

## **The Politics of Expertise in Latin America: Antecedents and Actualities**

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All public activities are in some broad measure political, and all require certain specialised skills, which may be termed “expertise”. But over time and space the realm of the specifically “political” may either expand or contract. Equally, what counts as expertise, and how much autonomy it will be granted, also varies over time and space. Horsemanship, literacy, oratory, textual exegesis, and an understanding of global financial derivatives have each been regarded as the hallmark of the modern expert in one setting or another. The relationship between the “generalist” politician and the “specialist” expert is one of the most ancient and recurring themes in political science. Effective and durable rule requires the enlistment of a range of competences, yet government is not reducible to technique. How then are the rulers to be guided by their advisers without being usurped by them?

### I. INTRODUCTION

All public activities are in some broad measure political; and all require certain specialised skills which may be termed “expertise”. But over time and space the realm of the specifically “political” may either expand (e.g. during wars or revolutions), or contract (e.g. following the discredit of a utopian schema). Equally, what counts as expertise, and how much autonomy it will be granted, also varies over time and space. Horsemanship, literacy, oratory, textual exegesis, and an understanding of global financial derivatives have each been regarded as the hallmark of the modern expert in one setting or another. The relationship between the “generalist” politician and the “specialist” expert is one of the most ancient and recurring themes

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in political science<sup>1</sup>. Effective and durable rule requires the enlistment of a range of competences, yet government is not reducible to technique. How then are the rulers to be guided by their advisers without being usurped by them? This problem presents itself in many different guises depending — e.g. upon whether it arises in a hereditary monarchy or a constitutional republic; whether under conditions of technological leadership or of educational backwardness; or whether the dominant preoccupation is with state-building or with state-shrinking, etc. But whatever the prevailing form of rule, and whatever the dominant source of expertise, the fate of the polity will be heavily determined by the manner in which these two are coordinated, and the ways in which the tensions between them are resolved.

In post-Cold War Latin America the prevailing form of rule is liberal constitutionalism, and the dominant *zeitgeist* is that of state shrinking and market liberalization. These are conditions in which the strictly “political” realm tends to contract, and market-related forms of expertise claim increasing autonomy. It has inspired some excellent studies of the recent rise of economic “technocrats”, and some swingeing denunciations of the evils of “politicised rent-seeking” and “populism”. But allegedly “technocratic” rule is no novelty in Latin America (consider the “Científicos” of Porfirian Mexico), nor is it confined to narrowly economic forms of expertise (consider the “positivists” in republican Brazil). So this paper aims to situate contemporary trends in their broader historical and socio-geographic settings. The hope is that by sketching out the distinctively Latin American antecedents to the rising power of this latest cohort of experts it may be possible to demythologise some fashionable judgements about the present.

## II. ANTECEDENTS

During the colonial period access to positions of political and bureaucratic power in Latin America was drastically restricted by stringent birth, race, gender, education and property requirements. The dominant principles of recruitment were aristocratic and/or patrimonial. European birth and family or courtly connections were formidable assets, and active Catholic observance was virtually indispensable. Good command of the language of administration, in both its written and its spoken forms, were of course essential, together with a working familiarity with colonial laws and institutions. A reasonable degree of numeracy was also normally required. In the social circumstances of the period these were highly restrictive pre-requisites. But these restrictions were not such as to preclude intense competition to fill the positions available, since these were very few in number. Even so, effective colonial government required the performance of some complex

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Wolin traces it back to Plato in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1960, p. 60).

and specialised tasks. Advancement on merit, or as a recognition not just of experience but of the expertise that could be derived from diligent public service, was already a recognised career path. Not only were military promotion structures based partly on training and experience, but credentialism was strongly developed in the main civilian professions of public life — the church and the law<sup>2</sup>. Military colleges, seminaries, law schools, and even universities were busy cultivating the “expertise” required for colonial rule well before Latin America’s wars of independence. Not infrequently, such training institutions contained the potential to develop into seats of learning, producing not just technically competent servants of the status quo but critical thinkers and potential leaders of a distinctively American orientation<sup>3</sup>.

