

Embedded Authoritarianism¹

Sovereignty, Coloniality, and Democracy in Latin America

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Introduction

To engage with authoritarianism in the Global South entails more than accounting for its historical, economic, social, and geopolitical particularities. Rather, perhaps precisely in order to be able to address such particularities, it is necessary to move a step back and reassess the assumptions about government, political regimes, and the exercise of sovereign power that are embedded within the notion of authoritarianism itself. The argument presented in this chapter is that contemporary definitions of authoritarian regimes, especially those presented in relation to the Latin American context, are premised on an understanding of sovereign states that assumes (sometimes unproblematically) the liberal democracy as its standard or optimal form. I draw from the literature on international historical sociology an alternative understanding of the relation between statehood and authoritarianism.

A history of the states-system that ties the notion of modernity to the spread of liberal values and political forms misses the role played by colonial rule and imperialism in said history, as well as in liberal political theory itself. By assigning coloniality as the centrepiece of a narrative of international history, we must acknowledge that liberal values are not mutually exclusive with authoritarian practices, but simply rearrange them around a different conception of political subjectivity. In other words, the transition to a liberal order does not bring an end to authoritarian politics, which continues to be the foundation of sovereignty. The notion of the Global South itself is premised upon the coloniality of the modern world-system, understood as the contemporary legacies of colonial rule that continue to shape it. To avoid the structural reductionism that simply describes such legacies as permanent and constant features of global politics, it is important to

1 I would like to thank the comradely rounds of discussion with my IRGAC colleagues for the formulation of the argument presented here, especially to Inés Durán Matute for the comments made on previous versions of this paper.

acknowledge not only the enduring role of coloniality, but also how it is upheld by specific geopolitical strategies.

One of the results of adopting such a broad historical lens is that it becomes difficult to point out a recent or current rise of authoritarian politics. At the same time, it does not imply a denial of all political changes over the past 30–40 years. Instead, it places such changes in a broader context, as a reconfiguration of how political power is organized and exercised over a longer period. Specifically, their relation with neoliberalism is brought into question, being conceived not as an outcome of a neoliberal agenda, but as co-constitutive with it. Additionally, understanding the particularities of authoritarianism in the Latin American context does not only entail uncovering the specific ways in which neoliberal reforms take place and the effects produced by them in each particular case. Instead, such particularities themselves can be grounded upon the geopolitically-differentiated notions of political subjectivities produced through colonial domination. Ultimately, by disrupting the dichotomy between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, the argument presented here traces the problem of authoritarianism back to the idea of sovereignty and sovereign states as a core element of modernity, which presents a different set of challenges.

Before those can be finally addressed, the chapters' argument is developed in two steps. First, I engage with two interpretations of authoritarianism that present it in opposition to liberal democracies. One is found in contemporary institutionalist political science (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019; Albright 2018), and the other draws from the Poulantzian Marxist tradition of state theory (Poulantzas 1975; 2000) in order to provide an interpretation of the current crisis (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). As a second step, the argument moves further back in history to establish the shift towards modern sovereignty and colonial domination as the basis for the creation of geopolitically-differentiated categories of political subjects. By bringing the subject into question, this disrupts the assumption of liberal democracy as a standard form of politics, and, more importantly, reveals the authoritarian practices upon which it is premised (Quijano 2000; Bhambra 2007; 2014; Wood 1991). This concludes with a reflection on how an analysis of authoritarianism from the perspective of coloniality has influenced the narrative of Latin American politics over the past few decades.

Authoritarianism *versus* Democracy

The conception of authoritarianism that presents it in opposition to democracy can be traced back to the earliest steps of political philosophy, where establishing the distinctions between types of states, regimes, and laws was carried out in taxonomical style. Montesquieu, for instance, grounds his anti-absolutist reasoning in

The Spirit of Laws on a characterization of despotism as a regime based on fear and obedience to the will of the ruler, and not on honour and virtue (which are traits of well-regulated monarchies and republics) (Montesquieu 1989, 21–30). This notion of despotism relying on the image of a ruler that deals with the people or citizens as a master does with his slaves is not only already present among classical thinkers, but is also associated with the ‘East’ or ‘Asia’. While this excursion cannot address modern political philosophy in detail (see Wood 2012), it helps me establish the key argument I am presenting to the current literature on authoritarianism (one of the categories to replace despotism in political thinking throughout the centuries) and democracy. These taxonomies of governments and regimes often rely (admittedly or not) on the idea that each nation or people is imbued with a natural propension (a ‘spirit’, in Montesquieu’s terms) towards one particular type of state. The suggestion I develop here is that ‘Latin America’ (and perhaps even the ‘Global South’ as a whole) can be placed alongside these identities associated with peoples, nations, and their political forms.

