

*When Democracy Isn't All That Democratic*  
*Social Exclusion and the Limits of the Public Sphere in Latin America*

by

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This paper argues that many of the challenges faced by Latin American democracies today and the long term implications of those challenges for democratic stability in the region can be usefully understood in terms of their impact on the public sphere. The first section develops a theoretical framework for understanding the public sphere as the nexus between civil society and the state. The second section then examines the nature of the public sphere in Latin America and the ways in which large segments of the population are effectively marginalized from actively participating in it. More specifically, the narrowness of the public sphere is discussed in terms of two inter-related dimensions: the dominant mode of interest intermediation, what I call *neopluralism*, and the growing gap between the general population and the political elite. The section concludes with a case study of Chile after the return of democratic government in 1990. The final section of the paper briefly discusses the need to fill the growing public void in Latin American and some possible steps to take.

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During much of the 1970s and 1980s, the principal political struggles throughout Latin America revolved around the creation of democratic political regimes based on the right to vote. Now that this right has been effectively established in virtually every country of the region,<sup>1</sup> the limits of the of political democracy as traditionally defined are becoming increasingly apparent (Oxhorn and Ducatenzeiler, 1998; Agüero and Stark, 1998; Chalmers et al, 1997). These countries are undisputably political democracies, yet the *quality* of democratic rule leaves much to be desired. Recent studies of the democratic deficits in Latin America have focused on a variety of dimensions (including extremes of economic inequality, poverty, growing levels of criminality, limits on citizenship rights, the weakness of civil society, problems of representation and weak of political parties, among others).

Significantly, given the increasing emphasis on the public sphere in democratic theory more generally (Elster, 1998; Bowman, 1996, Nino, 1996; Putnam, 1995), very little work has focused specifically on the nature of the public sphere Latin American democracies and its relationship to the quality of democratic regimes in the region. While no longer formally circumscribed,<sup>2</sup> in practice the public sphere in Latin American democracies is limited in ways which contribute to a growing distance between a political elite and the people they are supposed to represent. This paper will argue that many of the challenges faced by Latin American democracies today and the long term implications of those challenges for democratic stability in the region can be usefully understood in terms of their impact of the public sphere. In the first section, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding the public sphere as the nexus between civil society and the state. In the second section, I examine the nature of the public sphere in Latin America and the ways in which large segments of the population are effectively marginalized from actively participating in it. More specifically, I examine the narrowness of the public sphere in terms of two inter-related dimensions: the dominant mode of interest intermediation, what I call *neopluralism*, and the growing gap between the general population and the political elite. I conclude this section with a case study of Chile after the return of democratic government in 1990. In the final section of the paper, I briefly discuss the need to fill the growing public void in Latin American and some possible steps to take.

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<sup>1</sup>The obvious exception is Cuba now that Mexico appears to be firmly locked into a process in which governments will be selected on the basis of relatively free and fair elections.

<sup>2</sup>Chile is perhaps the most notorious exception given the continued enforcement of censorship laws inherited from the military regime.

*Understanding The Public Sphere: The Civil Society–State Nexus*

In this section, I argue that the public sphere is best understood as being the nexus between civil society and the state. As such, it the public sphere is shaped by both civil society and the state in a variety of fundamental ways. To appreciate this, I adopt the following definition of the public sphere:

The public sphere denotes a contested participatory site in which actors with overlapping identities as legal subjects, citizens, economic actors and family and community members form a public body and engage in negotiations and contestations over political and social life (Somers, 1993:589).

As such, the public sphere can be characterized according to its inclusiveness in terms of the multiplicity of actors which can actively participate in it and the capacity of those actors to “alter patterns of integration or the overall exercise of power” through such participation (Calhoun, 1993: 278). In other words, the public sphere should be evaluated according to who is included in it (and who is not), as well as the significance of that inclusion in terms of the ability of those actors to pursue their self-defined interests.

The latter point about the *effectiveness* of the public sphere needs to be emphasized. As Habermas (1992: 452) warned, “discourses do not govern.” The public sphere becomes politically relevant “...only to the extent to which it enables the participants in the economy, via their status as citizens, to mutually accommodate or generalize their interests and to assert them so effectively that state power is transformed into a fluid medium of society’s self-organization” (Habermass, 1992: 431).<sup>3</sup> The proliferation of identity-based groups based on gender and ethnicity, for example, which undoubtedly has been very important to their members and, probably to a lesser degree, the communities in which they have emerged, need to be seen in this light. The existence of such organizational activity is significant and unprecedented given literally centuries of oppression that groups represented in such organizational activity have experienced (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998). Yet their existence is ultimately insufficient unless it is accompanied by meaningful changes in state policies, institutions and social practices. This is especially true in developing countries like those of Latin America, where the noticeable lack of impact from such movements can feed frustration and, perhaps paradoxically, further shrink the public sphere as people withdraw from it. Moreover, social heterogeneity has historically created collective action problems among Latin America’s lower classes that have served to reinforce social hierarchy rather than empower subaltern groups (Oxhorn,

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<sup>3</sup>Habermass tends to limit his analysis to economic status and social class, although his general point about the importance of gauging the effectiveness of the public sphere is equally applicable to other kinds of social actors. See Calhoun, 1993.

1998a).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I will return to both points in later sections.

Similarly, locally-based actors (which include most identity-based organizational activity) need to be situated in larger national contexts to understand their ultimate impact on the societies in which they emerge (Oxhorn, forthcoming a). Unless such actors are able to project their influence onto national agendas and begin to influence larger socio-economic and political processes that effect their ability to pursue their self-defined interests, their concrete achievements will at best be quite limited. Whether it be to influence the distribution of resources by the central state, seek protection from the negative consequences of globalization, reverse and/or compensate for discriminatory social practices, pursue environmentally sustainable development with some level of social equity, to name but a few examples, many of the principal objectives of social actors cannot be achieved in isolation from decision-making processes which determine the overall direction of the larger societies of which they form a part. This is particularly true in Latin America, where centuries of national centralizing tendencies still predominate, despite recent efforts at state decentralization in many countries.<sup>5</sup>

This perspective on the public sphere suggests its close relationship with civil society. Indeed, much of the literature seems to conflate the mere existence of civil society with the public sphere, thereby ignoring important questions about the composition and effectiveness of the public sphere (Calhoun, 1993). As distinct from the public sphere, civil society is defined as the social fabric formed by a multiplicity of self-constituted territorially- and functionally-based units which peacefully coexist and collectively *resist subordination* to the state, at the same time that they *demand inclusion* into national political structures (Oxhorn, 1995b).

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<sup>5</sup>On Latin America's "centralist tradition," see Veliz, 1980. This is not to deny the important role played by local and regional actors in mediating national level processes of socio-economic and political change. On the Mexican case, for example, see Rubin, 1997 and Vaughan, 1997.

This definition focuses attention on power relations within a given society, capturing the tendency of civil societies to mirror the existing distribution of power within those societies (Phillips, 1999). The dual dynamic of resistance and inclusion characteristic of civil societies implies that strong civil societies reflect a relative dispersion of political power throughout entire polities.<sup>6</sup> By looking at civil society in terms of this dual dynamic, I am highlighting the aspect of civil societies which is of particular relevance to understanding Latin America. Civil society since its inception in the West has always been characterized by multiple, even contradictory dimensions (Black, 1984). In consolidated democratic regimes, this dynamic may be more latent than apparent. The voluntary organizations which are the hallmark of civil society in countries like the United States would not generally be expected to either actively demand inclusion (since political inclusion is already firmly established more broadly) or actively resist subordination to the state (given that a variety of institutions exist for negotiating the limits on state action within civil society). Organizations of civil society are often quite active at all levels of government as they attempt to influence policy making and determine the appropriate boundaries of state action within civil society through well established channels. Yet even in the U.S., some of the most influential social movements since the 1960s, particularly the civil rights and feminist movements, have had inclusion as their explicit goal.<sup>7</sup> Historically in the West, this dynamic was central to the emergence of both civil society and consolidated democratic regimes—and their strength today is a measure of earlier “victories” (Bendix, 1964; Keane, 1988). In most of Latin America, both political inclusion and the autonomy of civil society organizations from the state are much more problematic.