Following the American and French revolutions new models of political organization and new sources of influence and power displaced colonial rule from Europe. European birth or aristocratic connections shed their political advantages — sometimes drastically (as in Paraguay), sometimes more gradually (as in Brazil). Depending upon the course and intensity of the battles for independence new channels of political recruitment opened up, with opportunities for advancement extending to some who lacked property or education, and to some who had been excluded on “caste” grounds in colonial times. But those classified as “mestizos” were far more likely to benefit than those who were “indian”, let alone “black”. Non-Catholics only slowly secured access to the higher levels of political power (mostly not until well into the twentieth-century) and women, of course, remained virtually outside public life until after the Second World War.

For the first century or so after independence most Latin American political elites continued to be recruited overwhelmingly from a narrow social stratum which although it differed in form typically retained significant sociological continuities with its colonial precursor. Of course an important distinction must be made between regional and provincial levels of political leadership (often semi-autonomous and based on extra-legal control over local resources) and the formal positions to be filled at the national level in the state apparatus. Our concern here is the latter, since that is where technical competence and political professionalism would necessarily be concentrated. But in many countries and over substantial periods this level of government did not concentrate any very large proportion of social power. However that may be, political recruitment at this level continued to privilege various skills and educational attainments that were scarce in the society as a whole. Indeed the shift from a colonial to a republican principle of legitimacy greatly increased the value of a higher educational qualification for those seeking either a

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<sup>2</sup> For one recent and instructive case of ‘bureaucratic patrimonialism’ see Victor Uribe (1995). Such studies usually highlight the contrast between administrative theory and local social realities, dominated by family clans and informal favours. The bald statements in my first paragraph fail to convey any of this, but instead draw attention to the underlying regulative framework.

<sup>3</sup> See David Brading (1990).

bureaucratic or a political career. (This was as true for imperial Brazil as for republican Spanish America)<sup>4</sup>. Although university education for long remained heavily oligarchic and weighted towards the more traditional vocations (especially law and medicine) republican institutions of higher learning were no longer subject to colonial censorship or to such strict ecclesiastical discipline as in the past. On the contrary, they became major centres of illumination, within which successive new generations of aspiring political leaders could aim to debate all the ills of society, to imbibe the latest philosophies of social reform, and to formulate their respective programmes of political action. Many major Latin American political parties can be traced back to specific student cohorts (the Colombian “generation of 1880”, the Venezuelan parties founded by the UCV leaders of 1928 etc.). Typically this pattern of elite formation encouraged generalists rather than specialists (the student leader-cum-journalist who subsequently became a legislator-cum-lawyer). But then the contemporary “technopols” discussed in other essays in this collection are also generalists in this sense.

To make a top leadership career in this setting required high intellectual prestige, and attainment on a broad front. Like the *philosophers* of republican France, the aspiring political leader of pre-Castro Latin America was likely to respect no intellectual or disciplinary boundaries. Historian, poet, philosopher and legislator — all these attributes could be embodied in a single individual. Figures such as Benjamin Constant Botelho de Magalhães, José Vasconcelos, and even (to take a contemporary example) Rafael Caldera indicate the real political power that could accrue to such individuals. Of course many students who have attempted to imitate this style ended up with no political power, and no real field of professional competence either. They could be dismissed as mere “café intellectuals”<sup>5</sup>.

Various factors have been suggested as explanations for the distinctive political role of the general intellectual in Latin America between the 1850s and the 1950s. First, there is an analogy with intellectuals in post-revolutionary France. Having decapitated a hereditary aristocracy and overthrown an Ancien Régime legitimated by powerful traditions, the isolated philosopher wielding only his pen seemed capable of remarkable feats of social transformation. His prestige and ambition soared, and to some extent the Paris intellectual came to substitute the overthrown nobility and the apex of the French pyramid of social prestige. Latin American intellectuals were deeply influenced by this model, particularly during the century in which

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sérgio Adorno, *Os Aprendizes do Poder: O Bacharelismo Liberal na Política Brasileira* (Paz e Terra, 1988). Gilberto Freyre reports that under Dom Pedro II “Portuguese, Latin and French were languages that an educated person needed to know well... One of the obstacles impeding the political rise of Estácio Coimbra was his failure in a discourse to pronounce the word *élite* in the French manner”. Gilberto Freyre, *Order and Progress: Brazil from Monarch to Republic* (University of California Press, 1986, p.106).

