

NOTES FOR A HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICAN LIBERTARIANISM

MARCOS FALCONE*

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In recent years, popular interest for libertarianism has grown in Latin America¹. Self-declared 'libertarian' parties have formed in recent decades² and libertarian candidates have in some cases achieved noteworthy electoral success for the first time, particularly with the unprecedented election of a libertarian president in Argentina. In that country, even before that election polls had started asking people whether they identify as 'libertarian.' (Berenzstein, 2022) In that context, there is a need to explain why libertarianism has become fashionable where it has and why it has not in other places.

Libertarianism Across the World

Most academic research on the growth of libertarianism currently places it in the context of larger ideological tendencies that have

* Universidad del CEMA, Argentina; mafalcone@ucema.edu.ar. ORCID es 0009-0008-9729-6616.

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¹ Google Trends shows that between 2010 and 2020, for example, the proportion of inquiries on the term 'libertarianismo' increased ten-fold in Argentina. In the same time frame, the word 'libertarios' was searched six times more frequently in Brazil and Peru, though by contrast both terms attracted approximately the same amount of interest in Mexico.

² Libertarian parties were founded in 1994 in Costa Rica (Movimiento Libertario), in 2009 and 2018 in Argentina (Partido Liberal Libertario and Partido Libertario respectively), in 2014 in Brazil (Movimento Brasil Livre), in 2015 in Colombia (Movimiento Libertario) and in 2018 in Chile (Partido Libertario), among others. As of 2022, signatures are being collected to found new parties in Mexico, Peru and Uruguay.

taken place across the world. This is particularly true in the case of intellectuals who come from a non-libertarian background and argue, for example, that libertarianism's 'intrinsic contradictions' allow for a strategic alliance with paleoconservatism which is in the end reactionary (Cooper, 2021). Contentions that libertarians have 'veered' towards the far-right are not uncommon among academics (Stefanoni, 2020; Finchelstein, 2021; Semán, 2023).

Country-specific analyses from non-libertarian backgrounds, when available, also tend to analyze libertarianism in the context of larger phenomena. In Argentina, some intellectuals openly and critically discuss the rise of Javier Milei as that of a member of the 'radicalized right.' (Torme, 2021; Ben, 2022; Tossolini, 2022; Semán, 2023). In Brazil, most inquiries into the relative rise and fall of libertarianism focus are also made almost exclusively in relation to the career of 'far-right' Jair Bolsonaro. In both cases, the name of Donald Trump invariably appears almost always as a predictor of their rise.

In terms of non-left-leaning approaches, studies on libertarianism have tended to be more theoretical than empirical, and the level of attention devoted to Latin America in them is scarce if not null (Mack, 2011; Brennan et al., 2017; Tomasi and Zwolinski, 2023). A noteworthy exception is the series of articles on economic classical liberalism by the *Econ Journal Watch*, which at the time of writing includes the cases of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela (Faria and Filardo, 2015; Marroquín and Thomas, 2015; Kuchař, 2016; Romero et al., 2018; Sáenz-Armstrong, 2018; Berlanza, 2020; Rodríguez Durán and Ramírez Espinosa, 2022).

The more comprehensive study on the history of libertarianism to date also eludes Latin America as it mostly focus on the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. In *The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism*, John Tomasi and Matt Zwolinski argue that libertarianism emerged in Great Britain and France in the 19th century and then made its way to the United States. Furthermore, they contend that libertarianism surfaced as a relatively progressive movement but moved towards conservatism as the threat of communism loomed larger in the 20th century. According to them, American libertarianism in the 21st century now finds itself in an unresolved dispute between these two elements (Tomasi and Zwolinski, 2023).

In any case, avoiding preexisting biases is crucial to understand the evolution of libertarianism. The goal in this case is to study a movement and the many bifurcations of its trajectory in Latin America, focusing on its complexity and nuances; the motivations of its members and followers; and ultimately, the context that contained and shaped this trajectory.