Moreover, by defining civil society in terms of self-constituted units, the importance of *organization* in generating political power is emphasized. In particular, the capacity of subaltern groups within a society to organize themselves autonomously from other actors is a key defining characteristic of developed civil societies capable of supporting stable democratic regimes.<sup>8</sup> Whether it be peasant groups organizing to assert their rights vis-a-vis feudal lords in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages (Brenner, 1976; Putnam,

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<sup>6</sup> The terms “power” and “power resources” are used to refer principally to economic resource, and organizational capacity to autonomously define and defend collective group interests. The latter can be based on a strong sense of collective identity, an ideology and/or organizational skill. It can also derive from the availability of selective incentives for members. Coercive power is not relevant here because it is generally used for ends which are antithetical to development of civil societies.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, resistance to state subordination has been a historical demand of civil society in the U.S., stemming back at least to the War of Independence. One must not forget that the associational tendencies so admired by Tocqueville laid the foundation for successful armed struggle against the distant, closed state of the British Crown. Today, it is best reflected in the American Civil Liberties Union and National Rifle Association, not to mention various rightwing militia groups and a variety of conservative political groups.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the organization of subaltern groups will necessarily contribute to the emergence of political democracy, let alone civil society. Revolutionary groups seeking to capture the state, for example, are antithetical to the idea of civil society expressed here. The organization of subaltern groups also has frequently led to an authoritarian backlash.

1993), the great working class struggles of the 19th and early 20th centuries for basic rights of citizenship (Bendix, 1964), or the poor creating self-help organizations in the shantytowns of Latin America (Eckstein, 1989; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992), the capacity of disadvantaged groups to organize affords them the potential to define and defend their interests in larger political processes. This contributes to the dispersion of political power in their favor. Such organizational minimizes the tendency in capitalist societies for the interests of dominant actors and social classes to completely subordinate the interests of other less powerful actors and social classes.

It should be apparent from the above that civil society needs to be understood in terms of its specific relationship with the state. While the autonomy of civil society from the state must be stressed, this autonomy does not imply isolation. Rather, such autonomy refers to the ability of the societal units that compose civil society to define their collective interests and act in open pursuit of them, in competition with one another. As part of that competition, these societal units seek to influence state policy. Their relationship with the state may be fluid and mutually-reinforcing, as is the case in established liberal democratic regimes. But it can also be more selective, with preference given only to certain groups, as is the case with many newly democratic governments. It can even be openly antagonistic in countries where civil society is engaged in on-going struggles against authoritarian regimes.

The possibility of such an antagonist relationship between civil society and the state underscores the historically strong association between what are generally considered strong civil societies and political democracy. The relative strength of a civil society's composite units ultimately forces reluctant elites to open closed political systems as a way of maintaining societal peace (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992). Indeed, in the absence of any societal consensus and after a stalemated political struggle reflecting a relatively equal distribution of power resources, democracy may be the second-best alternative acceptable to all actors (Rustow, 1970). In societies where political power is more concentrated, civil society is weaker and the prospects for long term democratic stability correspondingly are lower.

The relationship between a strong civil society and democracy is a direct reflection of the link between civil society and the public sphere. As Calhoun (1993:273) noted, the public sphere is "an operationalization of civil society's capacity for self-organization." From this perspective, the public sphere is in reality the definitive demand of civil societies and its creation is one of their principal *victories*. In effect, it is at the level of the public sphere that the dual dynamic of resistance to state subordination and the demand for inclusion plays itself out, and the interaction of civil society and the state through the public sphere historically has been responsible for shaping the principal rights of citizenship actually enjoyed by citizens (Oxhorn, forthcoming b; Somers, 1993). The public character of the various social actors which compose civil society and drive this dynamic defines the limits of the competition among them for influence, effectively allowing them to peacefully coexist (Oxhorn, 1995b). Conversely, as will be discussed in the following section, the weakness and nature of civil society in much of Latin America has had an important constraining effect on the expansion of the public sphere under democratic regimes in the region. To the extent that civil society remains atomized and fragmented, the public sphere necessarily excludes large segments of the population.

Just as civil society cannot be understood in isolation from the state, the state also plays an important role in structuring the public sphere. In extreme cases, the public sphere is severely circumscribed as a result of the state's physical repression civil society actors. States also play a role in directly creating



and/or strengthening civil society actors, thereby conditioning the nature of the public sphere through the kinds of relations it establishes with these actors. This has been the case historically in the United States (Skocpol, 1996), and is a hallmark of corporatist modes interest intermediation both in developed and developing countries (Schmitter, 1974). The public sphere reflects this, both through the kinds of actors which are present in it, as well as through the specific channels the state establishes with these civil society actors.

More generally, the state directly structures the public sphere in several important ways which reflect a “state in society” perspective for understanding patterns of social domination (Migdal, 1994). First, state institutions create both opportunities and incentives for different groups to organize and attempt to influence policies (Skocpol, 1985; Tilly, 1981; Oxhorn, 1998b). The degree of openness of state institutions determines the kinds of groups which have access and how such access is achieved. The policies a state addresses, the scope of its influence in the economy and society, and the actual resources the state has at its disposal for distribution are all key variables which help determine the contours of the public sphere. Similarly, state institutions vary in terms of the degree to which they enable citizens to relate to one another in a variety of different ways that can help institutionalize the participation in the public sphere of the plurality of social identities present in any society (Bickford, L., 1999; Bickford, S., 1999).

A second way in which states condition the public sphere is through the provision of rights of citizenship. Important formal rights such as freedom of expression and association, as well as universal suffrage, are obvious prerequisites for any public sphere to function democratically. The effective provision of other rights of citizenship, particularly basic civil rights, is also very important for understanding the nature of the public sphere in Latin America. This because such rights often are anything but “universal” and in practice lead to the exclusion of large segments of the population from active participation in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

More generally, it is important to recognize that citizenship rights are socially constructed. Historically, their limits (or, more positively, their breadth in terms of who enjoys them and their depth in terms of what such rights entail) have been the result of “struggle and bargaining between expanding states and their subjects [that] created citizenship where it had not previously existed” (Tilly, 1996: 9). The nature of citizenship rights, both *de jure* and *de facto*, reflects this process of state- civil society interactions, and as such it has important repercussions for the scope of the public sphere that will be explored in the following section.

Before looking specifically at the nature of the public sphere in Latin America, it is important to briefly discuss two important intervening variables which also condition the nature of the public sphere: the media and political parties. In his original discussion of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1989) saw the modern mass media, with its commercialization of public discourse and the manipulative power it provided to those who controlled it, as a principal threat to the rational, deliberative reasoning he saw as the

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<sup>9</sup>This is hardly unique to Latin America in the present period. A similar process, for example, can be observed in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Somers, 1993), despite the fact that this same period in English history is generally recognized as having given birth to the modern ideal of universal citizenship rights (Marshall, 1950).

fundamental characteristic of the public sphere. In later work Habermas found such fears to be “too simplistic” (Habermas, 1992: 438), suggesting a more ambiguous affect of the mass media on the public sphere.