<sup>5</sup> Alan García seems to have followed this route until the late 1970s, when he returned to Lima and became secretary to Raúl Haya de la Torre, thus inheriting the mantle of the intellectual founder/proprietor of APRA.

Paris seemed the centre of world civilization and culture. Second, most of the newly independent states were genuinely in need of a new republican legitimacy, or alternative overall principles of economic and social design, to replace the colonial model which had collapsed on them. General intellectuals with a capacity of synthesise ideas from a variety of sources and disciplines were therefore needed to address quite pressing and fundamental questions of public policy that could not be resolved through inertia or ad hoc improvisation. Those who seemed the most effective bearers of the most “modern” ideas drawn from the experiences of the most successful liberal regimes were likely to secure a receptive following. Third, there was generally plenty of obscurantism and anti-intellectualism for these thinkers to struggle against. In particular the Catholic Church offered a coherent worldview, and a compelling source of traditional authority, which long resisted secular republicanism and the rule of reason to its foundations. Whether opposing traditional clericalism, or seeking to modernise it, Latin American intellectuals were required to address unresolved foundational issues. They could not limit themselves to “specialised” or narrowly “technical” areas of competence. This helps to explain why, from the early twentieth century until the 1970s, the secular religion of Marxism rose to prominence as the most complete and coherent alternative to submission to the priesthood. Finally, as the modern state became consolidated it sought to “co-opt” this republican *intelligentsia*, granting it public favours and creating educational and cultural institutions which glorified its most ambitious intellectual endeavours, which were placed beyond the reach of criticism (so long as the beneficiaries, in turn, abstained from directly criticising gobiernos de turno).

### III ACTUALITIES

I would argue that these long run antecedents are highly germane to any discussion of the politics of expertise in contemporary Latin America. The existence of unbroken intellectual and institutional traditions stretching back over one or even several centuries sharply distinguishes our region from most other parts of the “developing” or “third” world, where European colonial impact has been more recently and incompletely imposed and then withdrawn. Such major republics as Brazil, Mexico and Colombia have extremely well-established systems of elite recruitment, socialization, and reproduction which evolve only slowly and largely in accordance with internal rhythms and constraints. Even Bolivia — which may provide a yardstick of elite fragility — displays patterns of elite formation and political leadership recruitment which can be traced back to the doctores chuquisaquénos of the early post-independence period<sup>6</sup>. (The sinuous career of Casimiro Olañeta provides a significant precursor to various late twentieth century Bolivian political biographies.)

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<sup>6</sup> Manuel Contreras has traced the evolving fortunes of Bolivia’s legal, medical and engineering professions through to 1950, demonstrating the broad applicability of mainstream ideas about the sociology of the professions, even in this isolated and precarious setting.

Alain Touraine's mostly rather negative account of the politicised Latin American intellectual will probably strike a chord with many readers of this collection:

“Les intellectuels passent d'un theme ideologique à un autre avec la plus grande facilité, de la modernisation à la dépendance, de l'autoritarisme à la démocratie, sans permettre que les idées se transforment en pratiques et en formes d'action... Les modes successives permettent la création de groupes nombreuses mais fragiles d'intellectuels semi-professionnels qui interviennent à la fois a un nivel très général et dans des domaines qui exigeraient des professionnels plus spécialisés. Ces intellectuels doctrinaires ont produit peu d'analyses politiques originales ou de travail professionnel solide... les intellectuels apparaissent plutôt dans les espaces laissés vide entre l'oligarchie declinante et le pouvoir montant de l'État et... il prennent deux positions principales: celle de professionnels en particulier dans le domaine de l'éducation et des sciences sociales, et celle de radicaux d'extrême droite ou d'extrême gauche dont les idées ont une faible capacité mobilisatrices... La faiblesse des intellectuels doctrinaires est d'autant plus visibles que, plus récemment, et en particulier sous les dictatures militaires, s'est constituée, face a la persécution, une catégorie d'intellectuels tout à fait différente de la précédente, dont la qualité professionnelle s'élève rapidement, et a souvent atteint le meilleur niveau international. Ces intellectuels proposent des analyses générales qui vont bien au-delà des interprétations doctrinaires.”<sup>7</sup>

