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CURRENT HISTORY

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“Where neoliberals saw only a past to be overcome, the reactionaries discern a crucial battleground.”

From Washington to Madrid: The Latin American New Right’s Spin on History

CAMILA PEROCHENA AND ALBERTO VERGARA

In 2003, the mayor of Lima, Luis Castañeda of the center-right National Solidarity Party, removed the statue of Francisco Pizarro from the city’s Plaza Mayor. His justification was that there was a need for symbols more diverse than the leader of the conquistadors. In 2025, Rafael López Aliaga, the current mayor from the same party, rebranded as Popular Renewal, restored Pizarro to the square to mark the 490th anniversary of the city’s foundation. The ceremony was attended by Isabel Díaz Ayuso, the conservative president of the regional government of Madrid, and descendants of the conquistador. There, Díaz Ayuso said that Pizarro symbolized “the start of a historical coming together that transformed the world for good” and that restoring the statue was “a further step toward respect for our shared history.”

López Aliaga is the leader of Peru’s new radical right. But his revisionist history is not peculiar to that country. Members of the region’s new right wing—described variously as radical or populist, extreme or ultra—share the ambition of reinterpreting their countries’ major historical processes. Although they are often distinguished from traditional right-wing parties by being labeled as illiberal or anti-democratic, the specificity we emphasize here is no less important: their attempt, from the right, to reintroduce history to political discussion.

This is a contrast with the neoliberal right of the 1990s, which endured until the presidencies of Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Sebastián Piñera in Chile, and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru, perhaps the last generation of this movement.

Children of their time, neoliberals accepted Francis Fukuyama’s pronouncement of the end of history. Part of the neoliberal promise was bound up in a belief about breaking with the past: that countries could emancipate themselves from a tumultuous populist trajectory and usher in a future of technocratic reason.

By contrast, the new right embraces the past and re-politicizes national histories. Whereas neoliberalism fought battles on economic issues, the new right favors culture wars. Repudiating the ahistorical formula of the Washington Consensus, this new movement anchors its ambitions in the Madrid Forum, which has emerged as a hub of densely historical and symbolic new right ideology.

These reactionary rereadings of history set the tone for the new right’s political priority: restricting and reducing the content of citizenship. The move from Washington to Madrid represents a fundamental ideological and political transformation of the Latin American right.

ADOPTING THE WASHINGTON CONSENSUS

The neoliberalism of the Washington Consensus had three characteristics that traced back to its origins in mid-twentieth-century Europe. First, it was a political philosophy concerned with individual freedom as a response to totalitarianism. The ideas of Friederich von Hayek were central to its future trajectory: in his view, all expansive government activity endangered liberty. As Albert O. Hirschman argued, this enabled a transition of the focus of criticism from totalitarianism to the welfare states of the 1960s and 1970s.

Second, these anti-state ideas became concrete policy recommendations. They were intertwined, above all, with Milton Friedman’s monetarism and a critique of supply-side economic policies.

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Third, from early on, neoliberalism was more than a set of isolated ideas within academia; it was an epistemic community. The foundation in 1947 of the Mont Pelerin Society was key to building a transnational network for disseminating neoliberal ideas. As political scientist Dieter Plehwe has observed, from the first meeting of the group, neoliberals were united in their rejection of collectivism and their pursuit of an economic liberalism that was independent of the traditionally political form of liberalism.

Historical neoliberalism was a universalist appeal to liberty. Like all cosmopolitanism, it was rooted in the possibility that each individual can be free. The programmatic dimension and the transnational network combined to render neoliberalism a governing doctrine with global aspirations. The substrate was a cosmopolitan individualism, and its programmatic ambition was universal.

Thus, it does not matter where in the world one might recognize, or scoff at, the type of international technocrat Lea Ypi described in her 2023 memoir about Albania during its transition to capitalism: he always sported short-sleeved shirts bearing a wide-mouthed crocodile on the breast and carried the *Financial Times*; most importantly, he never encountered a problem he had not already seen and resolved in Bolivia or Africa. The end of history was also the end of specificity.