Classical Liberalism, Left-Wing Anarchism and Libertarianism

The fact that Tomasi and Zwolinski's book is an intellectual history of libertarianism and does not feature Latin American authors is telling, but also understandable. As a matter of fact, Latin American libertarians have heavily relied on ideas that have come from abroad, particularly the United States. When discussing the Mexican case, for example, José Antonio Aguilar Rivera (2012) even says that libertarianism 'is not a recent *import*' (emphasis added), the implication being that there are no local intellectuals that have ever developed original libertarian ideas. The result is that, today, libertarian public figures either appeal to the ideas of foreign intellectuals like von Mises and Friedman or, in the search for local thinkers, quote classical liberal intellectuals from the 19th century. It comes as no surprise, in this context, that the most comprehensive study on liberal thought in Argentina stops in 1940. In that country, the figure of Juan Bautista Alberdi, the father of a Constitution that was shaped like that of the United States, is routinely quoted by libertarians even though Alberdi himself could not possibly identify as a libertarian.

This discussion on classical liberal and libertarian thinkers poses a key question that any history of libertarianism needs to address: In which ways do new libertarians emerge from old classical liberals? It needs to be reminded that, in Latin America, the term 'libertarianism' used to carry a different meaning than it does today as it was commonly applied to left-wing anarchism, and some scholars in the Spanish-speaking world still adhere to that standard (see for examples Marin, 2010 and Albornoz, 2021). Indeed, unlike the American or the British tradition, where the term 'libertarian' has traditionally denoted a more restricted meaning (van

der Vossen, 2019; Boaz, 2021), the Spanish term *libertario* was applied to socialist-inspired movements in Latin America which were usually considered representative of a libertarian ideology at some point (Viñas, 1983; Cappelletti, 1990; Vitale, 1998).

This relationship between socialism and libertarianism is worth exploring, particularly as the distinction between the two is more clear now than it used to be in the past. Certain moments in history, such as the events of May 1968, have also been characterized as *libertarios* (Fernández, 2015) and there remain organizations, such as Chile's *Izquierda Libertaria* or Spain's *Revista de Pensamiento Libertario*, which still identify themselves as left-wing anarchist even today. But today, the blend would likely appall most self-declared, 21st century libertarians. Yet an examination onto the causes and consequences of the decrease in importance of left-wing anarchism is warranted: The strength of that 'libertarian'-anarchist movement has dramatically decreased, but it needs to be explained how this change affected those who would later on claim the label for themselves.

As noted, libertarians in Latin America today ground their ideology on classical liberalism, so an important task to be tackled is that of their separation. In that regard, Tomasi and Zwoslinski argue that 'what sets libertarians apart is the absolutism and systematicity with which they affirm the more gentle and compromising ideas of the classical liberals' (2023, p. 3). But if this is true, then studies on classical liberalism will necessarily miss the development of libertarianism, either because they will confuse the two or because the former will outright exclude the latter from analysis.

Latin American Libertarianism: When to Start?

So far, there has not been a systematic attempt at explaining the evolution of modern libertarianism in Latin America. But what is 'modern' libertarianism? In other words, *when* should any history of modern libertarianism start? As an intellectual construct and a political movement, libertarianism gained traction worldwide during the 1970s. The US Libertarian Party, for example, was founded in 1971. Moreover, 1974 saw the publication of Robert

Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, which became the standard-bearer of libertarianism in academia. This was the same year in which Friedrich A. Hayek, who disliked the term 'libertarian' but acknowledged that it was being used in order to represent his ideas (Hayek, 1960), was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. Milton Friedman, who embraced the term philosophically (Jaworski, 2002), received it in 1976.

If Latin American libertarianism is an imported construct, an appropriate starting point may be the late 1970s and early 1980s. Intellectually, the founding of libertarian institutions that took place during these years across different countries is worth exploring insofar as it can serve as a reflection of the arrival of new ideas. Alberto Benegas Lynch (h), an intellectual that promoted Austrian economics, founded the *Escuela Superior de Economía y Administración de Empresas* in 1978, an institute whose journal *Libertas* would become the beacon of libertarian thought in Argentina for the following decades. In Mexico, Carolina Romero de Bolívar founded the *Instituto Cultural Ludwig von Mises* in 1982, from where key figures in Mexican politics would later spring (Aguilar Rivera, 2012). Brazil's Instituto Liberal, in turn, was founded in 1983 by businessman Donald Stewart Jr and it has been argued that its role was 'decisive' for the transformation of Brazilian politics in recent decades (Berlanza, 2020).

