite having the strongest health security capabilities … were unable, or unwilling, to protect their citizens'. The comparison of US vs Vietnamese death rates from COVID-19 (despite their ranking in Global Health Security indexes) is telling of this.

private health insurance. The underutilization of ICU beds in the private sector led to a campaign calling for a unified pool of ICU beds (*fila única* — a single queue) that was quickly and easily lobbied against (Lavinas et al., 2020; Saad Filho, 2021). In Peru, unequal access to oxygen led to relatives being forced to buy oxygen on the open market at extortionate prices (Gianella et al., 2021).

These inequalities, in turn, played into the well-known uneven impact of lockdowns, namely that there was an intersection between those who were most at risk of contagion (given their occupations or difficulties in complying with lockdowns) and those with less access to healthcare provision. It is thus all the more tragic that social policy initiatives during the pandemic mostly emphasized segmented monetary income transfers rather than the expansion of public provision of services (most notably healthcare). In a nutshell, to understand the disastrous outcomes in terms of deaths, the underfunding of healthcare is less relevant than *persistent structures of unequal provision*. Even chronic underfunding of healthcare played less of a role than unequal access to health provision, the segmented nature of state intervention and the active reproduction of these inequalities during the pandemic.

THE 'NEW NORMAL' OR THE NOT-SO-GREAT RESTORATION

To recap, the first phase of the crisis was an open, unmitigated disruption that halted capital accumulation and exposed profound inequalities, triggering a particular response from the state that undermined its own legitimacy. In Latin America, a turning point was reached around the start of 2021. The rampant crisis of 2020 began to morph slowly into a managed crisis, after two key developments: a (lukewarm) global economic recovery with an impact in the region, and the unfolding of free and universal vaccination programmes.

The Global Bounce-back

In 2021 there was a partial recovery, signalled by the rallying of OECD economies, which grew around 5 per cent (the US saw growth of above 6 per cent, the UK an estimated 7.5 per cent). China, with an annual growth rate of 8 per cent, and India, at 9.5 per cent, stand out among emerging and developing countries, which collectively are thought to have seen growth of 6.4 per cent in 2021 (CEPAL, 2022a). These growth figures offset the dramatic falls of 2020, although the net effect of the two pandemic years is still negative in almost all cases.

This modest bounce-back was accompanied by a more substantial recovery of world trade, which according to the World Trade Organization grew by 11 per cent in 2021 against a 5 per cent decline in 2020.[16] For Latin America, this trade surge manifested in a 17 per cent increase in export prices and an 8 per cent increase in volume, translating into an overall 25 per cent gain in export value in 2021 (CEPAL, 2022a). Remittances, which contribute significantly to the GDP of Central America, soared by 30 per cent in 2021 (after a somewhat surprising growth of 8 per cent in 2020, probably due, as Dinarte et al., 2021 argue, to a shift in remittances from informal channels to formal, registered ones). The region grew (or more properly, recovered) in 2021 by an average of 6 per cent: South America, Central America and Mexico expanded between 6 and 6.5 per cent, while the Caribbean (excluding the exception that is Guyana) grew by only 1 per cent. The prospects for 2022 are mediocre: an expected 2 per cent overall growth. If this is confirmed, then fewer than half of the region's countries will have recovered to their pre-crisis levels of economic activity (CEPAL, 2022a).

The jobs market shows similar trends of recovery to those of the general economy (CEPAL, 2022b). After the peculiarities of 2020, when informality declined and open unemployment did not skyrocket, despite plummeting employment and reduction in hours worked (Weller, 2022), 2021 saw a considerable increase in informal employment — the region's 'normal' way of expanding the jobs market. Looking forward, inflation, debt and investment all show worrying signs. Inflation has been accelerating internationally and has impacted asymmetrically on food and energy prices, with a mixed impact on the region (namely, disastrous social consequences alongside feeble hopes for a new commodity boom).[17] Debt has soared since the pandemic: the sizable fiscal packages of 2020 and the contraction of tax incomes have meant a significant fiscal deficit financed with debt. Finally, as Weller (2022) rightly notes, private investment is not expected to pick up quickly, while indebtedness will constrain public investment for years to come.