What came to be known as the Washington Consensus was a decalogue of these policies exhibiting little interest in local specificities, originally formulated by economist John Williamson. Amid the bankruptcy of many populist states in the 1980s, neoliberal market reforms sought, in broad terms, fiscal discipline, privatization of state assets, deregulation of economic activity, and integration into global markets. Private actors rather than politicians or bureaucrats would drive progress.

The neoliberal right was not reactionary. Above all, it comprised reformists who eschewed political nostalgia. They espoused a vision that did not distinguish between those who could or could not be free in the market. On the contrary, the market was exalted as an inclusive space—even if it was not equally inclusive.

Hayek proposed in 1949 that this transformative vision would hinge on “secondhand dealers in ideas.” Journalists, lawyers, policymakers,

consultants, and, crucially, ideological entrepreneurs rather than major thinkers would disseminate neoliberal principles. In Latin America, Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto embraced this role like no one else. In the early 1980s, he founded the Instituto Libertad y Democracia, where he championed the idea that poverty in the region was related to a lack of property titles, not to asymmetric North–South relations. If the poor had property titles, they could use this capital to kick-start capitalism in the region. Previously relegated to the informal sector, they would become entrepreneurs with liberal beliefs.

De Soto’s neoliberalism, notes economic historian Stephan Gruber, had a “utopian dimension”: access to property rights would democratize prosperity for those excluded from its traditional circles. For political theorist and historian Timothy Mitchell, the ascendancy of de Soto was important because he structured a neoliberalism of the South and for the South, and ventured an explanation for poverty and inequality that was unhitched from international power relations.

Thus, neoliberalism was not merely a set of formulas drafted elsewhere and parachuted into Latin America. The local secondhand dealers in ideas had cleared the ground for its adoption. In Argentina, for example, Álvaro Alsogaray

introduced market ideas as early as the 1960s. He founded the Instituto de Economía de Mercado and then, in the 1980s, the Union of the Democratic Centre—a liberal political party that proved vital to the adoption of market reforms by the Peronist government of President Carlos Menem. Among these secondhand dealers in ideas, there was also cross-pollination. Domingo Cavallo, the Argentine economy minister who implemented the reforms alongside Menem, confirmed as much: “We had all read de Soto.”

Some dictatorships in the region had already introduced market reforms in the 1970s, but it was with the democracies of the 1980s that the reforms became omnipresent. One of the earliest adopters was Bolivian President Víctor Paz Estenssoro, who had led a state-driven revolution in 1952 and was now spearheading neoliberal counter-reforms. Something similar happened in Argentina in the 1990s, when the Justicialist Party set about dismantling the populist state that it had built in the mid-twentieth century. The classic populist parties

The new right's rereading of the past sows the seeds of exclusion.

broke with their state-centric and mobilizing tradition, while society was urged to agitate less and consume more.

It may have been in Mexico that the departure from the past went furthest. The old national and revolutionary party undid its own twentieth-century legacy to institute, under a Harvard-educated technocrat, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a new model in which the country would open up to the nascent global order. Even the poet Octavio Paz—the romantic liberal so attuned to Mexican specificity—found common cause with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the late 1980s, as the party undertook market reforms that were billed as a remedy to the worst party practices, which Paz himself had castigated for many years: clientelism and corruption, with their deleterious effects on public welfare. For once, historical uprooting seemed a fair price to pay to build a prosperous future.

The right of the 1990s was part of a movement that had, both politically and philosophically, a universal calling. But this universalism was restricted to the world of the market. In the language of citizenship, neoliberalism favored civil rights, especially to property; tolerated political rights, without enthusiasm; and downplayed social rights. Yet this was still a universal citizenship, even if it was a thin one.

Neoliberals sought to vanquish economic populism. They wanted to banish a statism they saw as unproductive to the point of atrophy. In so doing, they sought to transform their politics and societies.

If populism was seen as an unpardonably evil threat to progress, populists and leftists were redeemable. So long as the entrepreneurial state, corporatism, and generous spending were abandoned, the rest was negotiable. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, when asked what she regarded as her greatest achievement, said, “Tony Blair,” who had led the Labour Party from the left to the center in her wake. What the neoliberals wanted, to cite the title of sociologist Miguel Ángel Centeno’s book, was “democracy within reason.” By now, the left was no longer perceived as a national scourge—as it had been for several Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s—but as a barrier to prosperity.