At a minimum, it is impossible to think of a public sphere in the complete absence of a free media, and restrictions on the media are one way in which states attempt to deliberately (and sometimes violently) constrain the public sphere. “Freedom” of the media, however, cannot eliminate important media biases. In Latin America (as elsewhere), television in particular is often dominated by conservative agendas linked to business interests that complicate the ability of leftist political parties to win elections by limiting their ability to publicize their agendas (Lawson, 1999). Still, populist political leaders such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela have been able to win dramatic electoral victories by championing the interests of society’s excluded majority despite mass media opposition.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, severe economic and political crises combined to help them overcome initial media opposition and set the public agenda. In a similar fashion, opposition to the Pinochet military regime was able to successfully use the mass media to defeat Pinochet in the 1988 national plebiscite and thus begin a transition to democracy. This was achieved despite harsh authoritarian controls over the media and the often extreme rightwing bias of the major television networks and most (but not all) newspapers.<sup>11</sup> And in Brazil, the mass media successfully backed the Social Democratic candidate, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, over the his more leftist opponent, Luís Inácio (“Lula”) da Silva, in the last two presidential elections. Moreover, the obviously commercial nature of television has to a certain extent neutralized its ability to influence actual policy debates.<sup>12</sup> Still, the mass media often has a powerful impact on popular fears, particularly concerning crime and official corruption, and these fears can have the perverse effect of narrowing the public sphere as public opinion shifts in support of authoritarian, nondemocratic remedies.

The second mediating variable is political parties. While it is arguable whether political parties should

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<sup>10</sup>Fujimori’s electoral victory is particularly impressive. A virtual unknown prior to the 1990 presidential elections, he decisively defeated the world renown novelist Mario Vargas Llosa who enjoyed overwhelming support from both the business community and mass media.

<sup>11</sup>The opposition was aided by the free provision of television time by the military regime, but its success was due to the opposition’s skillful public relations campaign that was able to reduce the legitimate fears of many Chileans of the consequences of voting against the incumbent regime.

<sup>12</sup>Personal interview, Gaston Zamora, La Paz, Bolivia, July 16, 1999. Zamora was one of four people responsible for successfully mobilizing popular support for a series of major institutional reforms implemented by the Government of Bolivian President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in the mid-1990s. The reforms met with an intense effort by a variety of opposition groups to mobilize popular support against their enactment. Zamora also noted that the government also could not rely on national radio networks publicize its reforms given the high levels of distrust of any outside influences in most rural communities, particularly indigenous ones. Public campaigns instead had to be broadcast on local community radios stations, often with ranges of less than 5 kilometers. Garretón (1999) also noted the limited effect of television on policy debates.

be considered part of civil society given that they uniquely compete to win control over the state, their influence on the public sphere is determined in important ways by their roots in civil society. This, in turn, has important implications for the public sphere. The weakness and loss of legitimacy that traditional political parties experienced in Venezuela and Peru, for example, were important factors explaining the electoral victories of populists such as Fujimori and Chávez, who successfully campaigned against traditional parties and politicians. Conversely, the strength of political parties in Chile was a principal reason for the opposition's ultimate success there, at the same time that they had to overcome years of repression and the direct assault on their legitimacy by the military regime.

More generally, the nature of the ties between voters and political parties often crystallizes itself in the public sphere. This is part of their unique representational function in political democracies. Parties affect the public sphere directly, both through the agendas or platforms that they debate, and through the state policies that they advocate or oppose. The weaker the links between political leaders and the grassroots, the more distant and inaccessible the public sphere will appear. Indeed, this is one reason behind the widespread popular support of populists, both today and in the past: they appear to listen to the common person when other elites do not.

Figure 1 about here

The above arguments are summarized schematically in Figure 1. The public sphere is conditioned by both civil society and the state, at the same time that civil society mediates their own interaction. The strength of civil society, in particular, provides for a more inclusionary public sphere, while the state shapes the public sphere through the institutional spaces it creates for participation and the provision of citizenship rights. The mass media also have a clear, albeit ambiguous, effect on the public sphere. Political parties similarly play an important role in shaping the public sphere in a variety of ways. Whether political parties promote or restrict the public sphere is to a large extent determined by the kinds of linkages they have to civil society. Viewed in this way as the nexus for civil society-state relations, the nature of the public sphere offers important insights into the quality of democratic regimes and the principal challenges they face.

### *The Return of Democracy and the Poverty of Latin America's Public Sphere*

The resurgence of political democracy in Latin America has generally been accompanied by increasing guarantees of free and fair elections, noticeable declines in political repression and relatively few formal restrictions on the freedom of the mass media to express divergent points of view.<sup>13</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, these positive trends associated with the return of elected civilian governments have had a

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<sup>13</sup>Colombia and Peru are major exceptions due the extensive human rights abuses associated with on-going military insurrections and, particularly in the former, government efforts to control the drug trade. It is also important to emphasize that there are a variety of informal controls on the media in a number of countries, although there is little evidence of extensive self-censorship resulting from these controls—much to the media's credit.

much more muted impact on the nature of the public sphere. The reason for this lack of synchronization is found in two inter-related dimensions of the *kind* of democratic regimes that generally have emerged in the region: their *neopluralist mode of interest intermediation* and the growing gap between the political elite and the general population.

Neopluralism is a market-centered pattern of political incorporation.<sup>14</sup> It has replaced the state-centered pattern of incorporation associated with corporatism and the developmentalist state that dominated the region up through the 1970s, and is closely associated with current neoliberal economic policies emphasizing free trade, open markets and a minimal role for the state in both the economy and society. The pluralist aspect of neopluralism revolves around

the belief that the best balance of interests and values within a given polity is produced by some form (however limited) of free competition among individuals in the rational pursuit of their self-interest. In much the same way that the market is characterized in liberal economics, the rational maximization of individual interests (which are reconciled through the mechanism of the market when they conflict) is portrayed as the driving force behind progress. Individual freedom is valued above all, and this requires respect for private property and (ideally, at least) the rule of law (Oxhorn, 1998b: 201).

What distinguishes neopluralism from the more traditional pluralist model associated with democracy in the United States (eg, Dahl, 1961) is its marked authoritarian bent. Ultimate political authority is essentially decided upon through a free a market of votes. But once elected, officials have few checks on their power and frequently bi-pass representative democratic institutions (Oxhorn and Ducatzenzeiler, 1998; Weffort, 1998; O'Donnell, 1994). Moreover, a variety of unelected (and unaccountable) power holders, particularly the military, exercise control over key state decisions (McSherry, 1999).

The logic of neopluralism, undergirded by market-based economic reforms, permeates entire political systems in a variety of ways. In particular, market principals and market-based incentives come to play a defining role in collective action. An individual's personal economic resources largely determine the extent and nature of her political and social inclusion. They also directly affect the quality of education, health care and even the legal protection a person enjoys. Just as the state is assigned a minimal role in insuring the smooth functioning of the market in the economic realm, the state largely abdicates its role in providing incentives (both positive and negative) for collective action. The public and private goods formally available at the state level to those mobilized earlier periods, as well as the coercive incentives for the hierarchical organization of economic interests under state corporatism (Schmitter, 1974), no longer exist or have been significantly reduced. Group identities and collective interests lose any intrinsic value, and organizational activity within civil society reflects individual, self-interested decisions to join.