No matter how modest these gains look overall, particularly in terms of employment creation, they contributed to shifting the crisis into a different phase. In reality, Latin America's economy was reeling from the end of the commodities boom even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, growing at an annual average rate of less than 1 per cent, making it the most stagnant region in the global South. The rebound of the economy to 6 per cent growth over a year had the effect of showing a 'reversal' of some of the dreadful impacts of the first year of economic contraction. This recovery of capitalist accumulation, however, did not prevent a mounting crisis of legitimation, as we explain below.

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16. See WTO statistics at: https://stats.wto.org/
17. Besides the improvement of terms of trade for the region (whose causes are varied), there were initial signs of increased demand for some minerals that could form part of a 'green transition' (Svampa and Bertinat, 2022). For now, however, this seems like a distant prospect.

'Second Dose of the Vaccine: There is a State'[18]

Despite the many early warnings about vaccine hesitancy, some of which were specific to Latin American countries, the main challenge for states in the region was not the willingness of specific populations to get vaccinated, but rather finding a reliable supply of vaccines. Some of the warnings stemmed from a long-standing issue of low coverage of regular vaccines in the region (Guzman-Holst et al., 2020), but most of the discussion was fuelled by, first, a particular reading of the influence of far-right denialism and conspiracies (not substantiated empirically) and, second, by the question of 'mistrust and misinformation' (Rodriguez-Morales and Franco, 2021).

There are two factors behind this misjudgement regarding vaccination hesitancy: the state's crisis of legitimacy and the intellectual window dressing of colonialism. The first can only be understood in light of the change of context: policy analysts misread the resistance and 'mistrust' of the state (a sign of its crisis of legitimacy) in relation to vaccine hesitancy. The shift of 2021 dispelled these worries, as vaccines replaced (or sometimes complemented) lockdowns and curfews in the fight against the pandemic. The second was rather disingenuous: the difficulties involved in the wide distribution of vaccines were concealed by blaming the people who were to receive them. This was seen at the local government level but also at a global scale, where we learnt that 'US and G7 countries are becoming more committed' to global vaccination, but the problem is 'insufficient vaccine *demand* across the Global South stemming from vaccine hesitancy' (Argote et al., 2021, emphasis added).

With the benefit of hindsight, we know for certain that, intentions aside, these warnings were also based on false premises. Vaccine acceptance was higher in the region than in OECD countries and, at the time of writing, the main constraint on vaccine uptake in the region is still supply.[19] For instance, Solís Arce et al. (2021: 1386) found 'considerably higher willingness to take a COVID-19 vaccine in our LMIC [lower and middle-income] samples (mean 80.3%; median 78%; range 30.1 percentage points) compared with the United States (mean 64.6%) and Russia (mean 30.4%)'. The ratio of vaccine uptake vs vaccine availability is not consistently reported, but it is well known that there was hoarding of doses by most G7 countries. As a report by CEPAL notes: 'the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan accounted for 39% of vaccine procurement commitments as of November 2021, despite having only 12.9% of the world's population' (CEPAL, 2022a: 11).

The vaccination roll-out was intertwined with an effective narrative of a 'big effort' to lift lockdowns and put a definite end to the pandemic. In some

18. This echoes tweets circulating during vaccination in Argentina: 'segunda dosis: hay estado presente'.
19. Vaccine hesitancy declined worldwide as the vaccinations were rolled out.

cases, an anti-imperialist rhetoric was present (in all cases the geopolitics of 'vaccine diplomacy' were prominent; see Santos Rutschman, 2021). Governments exploited the real constraints of vaccine supply without acknowledging that local scientific and industrial capabilities to design and manufacture vaccines were being downplayed.[20] More importantly, however, the shift towards vaccination allowed the state response to move away from the perceived inaction of 2020, where 'in Brazil and much of Latin America … the masses *have been left to their own fate*. Most governments in the region *failed to deliver on many things*, except on securing cash transfers during the lockdown' (Lavinas, 2021: 87, emphasis added). The roll-out of vaccination programmes meant that states could once again preoccupy themselves with logistics and the delivery of concrete and material objects. And the vaccination programmes were (mostly) universal — in sharp contrast with the inequalities of provision of (even emergency) healthcare. Nevertheless, even if vaccinations have put the state back on the map, the crisis of legitimacy is still evident. The following section will briefly examine the dynamics of social conflict and provide evidence of the overall importance of this crisis.

The Compounding Crisis of Legitimacy

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Latin America was already going through a wave of social conflict and, in many cases, mounting crises of legitimacy. There were at least two different types of dynamics in this process, one affecting countries that had Pink Tide neo-populist governments, and the other applying to those that did not (the most notable of these being Colombia, Chile, Peru and Mexico).