For our purposes the most important point here is the shift that Touraine detects from what he characterises as impractical (“doctrinaire”) theorising to more effective and well-grounded political analyses which are still general in scope and broad in their implications (i.e. not “just” technical).

All this is, of course, at a very sweeping level of generalisation, and the realities on the ground remain extremely heterogeneous, if not also hybrid. After all, Abimael Guzmán was only captured four years ago, and subcomandante Marcos could still play an important role in the development of Mexican politics. Nevertheless, the case can be made that in a post-Cold War, democratic, and internationally liberalising Latin America the politics of expertise is being rapidly and irreversibly transformed. The rest of this paper consists of a statement of that case, a review of some of the most pertinent objections to it, and a brief discussion of a few major contemporary instances which can be used as “reality checks” in the debate.

The contrast between Cold War Latin America and the post-Cold War period provides the best starting point for the claim of irreversible transformation. As a consequence of the Cuban Revolution foundational issues of political philosophy and identity took the centre stage for a considerable period (roughly the sixties and

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Touraine (1988), pp. 138-139.

seventies). Fidel Castro never acquired any specific field of expertise, and he never allowed experts to grow up around him who might constrain his leadership style. (General Arnaldo Ochoa seems to have shown signs of developing that kind of potential, in 1989, before he was given a show trial, and then shot.) The Sandinistas were almost as casual about managerial competence. Priests and poets were highly valued, but not accountants or administrators. Neither Allende nor Velasco paid much attention to the politics of expertise. They were all engaged in voluntarist efforts at social transformation, and therefore valued commitment to this normative ideal above training and know-how.

But it was not just on the radical left that this syndrome appeared. When I briefly studied the Falangists of Bolivia in the 1970s I was impressed to discover that they were less flexible or reality-oriented than the Marxist utopians they opposed. More generally, the national security states of the 1970s, relied heavily on ideological commitment and often coexisted uneasily with technical competence. (That is a major reason why they did not endure... as the Marxist threat faded their business and elite allies turned elsewhere for effective government.) In Argentina, for example, the dirty war produced a systematic process of negative selection within the armed forces culminating with General Galtieri, perhaps the most non-expert military leader one could hope to recruit.

Even where such polarisation was avoided, it was often an uphill struggle to consolidate “pockets of competence” in limited parts of the state apparatus. Central Banks and Foreign Ministries, perhaps because of their specialised functions as interfaces with the outside world, were more likely than most political institutions to promote professional expertise, but they were often enclaves with little spill-over effect on the political systems as a whole. Admittedly, professional economics was on the rise, but at first this manifested itself in specialised academic centres and think tanks (and in international financial institutions) rather than in national politics. Many governments continued to operate with a relatively low level of economic expertise until the debt crisis.

During the 1980s, however, it became progressively clearer that the Soviet bloc offered no alternative model to liberal capitalism in Latin America and indeed that socialism no longer constituted much of a threat to the established order. As the aftermath of the debt crisis lingered on it also became more apparent that Latin America would be forced to adjust to the requirements of the outside world, rather and vice versa. This obviously increased the scarcity premium and political leverage of those judged competent to design and manage the necessary adjustments. At the same time, the establishment — or restoration — of (usually fragile) democratic regimes shifted the axis of political debate from the kind of foundational issues on which intellectuals traditionally vested their authority to the resolution of more specific policy questions of direct concern to a mass electorate — questions typically neglected by “doctrine” oriented theorists, although not necessarily beyond the range of a younger generation of western-influenced (often US educated) reformers. In the international climate of accelerated economic liberalisation that followed the end of the Cold War, expertise in foreign commerce, finance, technology and