To remove this barrier, it was deemed necessary to forget the past of utopias, mobilizations, and cumbersome citizen rights to embrace a future of thin universal citizenship. As Mario Vargas Llosa proclaimed during his candidacy for the Peruvian presidency in 1990, Peru had to be like Switzerland.

The end of history would bring the utopia of Year Zero.

Yet even with a programmatic transnational network and intellectual community, there was no international *politics* of neoliberalism. Leaders undertaking market reforms did not forge political networks to sustain one other. Presidents like Salinas, Menem, Alberto Fujimori of Peru, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, and Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada of Bolivia did not build transnational platforms of cooperation or defense. In the political—unlike the programmatic—dimension, the neoliberal right never strayed from the domestic spheres of action.

PIVOTING TO THE MADRID FORUM

The new Latin American right is a different phenomenon: a reactionary right with an interest in reconceptualizing and restricting the notion of citizenship. This is not to say that they achieve this aim wherever they win elections. But various declarations, programs, and proclamations point toward an attempt to reframe citizenship in an anti-universalist pivot neatly described as “the right against rights” by sociologists Leigh Payne, Julia Zulver, and Simón Escoffier.

This anti-rights proclivity is intellectually underpinned by the new right’s rereading of their countries’ histories. This distinguishes the reactionary from the neoliberal right: for the former, history matters. Where neoliberals saw only a past to be overcome, the reactionaries discern a crucial battleground. In this quest, two eras are especially important: the colonial and the dictatorial past.

The Madrid Forum has become a vital hub in this political–intellectual effort, in terms of contacts as well as ideological renewal. The organization was created in October 2020 through the Disenso Foundation—a think tank run by Vox, the Spanish ultra-right party. As the researcher Ariel Goldstein has pointed out, one of the initial aims was to challenge the presence in Latin America of Spain’s Popular Party by forging links with the new right and attacking the traditional center-right. Thus, with Vox as a key ally, Madrid became the rallying point.

In its manifesto, the Madrid Charter, the forum denounced the “advance of communism” and called on the countries of the “Iberosphere” to defend freedom. This term is important: it disavows the widespread usage of “Latin America” and reintroduces the old colonial power as a cornerstone of regional identity.

The regional pretensions of the Madrid Forum were cemented in four gatherings, held in Bogotá in 2022, Lima in 2023, Río de la Plata in 2024, and Asunción in 2025. These events attracted the political and intellectual leaders of the new right. Speakers included Vox leader Santiago Abascal; President Javier Milei of Argentina; José Antonio Kast, the leader of Chile's Partido Republicano and 2025 presidential candidate; Colombian Senator María Fernanda Cabal; and López Aliaga, the mayor of Lima.

The forum became a space for ideological articulation and cohesion. Replacing Washington with Madrid both symbolized and crystallized a shift in priorities. For the neoliberals, the problem had been economic statism; for their part, the Madrid adherents encouraged a culture war that would transform politics, society, and the economy. This signaled a transition from liberalism to reaction. Agustín Laje, the Argentine ideologue of the new right, dismissed the traditional right and its "economistic pathology." By contrast, the new right was ironically inspired by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, resurrecting the idea of cultural conflict as the only way to secure hegemony and transformation.

EXALTING THE COLONIAL PAST

Connected by Madrid, the new right denied the "end of history" and sought to make history a weapon of the present. The colonial period was the first historical juncture to be reinterpreted. The main criticism was leveled against accounts of colonization considered to reflect the "vision of the vanquished."

In Latin America, since the 1990s, organizations with agendas related to Indigenous communities and cultural diversity have become prominent, and declarations on the rights of Indigenous peoples have been promulgated by national governments and international organizations. The Zapatista uprising broke out in southern Mexico in 1994; new Indigenous movements gained influence in Bolivia and Ecuador. Across the region, October 12—the date of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas—was variously restyled as the Day of Respect for Cultural Diversity in Argentina, the Day of the Pluricultural Nation in Mexico, the Day of Indigenous Peoples and Intercultural Dialogue in Peru, the Day of Indigenous Resistance in Nicaragua and Venezuela, and the Day of Decolonization in Bolivia.