Starting with the liberal institutionalist literature, we see that democracy is described in procedural terms, and degrees of authoritarianism are identified through the measure in which particular regimes distance themselves from this model (Dahl 1998; Linz 2000; Levitsky and Way 2010). This generates the notion that building such democracies is a matter of fostering the correct kind of institutions, which can be achieved through “external democratizing pressure” and “linkage to the West” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 40–46). In the absence of these incentives and strong institutions, there is a constant danger that situations of crisis might trigger a regime change:

When we think about democracy what we fear is the prospect that some political forces would successfully claim that the only way to remedy some already occurring disasters – economic crises, deep-rooted divisions in society, breakdown of public order – is to abandon political liberty, unite under a strong leader, and repress pluralism of opinions, in short autocracy, authoritarianism, or dictatorship, whatever one wants to call it. (Przeworski 2019, 14)

It has recently become clear that such crises might even be, to some extent, created precisely with the purpose of attacking and subverting democratic institutions. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018, 3) argue that this corrosion of democracy is not usually carried out “in spectacular fashion”, with military coups and a clear and distinctive institutional rupture. More often than not, the crisis of democracy is insidious, a long and slow process carried out by elected leaders themselves in slow and “barely visible steps”. This realization brings two dangers, that are admittedly linked to the reasons for the publication of their bestseller, *How Democracies Die*. First, the idea that even the most stable of Western democracies are vulnerable to being taken over by authoritarian leaders. In other words, strong democratic

institutions and linkages to (or even being at the core of) the West might not be enough to ensure the stability of a (liberal) democracy. Even the United States (after Trump) and the UK (seeing UKIP's role during the Brexit campaign) not only are vulnerable to this but might as well be in the advanced stages of such a process. As Levitsky and Ziblatt admit in the book's very first paragraph (2018, 1), one never thought that the processes observed in Latin America, Asia, or the Europe of the 1930s could take place in fully-developed liberal democracies.

Second, precisely because this corrosion of democracy takes place in "barely visible steps", it is hard to build a consensus about which stage such attacks on institutions are in at any given point, or even (in some cases or stages) whether they are already under way or not, which make it harder for political actors and for institutions themselves to decide on how to respond. Since there is not the clear proclamation or institutional rupture that one would expect from the classical coup d'état, the dividing lines between democracy and authoritarianism become blurred. And while the literature has been concentrating efforts on providing guidelines for such an identification (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 21; Albright 2018, 253), such guidelines themselves seem to presume the fully-functioning liberal democracy as the ideal type against which 'populist' or 'fascist' leaders and movements are identified. The fact that democracies in Latin America have seldom conformed to such standards has never led to questions about the underlying assumptions about what one expects from the state and its relation to other social actors, and the histories of such relations in a broader global and geopolitical context (Antunes de Oliveira 2020, 10).

The liberal approach to the current 'crisis of democracy' thus relies on the idea that the rise of authoritarianism entails a corruption of democratic values and institutions, and it does so without questioning the expectations placed upon democratic institutions. Questioning such expectations entails bringing these state forms into their social and geopolitical contexts. This movement is at the core of the argument made here. It moves away from an analysis of the state and state institutions in abstraction, grounding them in global networks of social power. In other words, this means moving further from political science and into the fields of historical sociology and global political economy. This move helps to bridge the analytical gap represented by the differences between the Global North and South in a way that goes beyond acknowledging the particularities of the state in the Global South.

By looking at these states and societies in an integrated manner, through a global lens, the transnational effects of imperialism and coloniality in processes of state-formation and the construction of said democratic or authoritarian 'spirits' become more evident. The effects of imperialism and colonialism in the formation of nationalist sentiments are present across the Global North and South alike. By seeing geopolitical domination as a factor that only appears on one side of the

colonial divide, we erase the fundamental role it has played in processes of state-formation in the Global North. Consequently, it is also possible to demonstrate how the dividing line between authoritarianism and democracy is thinner than this liberal literature allows. First, because the ways in which liberal democracy relies on authoritarian practices for the control of its ‘undesirables’ echo the notion that the first few ‘modern states’ were, at the same time, colonial empires. Second, in drawing the connection between such early modern empires and liberal democracies through their geopolitical contexts we find a continuous reliance on the superexploitation of labour and the management of surplus populations elsewhere (Marini 1991; Bhattacharyya 2018).