For those countries that went through neo-populist reforms, the background of this process was the fiscal constraints, economic stagnation and distributional shifts stemming from the end of the commodity boom in 2012–13. In Argentina and Brazil, for instance (where data spanning more than a decade are available), the highest incidences of strikes and other forms of protest were between 2013 and 2016 (DIEESE, 2021; MTEySS, 2020). The evolving dynamics of these conflicts (which came after a decade of 'neutralizing' social conflict through the institutional response to some of the movements' demands) led later to different forms of institutional and para-institutional ruling class responses, from electoral shifts in Argentina, Uruguay and (of sorts) Ecuador, to different forms of coup in Brazil or Bolivia.

The second group of countries was not part of the Pink Tide; there, the end of the commodity boom had not been sufficient to articulate a neo-populist response to social resistance to neoliberalism. This group includes

20. For example, a small economy such as Cuba developed its own vaccine and rolled it out. Cuba has the highest rate of doses per inhabitant in the world (Blinder et al., 2021).

most notably Chile, Colombia and Peru, which have faced a series of massive protests or 'outbursts' of confrontation since 2019 (Barbosa Dos Santos, 2021; Murillo, 2021). Mexico, also in this group, saw a significant shift in the governing coalition in 2018. In Chile (for which comparable data are available from 2009 onwards; see COES, 2020), the wave of protests in 2019 was substantially more significant, in terms of the number of events, the number of participants and the radicalization of demands and actions, than the previous student revolts of 2011. Colombia saw a cycle of protests and student demonstrations in 2018 and 2019, but on a scale that was not comparable with the protests of 2021. Peru's political crisis has been apparent since 2016, with the impeachment of two presidents and a series of protests (the most prominent being in November 2020).

Undoubtedly, this environment influenced state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'sanitation' measures were discussed in terms of the impact they would have on the volume, dynamics and intensity of ongoing social conflict. On the one hand, insofar as measures were aimed at restricting the mobility of people and/or prohibiting the use of public spaces, and were also accompanied by the extension of police powers to different security forces, it was assumed that they would have the effect of curbing protests or at least redirecting them in ways that did not involve the use of public space. On the other hand, a number of factors point to a substantial increase in social conflict: first, the depth of the ongoing restructuring and the peculiarity of the 'hibernation' of productive activity with its unequal impact have increased the reasons for discontent within and beyond labour; second, and linked to this, the pandemic highlighted the essential role of some sectors and workers (including health, but also logistics, IT, the food supply chain, etc.), with the potential to increase the bargaining power of these workers. In sum, lockdowns and the strengthening of police powers were policies decided 'in correspondence' with this social reality and not just obediently following WHO guidance. As shown above, regardless of the *ex ante* speculations, we know *ex post* that the net effect of these policies was to further corrode legitimacy, particularly during the first phase of the crisis.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that lockdowns were ineffective in curbing social protest beyond an initial impact during the months of March and April 2020. After this period, the movements of contestation in the non-Pink Tide countries resumed and, if anything, intensified. Indeed, the cycle of protest in Chile, Colombia and Peru became increasingly politicized, with demands for some form of institutional change. In the former Pink Tide countries, the post-pandemic conflict has been characterized by a substantial increase in the number of 'defensive' conflicts, fighting against layoffs, unpaid salaries, etc. (Nava and Grigera, 2022).

The images emerging from electoral results and political climate surveys also show signs of the deepening of the existing crisis of legitimacy. Almost all 2020 elections were rescheduled due to epidemiological (and possibly also political) concerns. In 2021, left-of-centre candidates won in most of

Table 2. Outcome of Main Elections after the Start of the Pandemic in Latin America (2020–21)

Country	Type	Date	Winner
Bolivia	Presidential	Oct 2020	Opposition
Ecuador	Presidential	Feb 2021	Opposition
El Salvador	Mid-term	Feb 2021	Ruling Party
Peru	Presidential	Apr 2021	Opposition
Mexico	Mid-term	Jun 2021	Stalemate
Chile	Presidential	Nov 2021	Opposition
Argentina	Mid-term	Oct 2021	Opposition
Nicaragua	Presidential	Nov 2021	Ruling Party*
Honduras	General	Nov 2021	Opposition