Neopluralism adversely affects the public sphere in at least three ways. The first is through growing economic insecurity. Economic insecurity undermines the public sphere by directly decreasing the ability of

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<sup>14</sup>For a more extensive discussion of neopluralism, see Oxhorn, 1998b.

workers to engage in it, both individually and collectively. This increased insecurity is a direct result of neopluralism's reliance on the market for determining the best allocation of resources and opportunities for all members of society. As a result, labor codes throughout the region have been modified to generally make it easier for firms to hire temporary workers and fire current employees (Oxhorn, 1998b). The resulting labor market flexibility allows for the maintenance of international competitiveness on the basis of low wages. Moreover, governments increasingly "informalize themselves vis-à-vis their own laws in their quest for even more foreign investment" by creating special production zones that exempt foreign firms from labor legislation and taxation policies applicable in the rest of the nation (Portes, 1994: 168). Where existing rights are not taken away outright, their systematic violation is often ignored by the state.

The consequences of this have been significant. Latin American economies grew approximately 15 percent in the first half of the 1990s, yet unemployment also rose, while real wages fell. This is in part because 90 percent of all new jobs created in the 1990s were in the informal sector (Vilas, 1999:15).<sup>15</sup> Poverty levels remained unchanged from 1990 to 1995, with 1 in 3 people living below the poverty line (Fleury, 1998: 5-6). Employment is no longer a guarantee of even a minimal standard of living. For example, 70 percent of all poverty is accounted for by low wages in Argentina (Vilas, 1999: 17). More generally, a World Bank study concluded that 50 percent of all poverty in the region is "excessive" in that economic conditions were sufficient to eliminate it.<sup>16</sup> These trends reflect structural problems in the economy that can be corrected only through state intervention. As Díaz (1991:89) concluded:

...an important portion of the poor in the 1990s *work* and receive regular wages. However, their employment is precarious, unstable and subjected to authoritarian labor relations. This means that poverty no longer is generated by "exclusion" from the system, but is reproduced thanks to the exploitation of the workforce. The consequence is that economic growth will not by itself solve problems of poverty or inequality, but will more likely

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<sup>15</sup>Chile is a partial exception, with real wages showing moderate growth between 1992 and 1992. Yet among the poorest 10 percent of workers, the proportion earning less than the minimum wage increased from 48 percent to 67 percent. Moreover, the overall pattern of income distribution at best remained the same, and may even have worsened during the same period (MIDEPLAN, 1994; Barrera, 1998; Altimir, 1998).

<sup>16</sup>Cited in Fleury, 1998: 7. This conclusion was based on a comparison of poverty levels in other regions with a similar level of economic development.

reproduce them.

These same trends are also responsible for the weakening of labor movements, the principal representatives of the lower classes in Latin America, throughout the region. Workers in the informal sector and most free trade zones are only rarely organized (Barrera, 1999; O.I.T., 1996). Declining union membership and organizational fragmentation have combined to reduced the collective bargaining power of organized labor, independently of legal changes designed to have a similar effect (O.I.T., 1993:29). Increasingly, organized labor has become a narrowly self-interested actor, competing with other groups in civil society in the pursuit of the particularistic interests of its reduced membership. Moreover, labor union elites have often bargained elected governments over concessions intended to preserve their own individual status and institution position through control over worker pension funds, government posts and so on, in exchange for their acquiescence to legislative changes curtailing organized labor's effective power (Zapata, 1998; Murillo, 1997; Buchanan, 1997). This has further weakened organized labor by contributing to a growing distance between the union rank-and-file and their leaders.

Aside from the obvious effect of economic insecurity on the *capacity* of workers and other economically disadvantaged groups to participate in the public sphere, another important consequence has been the erosion of their *will* to participate. As Vilas (1999: 20) notes, the growing phenomenon of the working poor is radically altering what he calls "the culture of work:"

The idea of employment as the means which permits a living to be earned...is now diluted by the evidence that having a job does not necessarily permit one to live better. The vision of the union as the instrument of the defense of rights and access to benefits is likewise losing ground. The idea of belonging to a group of fellow-workers—a class—is brought into question by fragmentation. The sentiment of solidarity with fellow workers is undermined by the competition for all against all for a decent job.

Under these circumstances, the necessity of day-to-day survival may make public participation and collective action seem at best a luxury one can no longer afford, and at worst a wasted effort. As Victor Mejia, President of the Association for Community Development in San Salvador, explained, there is an unavoidable decline in organizational activity when "the people in the communities are thinking about what they will eat today, despite all their other problems" (Personal interview, San Salvador, May 1997).

Rising crime rates and the predominant responses to them reflect the second way in which neopluralism affects the public sphere negatively. Crime rates, in part fed by growing economic insecurity, have risen substantially in almost every country in the region (Neild, 1999; NACLA, 1996). This has led to the criminalization of poverty (Méndez, O'Donnell, Pinheiro, 1999), a marked increase in state repression (Neild, 1999; McSherry, 1998) and the de facto *marketization of the rule of law* (Oxhorn, forthcoming b).

To deal with rising crime rates, the poor are often targeted by police efforts to control crime in what amounts to criminalizing poverty. As Pinheiro (1999:2) explains, "...the poor continue to be the preferred victims of violence, criminality, and human rights violations." Despite recent transitions to democracy and a substantial reduction in the systematic violation of human rights by the state (with the exceptions of Peru and Colombia due to ongoing civil wars), the overall level of state violence in these countries has generally not declined. Instead, it has undergone a qualitative change, as it is no longer directed against the political opposition, but the poor (Méndez, 1999a: 19-20). Moreover, the military is increasingly becoming involved

in basic law enforcement, particularly in the growing area of drug-related crimes (McSherry, 1998). In some cases, the criminalization of poverty is even formalized in law. For example, the elected government of El Salvador passed several laws (portions of which were eventually declared unconstitutional) in March 1996 which stipulated that individuals were to be considered potential criminals subject to imprisonment and the loss of basic rights simply because of their appearance (Oxhorn, forthcoming b).

What is most surprising is that lack of opposition such trends generate. Because the poor remain the principal victims of crime, even laws like those in El Salvador generally receive widespread popular support among the poor (Neild, 1999; Méndez, 1999a). This was the case with the laws in El Salvador. Similarly, a 1998 poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* (April 16, 1998: A15) found that fears of social violence, corruption and upheaval led more than a quarter of the respondents in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela, as well as a majority in Ecuador, stated explicitly that they preferred more authoritarian governments.

Public support for repressive police policies involves more than just a simple fear of growing crime rates. Abuse of the legal system by elites, corruption and widespread perceptions that officials enjoy a certain impunity regardless of what they do has also undermined trust in legal institutions. Throughout Latin America, with the exception Chile, public confidence in the judiciary is alarmingly low. This is particularly true for low income groups, including the poor in Chile (Garro, 1999: 279). It reflects not only the continued distrust of state institutions caused by high levels of abuse under authoritarian regimes, but also the fact that such practices do not end with the transition to democracy. Laws and personnel are held over from the authoritarian regime and are difficult to change. People become accustomed to pursuing extra-legal remedies for their grievances. Moreover, elected officials have contributed to the pervasive lack of confidence in judicial institutions due to their own political intervention in the courts (Méndez, 1999b). As a result, people are reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement agencies, even to the extent of reporting crimes. In Chile, for example, up to half of all burglaries and thefts go unreported, despite the fact that this is the only country in the region where most citizens approve of police performance (Neild, 1999: 5).