Since such an argument echoes very clearly a conception of the state as part of a broader (geo)political configuration of class-based rule, it is drawn to a dialogue with the Marxist literature on the topic. But rather than trying to encompass all of Marxist state theory, my argument here merely points out that some of the recent contributions in this field also incur problems that are similar to those pointed to above. Namely, the conception of democracy and authoritarianism in mutually exclusive terms, through a study of states and societies that considers them in a kind of abstract isolation, to which international politics is added as an additional later stage in the analysis. Specifically, I am addressing here a type of structural account that establishes a connection between different stages or forms of capitalist development and their corresponding political form, while these different ‘stages’ of development are actually co-constitutive.² I am referring here especially to the literature on “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014; Tansel 2017). The point is not to reject the notion altogether, but to disentangle some of the theoretical premises that stand in the way of their claims that:

As opposed to enshrining an ossified separation of liberal democracy and authoritarianism, we maintain that it is important to recognize that state responses to the economic and political crises of capitalism can—and increasingly do—assume similar forms both in formal democracies and in traditionally defined authoritarian regimes. (Tansel 2017, 11)

Identifying authoritarian neoliberalism as a “historically specific set of capitalist accumulation strategies” (Tansel 2017, 6) is in itself an important contribution to

2 The critique posed here is therefore aimed at the absence of an international dimension of capitalism at the core of the analysis offered by this literature. This is precisely the point raised by scholars affiliated with dependency theory and world-systems theory (Marini 1991; Sotelo Valencia 2019; Antunes de Oliveira 2019; Wallerstein 1983). I would still claim that the geopolitical dimension of strategies of accumulation is undertheorized in such accounts, but such an argument would extend beyond the limits of this paper. Still, it is important to acknowledge a literature that deals with the problem I am raising here in a different way.

recent developmental trajectories on a global scale. However, the identification of this historical specificity with a “post-2007 shift to more authoritarian forms of neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014, 120) returns to a problem of periodization that has already been pointed out by some critiques (Ryan 2018). By ascribing the increasingly authoritarian and antidemocratic tendencies of neoliberalism to the post-2007 period, one creates precisely the kind of divide that Cemal Burak Tansel aims to avoid. My contribution to this critique is to add that such a distinction is not only temporal, but it also carries a necessary geographical component. This separation between neoliberalism ‘as usual’ and its specifically authoritarian moment is based on Nicos Poulantzas’s conception of authoritarian statism, which is clearly developed from the standpoint of advanced capitalist societies:

I shall deal here only with the dominant (or, in more dignified language, the developed) capitalist countries, above all Europe and the United States. Of course, these changes affect every capitalist country insofar as they have their origin in the current phase of international reproduction of capitalism. But given the deepening division between dominant and dominated countries of the imperialist chain – a result of the internationalization of capitalist relations – we cannot engage in general theorization about the contemporary State covering transformations in these countries as a whole. Thus, in the zone of dominated countries, for example in Latin America, we are witnessing the emergence of a *new form of dependent State* [emphasis in original] which, itself manifested in diverse regimes, involves significant points of dissimilarity with the new form of State in the dominant countries. (Poulantzas 2000, 204)

The phenomenon of authoritarian statism (upon which Ian Bruff grounds his notion of authoritarian neoliberalism) is clearly circumscribed by Poulantzas to developed capitalist states. Whatever is taking place in the Global South (or “in the zone of dominated countries”), despite the global connections clearly established by capitalism itself, is explicitly excluded from Poulantzas’s attention, because these states and societies (or “social formations”, in Poulantzian terms) find themselves in different ‘phases’ of capitalist development. The fact that the geopolitical connections between these uneven stages of development are only considered post-hoc is precisely what turns the problem of periodization into a question of geographical separation between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes (or “new forms of dependent state”). In other words, these analyses result in fixing authoritarian regimes in time (the past) and space (in non-Europe).

The Poulantzian framework adopted by Bruff therefore reproduces the problem identified among liberal scholars, which consists in the identification between liberal democracy and developed capitalist states. Tansel is careful to consider the international networks upon which neoliberalism has relied since the beginning (with its inherent authoritarian tendencies). However, they are simply added to the

Poulantzian state-centric framework described above, without drawing the necessary implications about how the construction of liberal democracies relies on a series of authoritarian practices both domestically and internationally. To account for the inherent coloniality of these geopolitical connections and their role in shaping authoritarianism and liberal democracies, they must be allowed to disrupt the assumptions of any clear empirical separation between the two.