In that regard, any history of Latin American libertarianism cannot detach itself from the political and economic developments that ensued since the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. In particular, for many Latin American countries, these years represent the beginning of the democratization processes that ended authoritarian regimes. Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil (as well as Uruguay) returned to democracy in 1979, 1980, 1982, 1983 and 1985 respectively. Other countries, like Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua and Paraguay, began their democratic transitions in the late 1980s and 1990s.

While these democratization processes eventually posed an opportunity for virtually all Latin American countries to return to basic civil liberties, their economies did not always necessarily follow that path, a development that should be studied as a potential dependent variable for the surge of libertarianism. Attempts at

liberalizing the economy after the fall of the Soviet block during the 1990s generated renewed interest for economic liberty in various Latin American countries, but the decade of 2000 saw a reversal towards state interventionism which has been followed by a mix of pushes for liberalization and anti-liberalization in the 2010s (Wise, 2003; Castañeda, 2006; Luna and Roviera Kaltwasser, 2014; Vommaro and Gené, 2022). Recently, the rise of Javier Milei to the presidency in Argentina has brought libertarianism to the forefront not just in Latin America, but the world as well.

Potential Explanatory Factors: The Economy, The Covid-19 Pandemic, Social Media

Economic differences across countries could help explain why libertarianism as a political movement has been more successful in some countries than in others. In that context, the case of Argentina stands out, as the economic stagnation in which the country has found itself for decades can likely be considered a major reason why a candidate like Milei got elected. If an excessive level of state intervention in the economy could be linked to economic crises and, simultaneously, the following periods of liberalization also failed because they were perceived as not far-reaching enough, then the rising popularity of the more extreme solutions that libertarianism offers could be explained. Based on available evidence, both are potentially feasible arguments. For literature on the economic history of Argentina that mostly blames permanent fiscal deficits for the country's economic failure, see Cortés Conde (2005), Cavallo and Cavallo Runde (2018) and Buera and Nicolini (2021). For literature on specific periods of Argentine history where the relationship between government intervention and economic results is also depicted negatively, see for examples Hanke and Schuler (2002), Gallo (2008) and Damill and Frenkel (2014).

If it is the economy which explains the rise of libertarianism across Latin America, then the divergence in the defense of economic and social liberties that is pointed out by intellectuals on the left (Nunes, 2020; Stefanoni, 2020) could be explained as well. However, simplistic explanations that merge libertarianism with conservatism

need to be avoided because libertarians are *not* demanding that any civil liberties be curtailed and are in some cases even advancing further reforms. The first major libertarian party in Latin America, Costa Rica's Movimiento Libertario, called decades ago for the 'respect for differences in socio-economic status... age, religion, gender, sexual preferences' (Movimiento Libertario, 2024). But that has not changed. Today, indeed, Brazil's main libertarian organization calls for the primacy of the individual over the state in its statutes (Movimento Brasil Livre, 2024). Similarly, Argentina's La Libertad Avanza (2021) has stressed the need for a secular state in a country whose Constitution names Roman Catholicism as its official religion. At least in some ways, the basic ideological structure of libertarian organizations appears to remain untouched.

Instead of simply conflating libertarianism with conservatism, a more promising approach to analyzing the evolution of Latin American libertarians may be to look at the evolution of libertarian thought in other parts of the world. In this context, the works of Murray Rothbard and contemporary figures like Walter Block or Hans-Hermann Hoppe may provide insights onto how libertarianism is to be distinguished from mere conservatism. Hoppe's discussion (2011) on 'covenant communities,' for example, illustrates how conservative, reactionary values could be conceived as compatible with a libertarian framework. Moreover, in distinguishing between 'libertarianism' and 'libertinism,' Block (1994) also offers a way to understand ideological movements towards conservatism within the boundaries of libertarianism.