the workings of modern market economies acquired an enhanced value. Equally well, in a climate of fiscal austerity, “state shrinking” and retreat from universalist formulae of welfare provision, expertise in socio-economic regulation, in trade union issues, and in state organised health, education, etc, no longer commanded any scarcity premium. Military expertise was also downgraded, whereas journalism gained ground. Military expertise was also downgraded, whereas journalism gained ground. Some new channels of professional training and recruitment therefore surged to the forefront, while some old-established channels struggled to adapt (compare UNAM v. ITAM as rival sources of economic expertise, for example).

In summary, then, the case for an irreversible shift in political elite training and recruitment rests on the assumptions that (i) the foundational debates of the Cold War era have been durably resolved; (ii) the fragile democracies of the region are, if not en route to consolidation, at least reasonably secure from breakdown; and (iii) the internationally-oriented new economic model is here to stay. If these assumptions are valid then, with the passage of time the remaining vestiges of the old generalist and doctrinal politics may well gradually fade away, and a more educated, articulate and cohesive civil society may perhaps demand progressively more competence and effective service delivery from their political and bureaucratic leaders<sup>8</sup>.

Having stated the case, rather baldly, I would now like briefly to review some of the main objections to it. My purpose here is not to reject the argument, but just to probe some of its limitations. Only time will tell how fully it captures the underlying social dynamics of the region. My assumption is that it contains enough truth to work in at least some of the more favourable settings. But we should be alert to the counter-arguments.

Insofar as there has been an “eclipse” of foundational politics in contemporary Latin America, this astronomical occurrence has been decidedly partial, rather than total. There is still at least one unattained utopia to struggle for — the vision of a fully consolidated democratic market economy founded on the role of law and compatible with elementary social justice. Were this to be attained in Latin America (say to the same extent as it has been in Western Europe), then politics might just become a “technical” or expert business of keeping the established order in trim. But in all countries of the region it is at present so far from being attained that much more than mere administrative or technical competence is required to bring it about. Admittedly, at least for the time being, alternative foundational projects are currently conspicuous by their absence. As a result even “doctrinal” intellectuals mostly concentrate on propounding competing interpretations of the same basic vision. But the conflict between those competing interpretations can still be highly unsettling. And the failings of “really existing” liberal capitalism, while perhaps less acute than those of “really existing” socialism a decade ago, are sufficiently serious to raise

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<sup>8</sup> In order to be fair to the argument I have spoken about “civil society” as a whole, although on a more critical reading the same case could be stated in terms of the requirements of an increasingly autonomous and hegemonic private business community/capitalist class.



doubts whether “the end of history” really has dawned even in the advanced market societies. Therefore, the rebirth of alternative Latin American utopias cannot be entirely discounted for the indefinite future. “Foundational” politics may be dormant, but not yet dead. (The continued prominence in public life of many who made their careers campaigning for alternative utopias — from Fidel Castro to Augusto Pinochet, or from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to Roberto Campos — reinforces my hunch that such disputes could still be reawakened.) So far the strongest argument for “irreversibility” has been the inability of critics of the emerging politico-economic model to formulate a coherent and workable alternative, or to demonstrate any success outside the liberal market framework. That seems likely to remain the most formidable obstacle to the resurrection of foundational disputes in Latin American politics, but it is not completely decisive. Continued social exclusion, gross inequality and personal insecurity may provide a large social base for alternative visions, even if political leaders are incapable of articulating programmes for that constituency. (The rise of evangelical protestantism seems partly to reflect such unsatisfied aspirations.) Sometime, somewhere a half-plausible alternative model may always present itself.

In any case we should guard against too stark a dichotomy between the “doctrinal” politics of the past and the “professional” politics of the present and future. The reality was, is, and seems likely to remain substantially hybrid. That is not to say that nothing is changing, but only that we should concern ourselves more with questions of balance and proportion than binary oppositions.

