Why are people demonstrating more than ever in Latin America? Growth is steadier and higher, poverty has decreased, and yet there seems to be high levels of dissatisfaction among the population.

Latin America has been described as the land of “vuelva mañana” (come back tomorrow). Its image is associated with a picture of a man sleeping under a tree with a hat covering his face, enjoying a “siesta.” This image of Latin America blurs our understanding of recent events. In the over three decades since the transition from authoritarian regimes began, the most significant change has not been economic growth or the consolidation of democracy. Rather, it has been the rise of self-expression values that have formed individualistic societies that put collective goals in second place. At the same time, traditional values have been enhanced, so that self-expression values and traditional values are simultaneously present, thereby producing “value tensions” in society.

PROSPERITY AND THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Prosperity has indeed formed self-expression values in societies that are going through a strong materialistic phase. We are seeing widespread access to goods previously unavailable to large parts of the population. Expansion of credit to low-income families has produced a true revolution of access to material goods. In fact, over 100 million people have been pulled out of poverty in the last 20 years, becoming members of the fragile lower-middle class. Women in the favelas in Brazil or the inhabitants of La Guaira in Venezuela now have washing machines and refrigerators. These people have material choices for the first time ever. Yet they still live in the same place. They may have more income but it is unstable; they may have more education but it is insufficient for further economic advancement. They have managed to step up the socioeconomic ladder but with weak tools.

DEMOCRACY: RIGHTS VS. OBLIGATIONS

Democracy, on the other hand, has brought promises of access to rights without putting the necessary weight on the obligations. Yet there is a widespread recognition by the general public of the lack of access to rights. People see insufficient equality before the law, weak states that cannot fully enforce laws, the exclusion of large parts of the population from services such as health care, and weak institutions such as the judicial system and political parties. According to the Latinobarómetro 2013 survey, only 8 percent of the region’s population say that they live in full democracies. Has the “third wave” of democracies brought more access to goods than rights?

At the same time, democracy means “freedom” according to 42 percent of respondents to the Latinobarómetro 2006 survey. Civil liberties are seen as guaranteed, but social and economic freedoms are not. Democracy has in fact
brought higher degrees of freedom of expression. The fear of repression has been gradually fading away. Today’s protests are an expression both of a loss of fear of repression and the critical view of citizens about the way societies are developing. Higher degrees of freedom are backed up with a more stable income, higher education, better health system, and the perception of progress.8 The general public now has a more solid platform upon which to act as critical citizens. The difference is that 15 years ago 70 percent of the population thought people “do not say what they think.”9 This is the first step toward the end of barriers; people now increasingly do say what they think.

“CUL DE SAC” PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRACY

Protest, at the same time, is a function of the conditions that democracy and prosperity have brought. People are empowered to demand a higher degree of self-determination in their lives and want a bigger share of prosperity. This involvement in society through protest reflects the weakness of institutions. Political parties are somehow not able to represent these discontented individuals. Protest is all about a non-ideological, non-institutional participation that has no follow up. This kind of unconventional participation in fact seems to increase as states do not fulfill the promise of democracy. It is a sort of “cul de sac participation” with no institutional channel to create real change.

A second expression of this “cul de sac participation” is reflected in social media, where people participate by clicking and typing. They post on Facebook and tweet, but they do not vote. Forty-seven percent of non-voters in the region have Facebook accounts; 43 percent use Twitter.10 Citizens are active electronically, but not electorally. There is no political action connected to their expressions in social media. This is not a real voice in the decision-making process. It becomes a substitute for the vote—another form of participation without an institutional channel.

A further expression of this phenomenon is the number of “potential activists” who say they would participate in protest but do not. In 2013, this group represented more than 60 percent of the total population of the region.11 Participation has evolved into new forms, while the perception of representation has shrunk. Shrinking representation is expressed, for example, in the atomization of the party systems, with parties and movements that are not represented in parliament. The formation of new party systems during the last three decades has been problematic. In most countries we find an atomized party system12 combined with numerous movements, which lead to weak, non-diverse representation. When a country has two or three dozen parties and movements, the representation system cannot function. In this context, regional protest movements can only grow and expand because party systems are unable to grasp the depth and scope of popular demands and address them in time.

At the same time, high levels of participation in “issue-related” protests do not automatically lead to the organization of civil society and representative bodies. The formation of a working party system that represents those demands can take more time than expected. Conflicts and ungovernability can be the consequence of this process. In short, democracy has arguably brought a demand for social and political inclusion that the political system cannot meet. This is a further element of the end of barriers. People are not waiting for the political system to offer solutions; they are demanding solutions irrespective of the fact that they can be heard.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development has been successful in the region, but political development has been left far behind. The shortcomings of the disconnect between economics and politics are now apparent. Economic success has proven to be a necessary but...
not sufficient condition for stability. The question is not about “how much” cake I have but “how fair” my piece is. It is about politics, power, and the exercise of rights—political goods. In this light, it is not a surprise to see presidents succeed because they have been able to produce political goods rather than economic ones; the cases of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa are emblematic in this respect. At the same time, we see an overall decline in government approval since 2009, indicating that the threshold of patience has been reached and the general public is increasingly expecting more—and is increasingly dissatisfied with what governments deliver.14

However, people are expecting results without caring much about the institutional developments needed to reach those goals. Norms and procedures seem to have less importance than the exercise of rights for the population. Individual access to rights is more important than collective goals.15

DISTRUST, DISCRIMINATION, AND GENDER

According to the World Value Survey, Latin America is the most distrustful region in the world. Over 80 percent of the region distrusts “others.” This lack of trust spills over into suspicion of all types of institutions—parties, government, companies, associations, media, etc. Distrust has its origin in unequal and very discriminatory societies.