Notes: Subnational elections (e.g. Bolivia March 2021, Chile April 2021, Paraguay October 2021) are not included since their outcomes are difficult to judge in the narrow binary terms proposed here.
*The results of the Nicaraguan presidential election of November 2021 have been questioned on the basis of voter turnout figures.

the elections held in the region: Luis Arce in Bolivia, Pedro Castillo in Peru, Xiomara Castro in Honduras and Gabriel Boric in Chile. This trend seems likely to continue in 2022 — in Colombia, where elections in March, May and June resulted in a swift change of political orientation from a right-wing to a left-wing government (Gustavo Petro); and in Brazil, where Bolsonaro seems to have little chance of victory in elections scheduled for October, with polls predicting a clear win for Lula. These results would signal a very quick swing back from the neoliberal and right-wing turn that signalled the end of the Pink Tide in these countries.

More than a sign of a change in the regional 'political mood' (which would be difficult to interpret at this stage, given that the left-of-centre category is only nominal) there is a consistent pattern in the fact that ruling parties have lost elections in the region. Table 2 summarizes the main elections in the region in 2020 and 2021: the exceptions to this trend are El Salvador and Nicaragua, the former having the president with the highest approval rating in Latin America (Bukele has a 90 per cent approval rating, followed by Lopez Obrador in Mexico with 60 per cent), the latter being a true outlier in the regional experience of the pandemic.[21] General elections in February 2022 in Costa Rica yielded a humiliating defeat for the ruling

21. Suffice it to say that in Nicaragua there was officially no pandemic (and thus no lockdown at all, reflected in the stringency index). But more than that, the government called for a demonstration of 'love' at the beginning of the pandemic, prohibited healthcare professionals from wearing masks and personal protective equipment, fired hospital employees who openly questioned the government's policy and threatened students and workers with expulsion if they stayed at home out of fear of infection. This unique case is well beyond the scope of this article; for an account, see Jarquín and Martí i Puig (2021) and Krawinkel (2022). In terms of the elections, it should be noted that the results have been contested, questioning voter turnout figures (officially announced at 65 per cent, but estimated by one influential NGO at 18 per cent).

party, Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), which obtained less than 1 per cent of the votes for president (amid the unearthing of cases of corruption). Its candidate ranked tenth and the party secured no deputies in the legislative elections. Even though each national case has unique characteristics, the regional pattern is revealing, and such a synchronous set of electoral outcomes and swings of the governments' political orientation have not occurred since the early 2000s, when the Pink Tide began, unfolding over the course of four years.

Surveys of political climate and voter turnout also reveal similar trends. Latinobarómetro's polls (available up to 2020) suggest that legitimacy is in free fall: to the question 'would you say that the country is governed by a few powerful groups for their own benefit, or that it is governed for the good of all the people?', the regional average response shows that in 2020, 73 per cent of people thought government was for the elite's own benefit, a significant change from 2009 when that figure was 54 per cent, and only a little lower than the highest response of 79 per cent in 2018. These figures are even higher in Paraguay (93 per cent), Costa Rica (89 per cent), Ecuador (87 per cent), Chile (86 per cent), Peru (86 per cent) and Venezuela (80 per cent), with only Nicaragua, Uruguay and El Salvador dipping below 60 per cent. Discontent with government seems to be consistent across Latin America.[22]

A similar pattern is found in presidential approval ratings from different agencies: in Brazil, Bolsonaro began his office in 2019 with opinion showing a three-way split (great/good, fair, bad/very bad). Just before the pandemic (after a year of government) a slight majority (38 per cent) selected bad/very bad, with the other two options garnering 30 per cent and 29 per cent of votes. At the end of 2021, the percentage thinking Bolsonaro was bad/very bad peaked at 53 per cent.[23] Alberto Fernandez in Argentina went from a peak approval rating of 83 per cent in March 2020 (four months after inauguration) to 50 per cent at the start of 2021, with most recent polls giving him only 39 per cent.[24] Approval ratings in Chile, Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia are even lower, at less than 20 per cent (Directorio Legislativo, 2021). Finally, voter turnout in the region has also been declining. With the exceptions of Chile and Bolivia, where elections were held in a context of rising conflict with the conflict itself being channelled into the electoral arena, participation has declined between 4 per cent and 10 per cent since the start of the pandemic.