Modern Sovereignty and Embedded Authoritarianism

The point is then to demonstrate that there is no such clear rupture between democracy and authoritarianism. The narrative to which I now turn establishes this distinction as a product of the modernity discourse, in which modern states are distinguished from pre-modern ones by their distinctively democratic form. In this logic, authoritarian institutions are the remains of the *ancien régime* or whatever appears as its equivalent in a particular historical experience, being, therefore, indications of an incomplete or imperfect process of modernization. Both Liberal and Marxist traditions conceive of such transition towards modernity through the notion of a 'bourgeois revolution', which has been critically reassessed in other works (Comninel 1987; Wood 1991; Teschke 2005; Salgado 2020). Rather than return to this argument here, I will start by presenting the transition towards modern state sovereignty not as a conceptual rupture with the legacies of absolutism, but as a result of the appropriation of absolutist sovereignty by a different type of ruling class with its own accumulation strategies—which consequently led to an alternative conception of political institutions and collective subjectivities.

This transition towards political modernity also presents its own problems of periodization. While usually associated with the Enlightenment and the revolutions of the late 18th century in the United States, France, and Haiti, historical sociologists point to the political changes in England in the 17th century (encompassing the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution) as the earliest case of a change in state structures resulting from a (violent) change in the social composition of governing forces. The struggles between propertied classes against the Crown had been taking place since the beginning of that century and culminated in the transition of sovereign rights from the King to Parliament. A coalition of the country's ruling capitalist and landowning elite secured control over decisions regarding taxation, jurisdiction, use (and financing of) military power, and foreign policy. Sovereignty was then no longer the personal attribute of a ruler but was enacted by Parliament as an abstract representation of the nation and its people (Teschke 2003, 252–55).

However, even though the sovereign was of a different nature, sovereignty itself—the monopoly over the use of force, jurisdiction, taxation, and general co-

ercion and its legitimization—did not change immediately. The different rationale behind its exercise is consolidated in the transition to the 18th century, with a clear difference between Britain and other European powers already being clear in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 (Teschke 2020). This created the conditions of geopolitical competition through which such transformations are adopted by other states (culminating in the revolutions in the US and France). Consequently, it makes this general shift in the exercise of sovereignty one that does not subvert the centralized and authoritarian character to which it was associated under absolutism. This is not to say that there were no decidedly anti-authoritarian alternatives raised during the period. However, these attempts to radically transform sovereignty in a popular and more horizontal direction (as was the case with the Levellers, the Jacobins, and in a sense, with Haitian revolutionaries) suffered tragic fates of differing natures. So, although the exercise of sovereignty is clearly transformed in this transition to modernity, such a transition cannot be implicitly associated with a move away from authoritarian rule.

These new practices of sovereign authority play a crucial role in the expansion of capitalism throughout the globe (Wood 2003), but their more important aspect (for the object of this chapter) is the rise of the nation as the legitimization of sovereign power. Sovereignty is still centralized (although not personified) and exercised through a body of representatives that correspond to an abstracted collective will associated with this idea of a culturally-homogenous nation (Anderson 2006; Buzan and Lawson 2015). The construction of such homogeneity draws upon a variety of context-specific elements, but one of its more general aspects is certainly the geocultural identities established through colonial domination (Dussel 1985; Quijano 2000). The coloniality of power described by Aníbal Quijano corresponds to the way in which different subjectivities are constituted by racial categories formed according to specific regimes of labour control, and to their place within colonial structures of geopolitical domination. Therefore, constructing the nation as a homogenous cultural identity implies a series of violent processes and disputes within these colonial powers themselves, but one that also takes place within a context in which a fundamental difference is created between such powers and the victims of their colonial domination throughout the world.