Distrust is rooted in discrimination that concentrates in two dimensions: race and socioeconomic status. The color of your skin and your level of poverty determine the degree of discrimination toward you.

Gender can be added to this list. Women have become presidents and are applauded when entering politics but it is politically incorrect for a woman to earn more than “the man.” Equal wages for men and women can hardly be a goal in societies where almost half of the population thinks it is incorrect for a woman to earn more than her husband. Certain areas of gender equality are particularly taboo. This is a kind of modern face of machismo, where some things are allowed to women and others are not yet. Culture, not public policy, is standing in the way.

This cultural problem with gender equality is also applicable to discrimination. Discrimination is more a social habit exercised by people themselves than a result of institutional or legal exclusion. Ironically, social mobility produces discrimination inasmuch as people reject their old peers because they are “losers” unable to move upward. Latin America has a cultural problem to solve. Race is part of the problem because there is a high correlation between poverty and ethnic origin.19

We have named three dimensions of value tensions: distrust, discrimination, and gender. There is a large consensus among experts with respect to the institutional and normative deficiencies of democracies, but there is no equal consensus with respect to these value tensions in cultural development. Traditional values remain a major impediment to the transformation of Latin American societies.

THE CONCEPT OF TIME

A further dimension of value tension is “time.” We live in the age of “instant delivery” when the Internet has taught us that things should not take minutes, but seconds. How to make the instant world of Internet compatible with a concept of time that is relaxed and imprecise? Time has been, in Latin America, a subject in itself, one of main characteristics of a region where things happen at a different speed. García Marquez described revolving time, where events take place over and over again, without evolution.

The way time is used in Latin America is probably the most difficult concept for citizens of the First World to understand. In a rational world there is a relationship between the amount of time one invests in an action and the value of that action. In societies where there is almost no reward for your efforts, where your opportunities do not depend on how much you can deliver, where currencies have been unstable, and where

Democracy has arguably brought a demand for social and political inclusion that the political system cannot meet.

Individual access to rights is more important than collective goals.
going to be a major cultural barrier of the region, probably the most significant one.

Breaking down the barrier of time—making time matter—marks the end of a major cultural barrier of the region, when added to the others here described, it becomes a powerful citizen-driven force.

**Conclusion: The End to Barriers**

Access to goods and guaranteed civil liberties are putting an end to barriers and giving people the determination to demand their rights. Decades of repressive authoritarian government had installed a culture of barriers that is finally coming to an end. We are experiencing a new relationship between the citizen and the state and government—one where citizens are empowered to demand the rights promised by democracy. Those who have left poverty now want to move from the lower-middle class to an established middle class. People want higher and stable wages, good public services, decent health, and better education. The ladder of expectations has expanded exponentially with prosperity. There is no end to it.

Cyclical time will not repeat itself. The new generation is experiencing what time means in the global world.

The region has never been so prosperous, so democratic, so free, and so happy. There is an end to barriers that (the promise of) democracy has brought, although democracy itself remains imperfect. These processes are simultaneous and therefore more difficult to identify. It is the population that is driving the political agenda, not elites. The latter will be pushed}

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**TABLE 1 — MOBILE PHONES AND ONE MEAL A DAY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have one meal a day (96%)</th>
<th>Mobile phone</th>
<th>No mobile phone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t have one meal a day (4%)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE** Latinobarómetro, 2013.

**TABLE 2 — POVERTY AND ACCESS TO THE INTERNET BY AGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Have mobile phone — Don’t have one meal a day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16–25</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–40</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–60</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 and older</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE** Latinobarómetro, 2013.
to fulfill the demands of dismantling inequality and discrimination.

Latin America’s biggest challenges lie in the organization of new elites who are today struggling to deliver the broad and swift access to rights that the public demands.

ENDNOTES


2. Shanty towns.

3. Hills near Caracas where poor people live.


7. See Latinobarómetro, 2011, survey: freedom of religion/faith, 76 percent; freedom to choose one’s occupation, 70 percent; freedom of political participation, 66 percent; freedom of speech always and everywhere, 59 percent; equality of men and women, 58 percent; equality of life chances regardless of origin, 50 percent; protection of private property 49 percent; protection of the environment, 48 percent; solidarity with the poor and needy, 40 percent; chance to get a job, 36 percent; social security, 36 percent; just and fair distribution of wealth, 31 percent; protection against crime, 30 percent.

8. Perception of progress has increased from 26 percent in 1996 to 37 percent in 2013.


12. In many countries the number of parties people mention in the question, “Which party would you vote for...” has been up to 80 different names, some of which experts in those countries do not know themselves. This has been a question in an annual survey in 18 countries in the region since 1995. See Latinobarómetro, www.latinobarometro.org.

13. The presidents of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, respectively.


19. Sixty-three percent of the indigenous population have a basic education; 43 percent of those who self-classify as whites have a basic education. See Latinobarómetro at http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp.


21. In Chile, 95 percent of children in the 11th and 12th grade have Facebook accounts, although 13 percent of the population is classified as “poor.” See Barómetro de la Educación Superior MORI Chile.


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