Three decades after this shift began, the Spanish right is promoting a rereading of the past that

once again exalts "Hispanicity," conquest, and colonization. In an October 2022 document on the meaning of October 12, the Disenso Foundation offered an interpretation in which the most violent traits of the conquest were expunged and its "global" dimension revindicated. The foundation contended that the Spanish monarchy "considered the inhabitants of these territories as subjects of the Crown, with the same status as those born in peninsular Spain." It claimed that the evangelizing project was a way of recognizing the humanity of Indigenous people and of "giving them their own dignity," as opposed to the "superstitions judged, rightly, abominable," referring to Indigenous belief systems.

The document further asserted that the Spanish had adapted their legislation to Indigenous communities, allowed pluralism, and carried out a conquest that was exemplary for integration, prosperity, and good governance. It concluded by connecting this account to the present, stating that the "Iberosphere" is the continuation of the "perpetual exchange of interests and values that constitutes Hispanicity." This benign view of conquest and colonization thus became the foundational myth of the Ibero-American reactionary right.

Yet the revival of Hispanism could not have the same intensity in every country. The instrumentalization of the colonial past is conditioned by national political trajectories. Calling for a rereading of colonial memory in former peripheral outposts of the Spanish empire, such as the Río de la Plata, is not the same as doing so in Mexico or the Andean countries.

In Argentina, the pre-Columbian and colonial past had never played a central role in public debate. But in 2013, during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the statue of Christopher Columbus outside the Casa Rosada, the government building in Buenos Aires, was replaced by one of Juana Azurduy—an independence leader in Upper Peru—and the October 12 commemoration was renamed. The impetus for these changes came from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez: in 2011, two years before the statue's removal, he had asked Fernández, "What is that genocidaire doing there?"

Thirteen years later, on October 12, 2024, the Milei administration restored the date's previous name of "Race Day," describing the arrival of Columbus as "a milestone that marked the beginning of civilization on the American continent." In an accompanying video that featured the newly

restored monument, Milei insisted that it “reminds us of the ability of the human being to overcome the unknown and seek new opportunities for development and civilization.” To the rhythm of politics, Columbus made the transition from genocidaire to the incarnation of civilization.

The “adventurous” and “civilizing” character of the conquistadors was also revived by the Brazilian right. The focal point was *Brasil Paralelo*, an alternative media outlet that serves as an ideological platform for the extreme right and produced the 2017 documentary series *Brasil: A última cruzada* (Brazil: The Last Crusade). The series garnered more than 1.5 million television viewers in just a few months; its YouTube episodes have been seen more than 5 million times. (For context, the film *Ainda Estou Aqui* [I’m Still Here], winner of the 2025 Oscar for best international film, has also attracted 5 million viewers in Brazil.)

The series was pivotal to the discourse of the new Bolsonarist right. It featured Olavo de Carvalho, the eccentric US-based philosopher who served as President Jair Bolsonaro’s ideological guide. Asserting that the conquistadors were moved not by greed but by a mission to expand the Christian faith, the series extolled a colonization project whose purpose was supposedly to “civilize the Indigenous people,” not to dominate them.

These cultural reinterpretations were translated into the domain of politics. The new Bolsonarist right went on to reclaim the Empire of Brazil (1822–89). During the celebrations of the independence bicentennial in 2022, Bolsonaro organized a ceremony for which he arranged to borrow the embalmed heart of Emperor Pedro I from Portugal. At the ceremony, boasting full military honors and the display of the relic at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the president proclaimed: “Two countries united by history, bound by the heart. Two hundred years of independence, an eternity in freedom. God, homeland, family! Viva Portugal! Viva Brazil!” Here, too, in the rereading of history, the radical right found the basis of a political identity distinct from the preceding center-right.

In countries with large Indigenous populations, this demographic fact does not determine the ideological position of the right in relation to the colonial past. As Teun A. van Dijk has shown in his

analysis of radical right discourses, such ideologies are context-sensitive. For instance, most of the radical right is anti-abortion, but in Sweden its members know that it would be suicidal to emphasize that position, and therefore they do not bring it up.