A continuous thread of interpretation running through my chapter on the history of Bolivia since 1930, is the evolution of the career of Victor Paz Estenssoro. Quoting articles he wrote in 1930, emphasising the pre-eminence of economic phenomena (“which in reality and beyond apparent causes, regulate the life of nations”), I labelled him “Bolivia’s first technocrat”<sup>9</sup>. I subsequently traced his career as Finance Minister in 1945; as leader of the MNR (the party which made the social revolution of 1952); as intellectual author of the 1956 stabilization plan (although he allowed credit/blame to accrue to a specially recruited and supposedly “technical”, but in fact highly ideological foreign adviser, George Jackson Eder); and eventually as the one leader capable of bring about a neo-liberal counter-revolution in the management of Bolivia’s economic affairs (the 1985 “shock treatment” plan which did so much to build the reputation of Jeffrey Sachs). In this career we find strong technical competence in the field of economics indissolubly welded together with intense political leadership skills of a foundational (revolutionary-populist) variety. These apparently incompatible ingredients have co-existed in his persona for the pasty sixty years. To label Victor Paz Estenssoro merely a “technocrat” would be to profoundly misjudge his historical significance, but to underestimate his expertise would be equally mistaken.

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<sup>9</sup> Laurence Whitehead (1988), vol. VIII (1991), p. 512.

But is this case unique? Probably not. The career of Raúl Prebisch spans approximately the same period and displays similar characteristics. His authority as a technical expert was fused with his charisma as a prophet of social transformation. Moreover, from the earliest years, and like Paz Estenssoro, Prebisch combined vision with technical know-how. Important parts of his career have been analysed elsewhere (by Sikkink and Hodara, for example). I will just contribute an anecdote he told me about his experiences in the military government of General Justo in the early 1930s. He came to the conclusion that, as a result of the depression, it would be necessary for Argentina to introduce a most unpopular new measure — an income tax. But how could he explain to the ignorant conservative President that he must adopt an innovation so contrary to the preferences of all his friends at the Jockey Club? No technical presentation, no rehearsal of the figures, no review of international experiences, would do the trick. What Prebisch had to do was present himself to the General as the most impeccable servant of the established order, and to persuade him that it was a patriotic duty to demand sacrifice from the public just as an officer expects discipline and abnegation from his soldiers in times of armed conflict. It may be wondered whether current discussions on economic policy between Cavallo and Menem are any more technically demanding than that between Prebisch and Justo in 1933.

The broader point illustrated by this anecdote is that complex policy reforms require both a good measure of technical competence and authoritative political endorsement. Sometimes the two may be combined within a single personality (Paz Estenssoro in 1985). Sometimes they may be harmonised within a strong bureaucratic administration (the gabinete económico in Mexico in the 1980s)<sup>10</sup>. Or, perhaps, they may be reconciled through an informed process of parliamentary debate and inter-party elite negotiation (as in Chile under the Concertación). But it is not unusual for those with the necessary political authority to lack the appropriate technical competence. (E.g. There was no meeting of minds between President Reagan and his budget director, David Stockman.) All sorts of hybrid combination have been found in the past, and even the experience of the most advanced liberal capitalist democracies provides us with see little reason to doubt that these multiple forms will continue to operate in the future. Sometimes they work well for a while (President Fujimori and his economy minister, Carlos Boloña); sometimes they break down (President Caldera and the Venezuelan technocrats); and sometimes the appearance of collaboration proves deceptive (President Sarney and the Cruzado plan). Undoubtedly the secular processes emphasised in modernisation theory are genuine and powerful. Overall levels of education are rising fast, and more or less “middle class” lifestyles and values are still on the increase. Dense and overlapping networks of specialised competence and expertise continue to develop, informing public policy and constraining some forms of misgovernment. But these are merely loose tendency statements, leaving plentiful scope for the perpetuation of inherited styles of gover-

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<sup>10</sup> See the recent Oxford D. Phil. by José Ramón López Portillo.

nance. Despite the many structural changes associated with the end of the Cold War, the transition to democracy, the liberalisation of the economy, and the increased leverage of the business community, there is really no conclusive evidence that hybrid, potentially unstable, and erratic patterns of policy-making have been eliminated from contemporary Latin America. Yet how can there be any “irreversible” triumph of the technocrats (or even of expertise more broadly understood) so long as many traditional patterns of policy-making still persist?