Nevertheless, the connection between conservatism and libertarianism must also be analyzed in terms of how the latter affects the former. What if, instead of becoming more conservative, libertarians are 'liberalizing' conservatives? This was, after all, Rothbard's goal (1992), and some evidence in the US and Latin America suggests that it could be happening (Hackett et al., 2018; Costello and Lilienfeld, 2020; Fasce and Avendaño, 2022).

As the analysis of Latin American libertarianism moves towards more recent developments in order to explain its evolution, another potentially productive topic to explore could be the COVID-19 crisis and, particularly, the political ramifications of the reaction against government-mandated lockdowns. Although the

2019-2020 pandemic is still a recent event, there seem to be indications that this government response brought about a surge in interest for libertarianism in Latin America (for acknowledgments and critiques of this phenomenon see Gómez García, 2021 and Waisbord, 2021). An exploration of this topic could also shed some light into the 'lost connection' between libertarianism and the left, perhaps through the lens of Foucault (1976) on the panopticon (see also Couch, 2020). For an argument that brings together Foucault's thought with libertarian ideas, particularly through his *Birth of Biopolitics*, see Fernández (2020).

Finally, and throughout the analysis, the constant expansion of social media usage needs to be taken into account in order to explain the evolution of libertarianism. In the United States, the phenomenon of 'complex contagion' has been used to explain the emergence and persistence of relatively less moderate forms of political activism, within which libertarianism could be placed (Rohlinger and Bunnage, 2017; Roumanias et al. 2022). And Latin America is no exception when it comes to the political implications of social media, which continue to grow (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Since recent elections show that social media can elevate outsiders (Lupu et al., 2020), the contexts where this applies for Latin American libertarians warrant further consideration.

Some Methodological Observations

Good social science research should make use of both quantitative and qualitative techniques (King et al., 1994). Without quantifying phenomena, words can become meaningless. But numbers that are not interpreted add nothing to our knowledge of the world.

In this context, potentially useful indicators to measure the evolution of Latin American libertarianism include the existence of libertarian parties, mentions of the term 'libertarian' on social media across media outlets, or vote counts in national elections, among others. On the other hand, indicators that can measure factors potentially associated to the evolution of this movement include the evolution of the GDP (for economic developments), the share of the population that uses different social media (for the

salience of its usage), or lockdown stringency (for government intervention during the Covid-19 pandemic). At all times, however, special attention needs to be paid to how the evolution of these indicators is *perceived* by the public so as to explain the causal mechanisms behind the relationships between variables.

But regardless of the types of indicators to be used, *how* should the evolution of libertarianism be explained? Political scientists ideally use experiments or large datasets where variables can be controlled so as to be able to isolate causal factors. Political history, though, does not lend itself well to experimental or statistical methods. As it is the case with most phenomena that are analyzed at the country level over a specific period of time, the small sample size is likely to prevent the use of statistical methods for anyone who wishes to write a history of Latin American libertarianism: Even the most comprehensive work on this subject will not be able to feature more than two dozen cases.

Since the task to be tackled necessarily entails the study of long-term processes, comparative historical analysis (based on Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, 2003) emerges as the most reasonable method to be used. Indeed, comparative historical analysis favors broad-based questions like that of the factors that explain the evolution of Latin American libertarian parties and movements over time. And even though studying specific cases requires deep knowledge of each one, which in turn is time-demanding, any conclusions to which one can arrive through comparative historical analysis will have to be applicable to all of them. By applying the techniques of ‘process tracing,’ (Waldner, 2012) any causal arguments that derive from such a study will be strengthened.

Final Considerations

In conclusion, in an era of increasing polarization and dissatisfaction (Levitsky 2018; Segovia et al., 2021), a history of Latin American libertarianism is needed in order to better understand the evolution of its politics. Unlike recent work, such a study must not only be comprehensive enough so as to explain differences among countries, but must also detach itself from normative questioning. On the

contrary, there is a need to carefully examine the evolution of libertarian political parties and movements as well as the meanings of the word 'libertarianism' itself. In contexts of economic stagnation, expansion of civil liberties and hypercommunication through social media, the answer to the question 'What does it *mean* to be a libertarian?' may not just be revealing in terms of the history of libertarianism, but may also offer important hints as to the present and future of Latin American politics.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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