The colonial foundations of modernity that survive far beyond direct colonial domination (through Eurocentric conceptions of the world and racially-differentiated subjectivities, for instance) are understood as coloniality. This lens is essential for addressing any conception of the Global South, since the experience of colonial domination is the cornerstone that makes such a category possible. Precisely because the concrete colonial legacies in each case vary according to their experience of colonial domination, the notion of Global South is itself limited in terms of how exactly this common experience unites such a variety of cases. The key for maintaining such broad categories (like ‘coloniality’ and ‘Global South’) in an analytically

useful way is to mobilize them not only as a set of particularities, but to give them meaning that goes beyond the empirical. The categories employed in the analysis must themselves take coloniality into account, rather than being formulated from the starting point of an abstract society with no geopolitical ties beyond itself (Bhambra 2007; 2014; Rosenberg 2016). Of course, this is not to say that coloniality is itself a structural condition from which we are able to derive logical conclusions about types of state and political organization. The geopolitical strategies employed in the exercise of such domination are varied, so that the implications for the way in which the resulting subjectivities are produced from the exercise of colonial power in each scenario must be allowed to vary accordingly. History still matters.³

Authoritarianism in Latin America: Colonial and Neoliberal

How to take coloniality into account in an analysis of Latin American authoritarianism? The analytical impact of coloniality is twofold. First, it highlights the fact that those changing practices of sovereignty, which in the Latin American context correspond to the long political disputes in the 19th and early 20th centuries, did not shy away from reinforcing their colonial enterprises. In the words of Miguel Centeno and Agustin Ferraro (2013, 3), the institutional transformations in this period never truly rejected “colonial ways of life”. They actually became more closely integrated into capitalist networks of accumulation and became a key element in shaping the international states-system (Wood 2003; 2012; Bezerra, Salgado, and Yamato 2019).⁴

Second, the colonial lens denounces how the notion of cultural homogeneity is presented as a condition of the possibility for democracy, which legitimates the violent exclusion of alternative political subjectivities through practices of bordering and policing (Bhattacharyya 2018; Ferguson and McNally 2015). These sovereign powers are necessarily premised on authoritarian practices, as long as they are required to reinforce an idea of ‘nation’ through the exclusion of those who do not ‘belong’. Quijano highlights the devastating effects of this form of legitimation in

3 I explore the contributions of historicism for the framework of coloniality proposed by the Latin American decolonial tradition in the essay “Anti-Eurocentric Historicism: Political Marxism in a Broader Context” (Salgado 2021).

4 A similar argument is presented by Florestan Fernandes (2019), as has already been highlighted by our colleague Sabrina Fernandes (2021). However, Florestan still seems to admit the possibility of a non-authoritarian sovereignty, as one of the key elements in his argument about the Brazilian bourgeois revolution is a differentiation between “classic bourgeois revolutions” and those that remain incomplete and result in an “autocratic form of bourgeois rule” (F. Fernandes 2008, 337–48; Salgado 2021, 273–74).

racially-divided societies to the point of making this form of nation-state “impossible” (Quijano 2000, 565–70), while others point out in more detail how this plays a role in the social composition of property regimes (Bhandar 2018; Smith 2008). In fact, both can be brought together through the critique of liberal democracies as regimes designed for the rule of propertied elites and capital accumulation (Wood 1991; 1995; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014). In that sense, if property rights are explicitly designed along racial lines, the exclusion of the dispossessed from politics also implies a movement towards the cultural homogeneity required by nationalism. Authoritarianism can be said to be embedded in the practice of sovereign power precisely because such exclusion has been a common aspect of statehood in the region since the formal declarations of independence in the early 19th century.

However, to simply speak of an embedded authoritarianism as a constant of Latin American states is dangerously close to an essentializing transhistorical view of the region. By bringing coloniality in, it is somewhat tempting to leave all the explanatory power to this concept, which results in that notion of 1492 as the eternal present which the entire region is condemned to repeat endlessly. It was pointed out earlier that bringing such a broad historical perspective makes it harder to speak of a recent ‘authoritarian turn’. To avoid such reductionism, it is necessary to encompass the ways in which the exercise of such authoritarianism changes across time, along with the practices of sovereign power.

In a closer dialogue with Tansel and Bruff, even if one does not entirely agree with the characterization of “neoliberal authoritarianism” proposed by them, the influence of neoliberalism over the region during the past 30 or 40 years cannot be neglected. But it also cannot be conceived as an authoritarian era which follows the ‘pink tide’, through a resurgence of the far right. Even if neoliberalism as a whole is framed as an authoritarian project, it cannot be said to have brought authoritarianism back (as it never left). The neoliberal project in Latin America coincides in many cases with violent military dictatorships (Chile being the main example) and continued throughout the 1990s with the region’s redemocratization (Collor and Cardoso in Brazil, Menem and De la Rúa in Argentina, Fujimori in Peru, et al.). The difference between its dictatorial and democratic versions cannot be described through the absence or presence of authoritarianism. Instead, it must be understood as a change in how the authoritarian exclusion of subaltern (dispossessed, racialized) subjects from institutionalized politics operates.⁵