#### IV. CONCLUSION

“Technocrats” derive their authority from their claimed mastery of certain specialised areas of knowledge that are deemed essential for effective government. If a central problem facing a society is the threat of yellow fever, then those who know best how the disease propagates and how it can be combated may have an irresistible claim to the public resources required for its defeat. If the central problem becomes the threat of hyper-inflation a similar logic may empower those economic experts who alone know how to restore monetary stability. But there are two very striking limitations to the power obtainable by this means, even in the most extreme of circumstances. The first is that once the “emergency” has passed other sources of concern will return to the centre of public debate, and there is no reason to suppose that the expert in disease control will also possess the specialised skills required to tackle non-medical dilemmas. Similarly, there is no good reason to suppose that the expert in monetary stabilization will possess the skills required to combat, say, the reappearance of cholera. Particular types of expert may therefore enjoy brief periods of concentrated power, but if they live up to their promises they will thereby undermine the conditions for their pre-eminence. Either they may prove false experts and lose power altogether, or true experts who having overcome one policy emergency retreat from centre stage to occupy a no doubt honourable and durable, but also a secondary, role in public life. True expertise becomes professionalised, institutionalised, and in a sense therefore even depoliticised, as the society moves from national emergency to routine administration. As Kathryn Sikkink has persuasively argued in relation to the ideology of “developmentalism”, unless such ideas acquire institutional embodiment they will lack the staging power and detailed follow through required to shape public policy over the longer run. Yet if they *do* become institutionalised they also become subject to broader processes of political bargaining and analytical dilution.

This relates to the second limitation. When technical expertise proves scarce, valuable, and a source of empowerment these rewards will attract an influx of new entrants. Scarce knowledge is therefore likely to become diffused throughout the society, the early technocrats will find themselves held increasingly accountable to a more informed community of peers, and the opportunity to make further breakthroughs on the basis of privileged expertise can be expected to decline. Broader and more “generalist” forms of policy discussion will therefore reassert themselves.

Post-Cold War Latin America manifests a range of characteristics that might be expected to reinforce the authority of political generalists and to curb the arrogance of unaccountable experts. Characteristics such as — constitutional rule; at a time of international detente and regional co-operation; following the failure and discredit of various forms of authoritarian social engineering; and under conditions of educational and scientific advance diffused through an increasingly assertive middle class and a rising stratum of young professionals; all reinforced by a high degree of media freedom, compared to the past. These are surely conditions that ought to favour the emergency of a stratum of political brokers and entrepreneurs capable of assimilating expertise without surrendering to its dictates. Their skills at communication and persuasion will be needed in order to synthesise and popularise the valid insights of the experts. The overall quality of public policy-making may therefore rise as hitherto esoteric forms of expertise become incorporated into the collective understanding of the whole community.

For the sake of simplicity this discussion has taken such expert claims to authority at face value. In any real political process we can expect to find dispute over the validity and extent of such claims. Inexpert politicians will have to make judgements about who to believe and therefore how much authority to delegate. Often such judgements may remain contested even with the benefit of hindsight. Here is a further reason why an apparent “triumph of the technocrats” may so often prove ephemeral. Thus, for example, even with all the reinforcement they can now muster from Latin America’s reinvigorated business class today’s neo-liberals still seem engaged in a campaign without end against an array of critics who may shift their ground but never seem to disappear. These critics can never be eliminated, in part because insulated technocrats characteristically over-reach themselves, but more fundamentally because the viewpoints and interests that the critics represent extend far beyond the reach of any form of bureaucratic rationality.

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