On close analysis, there is sufficient evidence from the patterns of social conflict and voting behaviour of a profound crisis of legitimacy in the region — one that has been made worse by the pandemic. At a regional scale, given the variegated dynamics and the limited regional (or regionally comparable)

22. See Latinobarómetro: www.latinobarometro.org/
23. See Datafolha: https://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/avaliacao-de-governo/
24. See Poliarquia: http://poliarquia.com

data on some indicators, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise temporalities of some of the dimensions of this crisis. This, however, should not preclude us from spelling out this conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The global epidemic has added insult to injury in the ongoing crisis of neoliberalism, adding a further shock to a world already in crisis. The COVID-19 epidemic has resonated with multiple layers of crisis (Saad-Filho, 2021) and amplified the variegated vulnerabilities of livelihoods under contemporary capitalism. The gendered, racialized nature of inequalities has been vividly foregrounded (Stevano et al., 2021b) as has the global and regionally uneven nature of contemporary capitalism.

Throughout Latin America, too, the pandemic has been an additional blow, occurring against the backdrop of a long-running crisis that began with the end of the commodities boom in 2012–13. Several structural traits of the region contributed to shaping the dynamics of this crisis: unprecedented levels of inequality (increasing further as a consequence of the crisis), a high rate of work informality, and distinctive dynamics of social conflict and legitimacy crises. As I have shown, all of these factors contributed to the emergence of an open crisis in 2020.

I have argued that there is a pressing need to historicize this crisis, both to reconstruct its 'moment of danger' and to avoid hypostatizing it. I thus identified a first period of 'open crisis' in 2020 and a turning point in 2021 towards a 'managed crisis' that is nonetheless threatened by an unrelenting crisis of legitimacy. During 2020, rather than deciding *whether* to hibernate production, the primary policy challenge was *how* to do so. Countries in Latin America implemented similar policies to those elsewhere (notwithstanding the exceptions of Nicaragua and Uruguay, and the differences in narratives and administrative levels of decision making), with measures in many cases even pre-dating the first cases of contagion. The available evidence on the distinctive traits of implementation in the region points towards longer and stricter lockdowns and other restrictions, both *de jure* and *de facto*, than other countries, even despite weaker programmes of impact mitigation. This resulted in a greater crisis of accumulation than the global average (7 per cent for the region against a world average of 3 per cent).

At first glance, we might not expect the combination of constricted economic and monetary space, a precarious labour market and highly vulnerable populations to correspond with the world's most rigorous mobility regulations to avert the pandemic. However, on closer inspection, when factoring in the high levels of inequality, the uneven and inadequate health systems and the relative weakness of the states in the region (in many cases also undergoing an upward cycle of social protest and facing a growing crisis of legitimacy), this rush to implement strict lockdowns seems to suggest an attempt to mitigate the anticipated destabilizing effects of the pandemic rather than a desire to follow WHO guidelines. This early establishment of a moment of exception paved the way for enhanced monitoring and an expansion of the state's repressive powers — even if these proved to be ineffective in curbing the levels of social conflict beyond a few weeks' grace period.

The turning point towards a managed form of the crisis happened in early 2021 after a lukewarm global economic recovery and the roll-out of free and universal immunization programmes. This article has contended that the rallying of GDP (globally around 5 per cent, in Latin America an average of 6 per cent), alongside growing levels of inflation, public indebtedness and stagnant investment have not proved as significant as the compounding crisis of legitimation. Similarly, the vaccination roll-out that was intertwined with an effective narrative of a 'big effort' to lift lockdowns and put a definite end to the pandemic led to some re-establishment of the state's role in actively 'caring for people', but not enough to overcome the growing discontent and articulation of social protest.

As indicators of this crisis, I have argued that countries that did not go through a Pink Tide faced the most radicalized processes of social protest, which started before the onset of the pandemic but continued robustly after it. In those countries that had neo-populist governments in the previous decade, social protest increased after 2020 (after an earlier cycle in 2013–18) with a strong component of 'defensive' struggles. The crisis of legitimacy is also evident in other indicators of the political system: the fact that ruling parties almost invariably lost elections in the region in the period 2020–21, the plummeting of presidential approval ratings and the perception by an overwhelming majority of the pro-elite nature of the political system. These again were pre-existing traits made worse by the pandemic. The discontent with existing political regimes will figure prominently among post-COVID-19 issues. The growth in inequality, the innovations in terms of surveillance (both public and private, extending to the expanded workplaces within homes), the uneven impact of the pandemic on some populations and the high levels of government indebtedness will add to the mix of a crisis that, even if it is being managed, has not come to an end.

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