The most important implication for this argument is perhaps that all progressive governments in the regions associated with the pink tide also relied upon these

5 For a more detailed discussion on different manifestations of colonial legacies in development projects from neoliberal to progressive governments in Latin America, see the chapter by Inés Durán Matute and Mariano Félix in this volume.

authoritarian practices to some extent. This becomes clear when addressing the issues raised by the critiques of a neo-extractivist model of development in Bolivia (McKay 2020) or how Brazil under Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) governments carried out extensive infrastructural projects with huge environmental implications (the Belo Monte dam being the most notorious among them) under the banner of modernization and progress. In many cases throughout the region, armed forces were mobilized by left-wing governments against urban and rural protests. The political situation deteriorated especially after the commodity crises in the 2010s resulted in austerity politics being mobilized, with variations from case to case, by these left-wing governments. The situation is aptly described by Jeffery Webber (2017): “the last day of oppression, and the first day of the same”.

These regimes still mobilized the state apparatus to isolate key elements of political decision-making from democratic scrutiny, exacerbating the exclusion of subaltern subjects from institutionalized politics. Despite the reduction of poverty, the “new Latin American left did not challenge the underlying class structures of its societies or the systems of capitalist accumulation that fundamentally reproduce the basic patterns of simultaneous wealth and poverty, of luxury among misery” (Webber 2017, 104–5). There were many important achievements in this period. The point is made here not as a denial of their relevance, but as a discussion about the inherent limitations presented by how they rely on violence against peasants and native populations, or by imposing strict limits around what is or is not subjected to democratic oversight. The existing attempts of improving and enhancing direct participation through social assemblies and popular consultation were designed in ways that can be abandoned before reverting to the more traditional decision-making structures of the state or that can be disciplined and controlled by the ruling social forces. This form of including subaltern populations through invitations from the sovereign effectively conditions their political participation to the ‘domestication’ of their radical transformative projects in the name of order precisely because, otherwise, it can be easily reversed. This remains clear by how easily the important achievements of the period were erased by the subsequent political growth of the Right in the region through a series of elections and coups. This is therefore not a return to a previous state of authoritarianism, but a continuation of the exclusion of subaltern subjects through the mobilization of sovereign power against its subjects in innovative (and sometimes more explicit) ways.

Conclusion: Towards Decolonial Democracies?

By assuming a spatiotemporal distinction between democratic and authoritarian countries—that corresponds to the West/non-West, developed/underdeveloped countries, or Global North/South—we accept the underlying assumption that

authoritarianism is somehow connected to an incomplete or failed transition towards modernity. It is important to return to the discussion about the origins of sovereign power, encompassing both its absolutist roots and its ties to colonial domination as a geopolitical aspect. This centres the notion of sovereignty on the exercise of territorial authority and the production of different political subjectivities that are tied to the idea of nation (and exclusion from it) as a means of legitimating sovereignty. In doing so, it becomes clear how this modern conception of democracy is insufficient to move away from authoritarianism, as the latter remains a constitutive part of modern sovereignty. It remains possible to imagine democratic forms of political organization by addressing their challenges and recovering alternative (including pre-modern) conceptions of democracy and politics. In any case, the challenge entails imagining alternatives to the current conception of sovereign power, by rethinking the use of 'nation' as a basis for its claim of legitimacy (García Linera 2014; Öcalan 2016), and/or by challenging the notion of sovereignty itself in favour of establishing a popular alternative (Bookchin 2015; Rancière 2014).

We have been accustomed to thinking of capitalism and the exploitation of workers as one of the core challenges to the establishment of egalitarian societies, and the roles of racism, sexism, and other forms of structural violence as instrumental in creating conditions for such exploitation. Any conception of democracy that aims to destabilize such modern/colonial structures of exclusion, inequality, and exploitation must also be able to destabilize our current understanding of sovereignty. Of course, this challenge presents many potential ramifications such as questions about alternative forms of subjectivity, the role of the nation, and the possibility of global politics beyond (or even without) the existence of sovereign statehood. But all of these can only be addressed once sovereign power is no longer seen as part of the solution but is instead acknowledged as a form of political organization which cannot be separated from its authoritarian origins and practices.

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