This lack of citizen cooperation leaves few alternatives to applying more violence because effective law enforcement and crime prevention are dependent upon community involvement. Yet repressive police measures ultimately do little improve the image of law enforcement agencies. Instead, there is a real danger that the situation will only be exacerbated as local communities further withdraw from the legal community. As Neild (1999: 13) warns:

it is precisely the record of authoritarian policing that built up social control and repressive functions at the expense of criminal investigation and crime prevention [and] generated the high levels of public mistrust that exist today. There is a real danger of a vicious circle in which a failure to act reinforces public perceptions that government is weak, while overreaction with “war on crime” and “fire force” policing measures leaves the impression that little has changed and will, in the end, only deepen the loss of confidence in the formal justice system.

The criminalization of poverty and resort to repressive police methods also reflect the widespread marketization of the rule of law. Basic civil rights are in effect allocated according to people’s “buying power.” Although equal protection under the law exists on paper, the poor cannot access it because of their limited economic resources. The state is incapable (because of corruption and its own lack of resources) of

filling the void. Instead, legal systems serve to further reinforce structural problems of inequality and social exclusion. As Pinheiro (1999: 4) argued, “police and other institutions of the criminal justice system tend to act as ‘border guards,’ protecting the elites from the poor.” At the same time, “middle class and elite crimes,” including corruption, fraud, tax evasion, and the exploitation of child or slave labor, are ignored by judicial systems which focus on the crimes committed by the poor (Pinheiro, 1999: 5). At the same time, particularly among the relatively well-off, there is an increasing privatization of law enforcement throughout the region as people purchase personal security by contracting private police forces. For those who lack the economic resources to hire armed guards or pay corrupt judges and police in order to attain justice, taking justice into one’s own hands in the form of vigilantism or “popular justice” is a growing phenomenon (Neild, 1999).

Rising crime and the increasingly violent and arbitrary responses to it inevitably have harsh consequences for the public sphere. As potential victims of crime, people can lose their “sense of minimum security...which allows them to look for alternative ways to improve their situation” (Personal interview, Victor Mejia, San Salvador, May 1997). After all, why “bother” to strive to move a head if one can so easily loose everything?<sup>17</sup> Studies from a number of developing countries in various parts of the world demonstrate that high levels of crime not only diminish economic opportunities for the poor, but also lead directly to decreases in school attendance, community investment in housing and infrastructure, and participation in community-based organizations (Neild, 1999). Looking beyond the local level, the result is not only an erosion of public confidence in state institutions, but the perpetuation of fear of them. The increased role played by the military in internal policing only serves to exacerbate neopluralism’s authoritarian tendencies, further reducing the space for popular sector participation in the public sphere—assuming the poor are even willing to try.

The latter point underscores the third way in which neopluralism undermines the public sphere in much of Latin America: the fragmentation and atomization of civil society. **Popular sector organizations often remain small, atomized and dependent on external (state and/or non-governmental**

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<sup>17</sup>The vulnerability of the poor only increases as a result of their poverty. For example, “Juan,” a street vendor in Santiago, Chile, in 1986 was barely able to make ends meet selling newspapers and periodicals near the central downtown metro station—a choice spot given its location near the University of Chile, and downtown offices. When he was robbed by neighbors in his own shantytown, he was cut off from his suppliers. Months later, when he somehow managed to save the necessary money to purchase a new stock to sell, he had already lost his choice location at the corner of the metro exit and was forced to move elsewhere to a less “lucrative” spot elsewhere on Santiago’s crowded downtown streets.



agencies) largesse. Their efficacy—so essential for understanding the impact of the public sphere—thus remains severely circumscribed.

This fragmentation reflects a variety of factors associated with neopluralism, including the demobilization of popular sector organizational activities during democratic transitions (Oxhorn, forthcoming b and 1998b). Efforts to reform both the state and society to conform more closely to market principals have often exacerbate this problem. Social welfare reforms, for example, emphasize helping people participate in the market by targeting those most in need for assistance until they can resolve their situation through participation in the labor market. This can generate political apathy as people's efforts are devoted to participating in the market, and they have less time and perceived need to become politically active. State agencies frequently play popular organizations off against one another in a competitive scramble for limited resources, particularly when social welfare budgets remain tight in order to curtail government spending (Piester 1997; Gay 1990; Cardoso 1992; Eckstein 1988). Decentralization of social welfare services, moreover, can further fragment potential popular social movements, restricting popular sector organizational activity to narrowly circumscribed communities. At the same time, popular sector mobilization is also circumscribed by fear of provoking a backlash from authoritarian elements in the state, particularly the military, leading to further withdrawal from the public sphere (McSherry, 1998; Oxhorn, 1995). Combined with problems of social organization created by increased economic insecurity and the effects of anti-crime efforts, the public “space” available to Latin America’s lower classes is quite limited, while their ability and willingness to try and occupy it remains in doubt.

It is important to note that the mass media accentuates the impact of many of these deleterious trends on the public sphere. Popular fears concerning crime are fueled by the mass media’s often intense coverage of crime and violence (Neild, 1999; McSherry, 1998). The poor and minority groups are often shown in a negative light, either as in need of charity or something to be feared. Positive images that reflect their daily lives rarely appear in the mass media, “transforming [the media] into powerful instruments of symbolic extermination of whole groups in the population (blacks, indigenous people or simply the poor)” (Fleury, 1998: 12). One consequence of this is that work with disadvantaged groups often has to begin with positive programs of identity-affirmation in order to overcome individual self-perceptions of “shame” and inferiority.<sup>18</sup> The continued atomization of civil society itself is reinforced symbolically by the mass media’s

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<sup>18</sup>Personal interview, Jose Luis Nuñez, director, Youth Program “Cadi Intiwatana,” La Paz, Bolivia, June 5, 1999. In countries with significant indigenous populations, racism is also often an obstacle to full participation of the citizenry in the public sphere. I will return to the issue of positive identity affirmation in the concluding section.

rejection of all collective referents, such as the “working class,” when dealing with issues related to the formation of people’s identities as a way to minimize social conflict (Vilas, 1999: 20). Even if commercialized television cannot substantively influence policy debates, it and most other media do directly affect the cultural and discursive contexts in which those debates unfold. And crime and violence appear to be most effective in attracting viewers and readers.

The second dimension of democratic rule which adversely constrains the public sphere in Latin America is the general distance between citizens, on the one hand, and political elites and democratic institutions on the other. While clearly accentuated by neopluralism, this dimension also reflects a certain convergence of deep historical legacies, particularly those relating to authoritarianism, and modern political trends that are not limited to Latin America or developing countries in the world.

Democracy as a system of government ranks high in Latin America, where it enjoys the support of well over half the population according to the 1996 regional Latinobarómetro public opinion survey.<sup>19</sup> In a region that has historically been characterized more for its *lack* of consensus (Chalmers, 1977) and frequent authoritarian lapses, this is very significant. Indeed, Marta Lagos (1997: 136), the director of the Latinobarómetro, concluded that “democracy...is the only thing that citizens agree upon so massively.”

Such massive support, however, does not reflect a necessary sense of *satisfaction* with existing democratic regimes. According to the 1996 Latinobarómetro data, the level of citizen satisfaction with how their democratic regimes actually functioned was generally 24 to 50 percentage lower than their declared support for democracy in each country. Only in Uruguay and Costa Rica did more than a majority of people express satisfaction with the actual performance of their respective democratic governments. More recently, public opinion polls show that only 27 percent of Latin Americans have confidence in existing democratic institutions (*New York Times*, March 25, 1998: A7).

This dissatisfaction stems from several sources, as revealed by the Latinobarómetro data. Apart from voting, which on average 53 percent of respondents felt allowed them to influence political outcomes,

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<sup>19</sup>The Latinobarómetro data is based on a survey of 17 countries in the region and was reported in Lagos, 1997. The only exception to majority support for democracy was Honduras, where just 42 percent of the population preferred democracy over authoritarian rule. Conversely, average support for authoritarianism in Latin America was only 16 percent.

the majority of Latin Americans had little sense of political efficacy. Only 43 percent of respondents regionally felt that the political tendency they most identified was as likely as other tendencies to assume to power. Even more serious for democracy, an average of just 14 percent of respondents felt that politicians offered solutions to the problems faced by their respective countries.<sup>20</sup>

These statistics reflect widespread perceptions of exclusion from political power and alienation from formal politics. Other indicators include increasing voter apathy in many countries—despite the majoritarian belief that voting made a difference. The most graphic examples of this come most recently from Venezuela and Guatemala, where voters faced critical choices yet failed to show up at the polls. In Venezuela, only 39 percent of eligible voters participated in elections for a constituent assembly to be charged with writing a new constitution and completely revamping the country's 40 year old democratic regime (*El Nuevo Herald*, April 28, 1999, Internet edition). The May 1999 rejection in Guatemala of constitutional reforms that would have officially recognized the country's 24 indigenous groups and institutionalized important channels for them to influence public policy is an even more poignant example. The proposed constitutional reforms stemmed from the peace agreements that ended more than three decades of bloody civil war in 1996. Yet in a country where over 60 percent of the population is indigenous, the historic constitutional reforms were rejected in a national referendum in which only 18.5 percent of registered voters cast ballots (*New York Times*, May 18, 1999).

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<sup>20</sup>Not surprisingly, given the magnitude of the problems people confronted at the time, the lowest scores—6 percent—came from respondents in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Panama. What is surprising is that the highest scores were found in Nicaragua (41%), Ecuador (40%), and Honduras (19%), countries that in many respects faced far more daunting challenges. Also surprising is that the two countries ranked as the most democratic in the region, Uruguay and Costa Rica (Argentina was a distant third), had very low scores of 10 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

Political elites, particularly those exercising power, seem disconnected from society. In this context, the perceived effectiveness of voting underscores neopluralism's basis in plebiscitary forms of democratic practice: Presidents, for example, are elected to exercise power with few or any checks until the next elections are held. Citizens, at best, are reduced to "consumers" of public discourses rather than producers of a genuine, participatory public sphere. This passive characteristic of politics is further reinforced by a growing tendency throughout the region (and world) to govern on the basis of polling.<sup>21</sup> Aside from well-known (and rather obvious) problems of bias and volatility which severely limit the usefulness of public opinion polls for determining policy, polling epitomizes the limits of the public sphere in Latin America: the decision to "participate" is deliberately random and initially made by others, the participant has no choice but to remain anonymous, there can be no inter-action (much less debate) among participants, and the decision about what is to be subject of such participation is not made by the participant.<sup>22</sup>

This distance between political leaders and the average person reflects various factors. In many countries, these include the lingering impact of high levels of repression prior to the return of democratic rule, which had the effect of severing institutional links between the political elite and any mass base (Oxhorn, 1995). It also often reflects the weakness of political parties, which are often little more than vehicles for the personal advancement of a small group of "leaders" who founded them (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). It also reflects the weakness of civil society more generally. Organizations, as noted, often remain weak, fragmented and circumscribed to local activities. They are often incapable of projecting the interests of the people they represent onto national agendas and influencing the public sphere in ways that can generate significant change.

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<sup>21</sup>An extreme example of this is the proposal put forth by a leading opposition presidential candidate in Mexico to conduct a public opinion poll in order to select a single opposition candidate for the presidential elections to be held in 2000.

<sup>22</sup>This is not to say that polls cannot provide useful information. On the contrary, polls like the Latinobarómetro provide extremely important insights into compelling political challenges. The problem lies in recognizing the limits of polling data and their appropriate use. In particular, they can supplement policy debate by providing participants with useful information, but should not supplant participation or debate.

A particularly good example of this lack of efficacy is the experience of women's movements in Latin America after the return to democracy. Organized women generally played pivotal roles in the struggle to achieve transitions to democracy. One consequence of this has been to place women's issues firmly on the political agenda in most countries of the region. Yet, as Habermas warned, "discourses do not govern." Despite important institutional and legislative changes in a number of countries in recent years,<sup>23</sup> the influence of women's movements has generally been quite limited (Wayland, 1994; Jacquette and Wolchik, 1998). Without strong organizations capable of ensuring that there is actually some follow-through on the promise of the discourse, frustration only grows. Monica Herrera, of the Salvadoran women's organization

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<sup>23</sup>Many such legislative changes also owe their successful passage to international factors, particularly the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing. In Bolivia, for example, national preparations for the meeting and the interactions at the meeting itself galvanized a small, fragmented women's movement. Aided by women legislators and a reformist president, the women's movement was able to push through important legislative initiatives, including the creation of a national Gender Affairs Secretariate and a legislative commitment to address female participation in comprehensive projects for state decentralization. Commenting on the small number of organized women, María Lourdes Cebala (a congressperson at the time of the reforms), explained that "some women say we are not even a movement. But we are because of our impact!" Personal interview, Cochabamba, Bolivia, July 13, 1999. In the aftermath of the successful reforms and the Beijing Conference (along with the subsequent election of a conservative president), the "movement" again found itself in a state of fragmentation and growing political marginalization.

*Asociación de Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* “*Las Dignas*,” explained the limits of women’s influence well:

Both the Dignas and the women’s movement lack a mechanism for political influence through their organizations. There are spaces thanks to international conferences like the one in Beijing and others. Discrimination against women is a recognized discourse, thanks to projects implemented by NGOs in this country, thanks to the actions of the women’s movement. But they are small spaces....The women’s movement is still not considered a legitimate interlocutor. It is seen as being at the margin of politics, focused only on gender (personal interview, San Salvador, May 1997).<sup>24</sup>

The inability to ensure that discourse or “promises” are transformed into successful policies itself is another reason why civil society remains weak. Many members of organizations which were active during the struggle for democracy, for example, often gave up on such activities after the transition when their ability to affect change proved much less than they previously had anticipated (Oxhorn, 1996). Alienation and frustration further undermine the incentives for people to organize in pursuit of common interests.

As is the case with the consequences of neopluralism more generally, such experiences reinforce another dominant trend in the region: “...the shortfall of interpersonal trust that lies close to the heart of what ails Latin American social and political culture” (Lagos, 1997: 127). This shortfall is reflected in the Latinobarómetro in three sets of findings. First, levels of interpersonal trust are extremely low. When asked if they felt they could trust most people, the highest score was for Uruguay where 1 out of 3 respondents replied they could. In the other countries, positive responses were in the low twenties and teens. Similarly, when asked if they felt if their fellow citizens were honest, a clear majority in all but 2 countries—Uruguay (where only 33 percent felt this was the case) and Paraguay (41 percent)—said no. Finally, when asked if their fellow citizens obeyed the law, in Peru, Brazil and Argentina over 80 percent said no, while the highest score was Uruguay, where half the population felt this was the case.

So endemic is this lack of trust that it is reflected in the region’s public and private institutions (Lagos, 1997). For example, Lagos notes that this is the source of “endless certifications and proofs of good faith,” including in some instances the need for people to provide letters of recommendations before a bank

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<sup>24</sup>One exception to this may prove to be indigenous movements, particularly in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico (Yashar, 1998). In these countries, indigenous movements in recent years have successfully placed issues of concern onto the national political agenda and achieved important constitutional and legal reforms. Yet the significance of such reforms for actually improving the living conditions of the members of communities remains unclear and will be dependent on continued mobilization (Davis, 1999; Oxhorn, forthcoming b).

will accept their deposits. This institutionalization of distrust only serves to reinforce the perception, if not the reality, of a closed public sphere. As Lagos (1997: 129) warns:

If a society has institutionalized distrust so thoroughly that you need to furnish a personal reference in order to persuade a bank to take *your* money, the implications for democracy can only be imagined: people who lack “connections” often cannot get benefits or services or exercise rights that are formally theirs because the entryways to the “system” are guarded by impenetrable thickets of red tape.

Under such circumstances, any *involvement* in the public sphere, rather than its lack, would be the most difficult to explain.

The experience of Chile since the return to democratic rule in 1990 offers a particularly important insights the limits of the public sphere in Latin America.. This is because the country’s unparalleled economic and political achievements. Economically, Chile experienced an average annual economic growth rate of 6 percent through the end of 1998 (when Chile, as well as the rest of the region, entered into recession). This thrust Chile to the highest position (34) of all Latin American countries according on the Index of Human Development (UNDP, 1999). Over a million and a half people were able to escape poverty in just seven years, as the poverty rate declined from 46.6 percent in 1987 to 28.5 percent at the end of 1994. Inflation remained in check and unemployment hit new lows.

Politically, Chile’s transition to democracy was the result of a successful opposition campaign to defeat Pinochet’s candidacy for the presidency in a 1988 plebiscite. The victorious opposition parties then went on to form the Center and Center-Left *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* coalition, which won the first two presidential elections and appears poised to win a third in December 1999. Under the *Concertación*’s leadership, successive democratic governments substantially increased social spending (paid for by a negotiated tax reform) and successfully reformed the Constitution imposed by the military regime to allow for the popular election of municipal governments.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Chile’s democratic stability is undergirded by a strong, institutionalized political party system with roots literally going back over a century, as well as its long experience with democratic government prior to the 1973 military coup that was unique in the region in terms of stability and social incorporation. Yet despite this economic and political “success,” the combination of which is unparalleled in the region, Chile’s public sphere exhibits the same limitations found in elsewhere.

Indeed, the United Nation’s Development Program in their 1998 Chile Human Development Report concluded that this is the “paradox” of Chilean development: “a country with notable economic development where the people do not feel happy.” Based on a 1997 survey of human security (long before there was any indication Chile would be heading into a deep recession at the end of 1998), the report found “important dissonance between [Chile’s] objective achievements and the perception of the people” (PNUD-Chile, 1998: 3). In one poll on which the report was based taken in the Southern zone of Santiago, for example, almost 83 percent of the respondents said they were not happy, regardless of their impression of the

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<sup>25</sup>It should be noted, however, that the reforms did not provide for the direct election of mayors. This has limited the accountability of local government toward local populations by increasing mayors’ dependence upon national party apparatus their position (Posner, 1999).

country's economic situation.

This dissonance stemmed from the high level of insecurity perceived by the majority of Chileans. Such security had 3 sources according to the study. First was what the authors identified as “fear of the other,” including ones’ own neighbors, which transformed the “the city into a hostile territory” (p. 3). The second source of insecurity was people’s fear of economic exclusion. Finally, the report found the pervasive impression that “things were out of control,” a “fear of the senseless” stemming from perceptions of urban disorder, drugs and “diffuse experience of ‘chaos’” (p. 3).

Two good examples of these subjective feelings of insecurity that are difficult to fully comprehend from more objective indicators of the reality people face deal with crime and healthcare. Almost 80 percent of respondents to the national survey felt it likely that they would be the victim of robbery in a public space, and 60 percent feared they would be robbed in their home. Such fears, however, seemed far removed from the reality in that over the previous 12 months, only 17.4 percent of the respondents reported that they or someone in their household had been robbed in the street without violence, and 6 percent said they or a family member were robbed in a public place in a violent act. Only 6 percent of respondents reported that they or family member had been robbed in their home. Similarly, a substantial majority of respondents (with the exception of respondents in the high income), said they did not trust either the public or private healthcare systems to provide opportune attention of good quality and, in particular, they doubted their ability to pay for it. This is despite the fact that per capita public healthcare expenditures more than doubled from 1989 to 1996 and “today the population has the best levels of health in its history” (PNUD-Chile, 1998: 7-8).

Such high levels of insecurity created, according to the report, “a noticeable weakness in the daily sociability of Chileans (PNUD-Chile, 1998: 6). Two-thirds of the respondents expressed serious doubts about the ability to organize their neighbors or receive help from them. Most tellingly, almost no one thought they would receive help if attacked in a public place. Civil society remains weak and fragmented, incapable of retaking the initiative it had demonstrated during the 1980s under the military regime (de la Maza, 1999; Oxhorn, 1995). For example, on average less than 2 percent of eligible voters participate in elections for local neighborhood councils (*Juntas de Vecinos*)—institutions that were first established and legally recognized in the mid-1960s (Posner, 1999: 70). Instead, political parties have dominated Chilean politics with a noticeable inability to resolve these problems so intimately tied to the public sphere (Posner, 1999). In effect, the transition resulted in a “... political framework that does not stimulate participation and is increasingly elitist” (de la Maza, 1999: 24). Even the women’s movement, which been a key actor during the years of authoritarian rule and was able to firmly place gender relations on the political agenda after the transition, has been largely displaced from political influence (de la Maza, 1999).<sup>26</sup>

Given the prominence of political parties, the problems in Chile’s public sphere inevitably revolve around their leadership, which in many fundamental respects has been lacking. Frustrations with enduring authoritarian legacies and what often appears to be a noticeable lack of change (for example, Pinochet’s

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<sup>26</sup>This is despite often glaring inequities. For example, Chile has one of the lowest levels in the region of representation of women at all levels of government, and while the average earnings for men are \$19,000 per year, women earn on average just \$5,000. See Serrano, 1999.



continued political presence, first as Command in Chief of the Army and then as Senator for Life, the important veto role played by designated senators and rightwing political parties over-represented in the legislature due to Chile's unique binomial electoral system) have contributed to the public's growing disenchantment with the performance of the democratic regime. Such disenchantment emerged quickly, from 20 percent of the population to 45 percent of the population in just the first 18 months of the new democratic regime. By 1996, only 27 percent of Chileans were satisfied with their the performance of the regime (Lagos, 1997).

Not surprisingly, voter apathy has been rising in Chile. In the 1992 municipal elections, the first in over 20 years, there was a 12 percent abstention rate and another 10 percent of voters submitted blank or void ballots. A trend seems to be emerging, and in the 1997 congressional elections, 20 percent of eligible voters (mainly youth) did not register and another 18 percent of voters cast blank or void ballots (compared to just 6 percent in 1993) (Posner, 1999: 70, 74). Voter apathy is particularly pronounced among the young, who see their future opportunities as limited and have not memories of the tumultuous 1970s and early 1980s.

The leadership of the *Concertación* has been unable to develop an effective long term strategy for dealing with these challenges. In effect, they wasted valuable opportunities for institutional change in the early years of the regime, when their overwhelming victories in the 1988 plebiscite and 1989 elections gave the *Concertación* government an unprecedented level of legitimacy and authority that would have helped to neutralize opposition from the military and the right to needed reforms (Garretón, 1995). Moreover, Garretón (1999:259) notes that much of this is related to the closed nature of Chile's political elite, to the extent that "... any potential criticisms from the intellectuals close to the Concertación was silenced by the official political class..." Pinochet's arrest in London in October 1998 only served to highlight many of these problems as the *Concertación* government of Eduardo Frei failed to devise a coherent strategy that reflected the overwhelming desire of a majority of Chileans for justice:

...this episode has produced the widest distance and deepest gap between the political class, responding self-referentially and introvertedly to the situation, and a public opinion that watched perplexed as the former got entangled in the issues of national sovereignty, spun a double discourse and was incapable of representing the demand for justice of the great majority of Chileans...(Garretón, 1999: 267).

Overcoming the problems of Chile's public sphere inevitably will revolve around the political parties which have exacerbated (if not actually created) them, and their relations with civil society. As authors of the 1998 Chile Human Development Report concluded, "it is fundamentally a political challenge: to develop the capacity of politics to name, accept and take charge of the fears and dreams, of the doubts and motivations of the people" (PNUD-Chile, 1998: p. 11).

#### *Conclusions: Filling the Public Void*

Growing apathy and social atomization as people delve deeper into their own narrow private spheres have been clear consequences of the exclusionary nature of the public sphere in Latin America. The continued erosion of civil society only further reduces the scope of the public sphere and the distance between citizens and their elected leaders. More dangerously, the alienation and insecurity this breeds help feed rising crime rates. In many respects, the narrowing of the public sphere, the deterioration of civil

society's organizational capacity and the effects this is having on the quality of democracy in the region exhibit elements of a classic vicious circle, as the three inter-related dimensions of state, society and the public sphere get trapped in a downward spiral. The question is simple: how long can it last until something dramatic happens? And in the meantime, what can be done to revert such processes?

Regarding the first question, what is clear is that a resurgence of populism may be the ultimate consequence of such vicious circle. Social heterogeneity and the lack of over-arching identities capable of mobilizing large segments of the lower classes in Latin America have made the region a propitious breeding ground for populists who claim to represent "the people" and promise to defend their interests against dominant groups.<sup>27</sup> While such populist leaders inevitably seem to betray the long term interests of those who initially support them by reinforcing social hierarchy and inequality at the expense of genuine reform and political democracy, populists have historically capitalized on growing popular frustrations and discontent during periods of rapid economic change and the apparent inability of representative institutions to respond. The simplistic dichotomy of "the people" against some alleged enemy can be a powerful mechanism for mediating the differences that divide Latin America's lower classes and prevent their effective mobilization. In the current period, not surprisingly, the "enemy" for some of the region's most popular leaders (populist or otherwise) like Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, are corrupt, elitist political parties and democratic institutions. Because "democracy" is part of the problem, authoritarianism may be the only solution. The sentiments of one slum-dweller in Caracas, Venezuela, is typical of the kind of support populists generate: "We're not as stupid as [Chávez's critics] think. I don't want my two girls to grow up in the same hell I live in. Chávez is the first to stand up for the poor. If he needs a strong hand, then I say use it" (q.i. *Washington Post*, July 27, 1999:A01).

The black/white, simplistic nature of this discourse and its effectiveness attest to the poverty of the public sphere. It also suggests a possible starting place for beginning to fill the void in a more democratic fashion. One way to avoid the populist alternative and create a more inclusionary public sphere is to retrieve the organizational experiences—"social capital"—developed in many countries as part of the struggle against authoritarian rule. It is a challenge to adapt such experiences to a democratic context, where there is no dictator to mobilize against. Already, at the societal level there is evidence of important changes in values stemming, in particular, from past human rights struggles under authoritarian regimes that is potentially conducive to a richer, more participatory public sphere under democratic rule (Avritzer, 1999; Peruzotti, 1999). To take advantage of this, it is important to develop the organizational capacity of the distinct disadvantaged segments of Latin American societies in order to overcome civil society's atomization and project the various competing interests onto the public sphere where they can influence processes of change and participation.

Populism mediates difference and overcomes the consequences of extreme societal heterogeneity by over-simplification, ultimately permitting those directing the mobilization to pursue their own particularistic interests. To avoid this, alternative ways of mediating difference need to be developed, again at the level of organized civil society. Only in this way will all citizens be able to assume the role of protagonist—something

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<sup>27</sup>These ideas are developed more fully in Oxhorn, 1998a.

many did in the unique context of authoritarian rule—in a democratic context in which different actors can compete, negotiate and reach compromises democratically. The shallowness of the elite compromises that ensured relatively smooth transitions to democracy during much of the 1980s, however necessary they may have been at the time, becomes increasingly clear as public alienation and frustration grows. This point was brought home most dramatically with Pinochet’s detention in London for human rights abuses as it became “increasingly clear that Chile’s apparent consensus was an illusion...” (Garretón, 1999: 259).

Paradoxically, the key to finding alternative ways for mediating difference and overcoming extremes of social heterogeneity must start with concerted efforts to affirm collective identities in positive ways. Efforts must be systematically undertaken at the grassroots level to begin to empower people by helping them to be proud of who they are—regardless of their social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Studies have already demonstrated the success of such efforts to overcome people’s symbolic exclusion (Fleury, 1998). This is particularly important in Latin American countries with large ethnic minorities. In Bolivia, for example, the principal challenge for people working with marginalized groups is re-establishing a sense of self-worth that is necessary to allow people to begin to participate.<sup>28</sup>

Once again, however, it is important to recall Habermas’ warning that discourses do not govern. Identity affirmation is only a starting point. Unless such collective efforts—of which there are an increasing number throughout the region (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998)—can form alliances among different groups within society and project themselves into the public sphere in order to begin to achieve meaningful change, the ability to empower people through participation in these movements will be extremely circumscribed and civil society will become more fragmented.

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<sup>28</sup>Personal interviews, María Eugenia Choque, Taller de Historia Oral Andina, and Jose Luis Nuñez, La Paz, Bolivia, June 1999. Here, problems ranged from the feeling of inferiority experienced by indigenous people when they found themselves in meetings with white people and the tensions created when immigrants to the city have to deal with their own ethnicity. In particular, important inter-generational issues arise when children are ashamed of their parents or deliberately cut off from their rural families and history by their parents in a futile effort to escape their ethnic identity. While discrimination is almost impossible to escape, the lack of a positive self-identity only makes it more difficult for young people (as well as adults) to cope.

The state has an important role to play, both in identity affirmation and in helping civil society to organize itself. As Walzer (1999) argued, only the state can provide the necessary unity within society to prevent civil society's inevitable tendencies toward fragmentation and inequality from becoming self-defeating. Moreover, according to Walzer, only the state has the necessary resources to enable society's disadvantaged to participate effectively. What is often needed, aside from political will, is the necessary imagination to devise strategies by which the state can play the same kind of role in Latin America that it has historically played in the West in helping to build civil society's organizational capacity.<sup>29</sup>

The task of reinvigorating, if not recreating, effective public spheres in Latin America is in many ways daunting. The economic, political and social dislocations of the 1980s and 1990s have converged with historical problems of exclusion and inequality. Yet the prospects for achieving real change are also greater than they ever had been. The existence of political democracies in virtually every country in the region, the discrediting of more traditional authoritarian alternatives and the experience within Latin American civil societies of organizing to struggle against dictatorships and in favor of basic human rights beginning in the 1970s represent a unique confluence of positive changes throughout the region compared to even just 20 years ago. It may now be possible for the three inter-related dimensions of state, society and the public sphere to reverse their downward spiral and breath new life into moribund public spheres. This unprecedented opportunity should not be allowed to pass. Hopefully, political leaders and members of civil society throughout Latin America will be up to the challenge.

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<sup>29</sup>For provocative proposals along these lines, see Cohen and Rogers, 1995, and Schmitter, 1995. It is also worth noting the role international factors can play, as was the case, for example, of the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in held in Beijing and the numerous regional women's conferences held in Latin America (Saporta Sternbach et al, 1992).

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Figure 1: Understanding The Public Sphere: The Civil Society–State Nexus