The same is true in Latin America. In Mexico, there is a long tradition of popular liberalism opposing *gachupines* (Spaniards). Both the epic of Benito Juárez—himself an Indigenous man—resisting Emperor Maximilian and the French armies in the nineteenth century, and the Mexican Revolution with its nationalist aftermath of PRI dominance, made the emergence of a Hispanist right very difficult. After a couple of politicians from the conservative National Action Party met with leaders of Vox, they were forced to pull back from further participation and withdraw their signatures from the Madrid Charter.

In Bolivia, the situation initially appeared similar to that of Mexico until the inauguration of the new president, Rodrigo Paz, in November 2025. During the presidential campaign, none of the right-wing candidates had promised to repeal the Wiphala (an official Indigenous symbol) or to change the country’s name from the “Plurinational State of Bolivia,” introduced by Morales in 2009, back to the “Republic of Bolivia.” But in the first months of his presi-

dency, Paz slowly began to challenge these symbols by removing the Wiphala from the presidential sash and from the army’s official insignia. Even so, it was still displayed during the inauguration ceremony and in various public institutions.

In Peru, the political trajectory is different. To borrow historian Florencia Mallon’s argument in her 1995 book *Peasant and Nation*, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Peru did not structure a national project “from below.” (Nor did it happen from the top, in a country marked by political fragmentation.) The consequences are felt to this day. The leader of the Peruvian reactionary right is the mayor of Lima, who repeatedly calls for a defense of “Christian civilization” against Marxism. The most important and successful conservative social movement in recent years is *Con mis hijos no te metas* (Don’t mess with my children), which opposes secular education and draws its arguments from the country’s colonial, Catholic, and Hispanic cultural reservoir. Many on the Peruvian right have signed the Madrid Charter and hailed the king of Spain.

*Madrid has played a symbolic
role in bringing together
the new right.*

This background has emboldened the dominant conservative coalition in Peru to advance an agenda that narrows the content of citizenship with greater aggression than any other country in the region, besides those with fully authoritarian regimes.

Again, a primary dimension in the revival of history as a space for political confrontation is a rereading of the colonial period to exalt the conquistadors, Catholicism, and the civilizing order that Spain and Portugal imposed on “uncivilized” populations—though each country’s historical political trajectory may curtail the use of the past. This process further recalls the emergence of reactionary right-wing movements in the 1930s, which also found in Hispanic Catholicism an ideological tradition to which they could adhere. Some of these movements were more intellectual, such as the Argentine circles around the journal *La Nueva República*; others were more socially oriented, like Peruvian Catholic Action or Mexican Sinarquismo; or overtly political, such as Laureano Gómez’s faction within the Colombian Conservative Party or Brazilian Integralism, which drew on Lusophone, Catholic, and reactionary currents.

Finally, Madrid—the old metropolis—has played a symbolic role as the place that brings together the new right. From Washington, it was possible to preach an ahistorical economic liberalism, but from Madrid, the irremediably historical question of who belongs to the national community—and who does not—has been raised anew.

AUTHORITARIAN NOSTALGIA

Memories of dictatorships provide a second historical realm that the reactionary right draws on to intellectually substantiate its mission. In many countries, the new right validates the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s.

In Argentina, Milei’s ascension to the presidency signaled a rupture of the consensus that the democratic transition had established about the memory of dictatorship. In 2023, 47 years after the coup d’état, his administration released a video that downplayed and partly justified the ensuing repression. It emphasized the guerrilla violence that preceded the coup, asserting that what followed had been a “war.” This reproduced the military’s justification for taking power, as well as the arguments aired by defense lawyers for junta members accused of crimes against humanity during the trials that took place after the return of democracy in 1985–86 and were reopened after 2005. Milei’s endorsement of that position shattered the

post-dictatorship consensus. The court verdicts against the military junta had found that torture, kidnapping, and disappearances constituted systematic violence by the state.

In Brazil, unlike Argentina, the democratic transition was characterized by silence about its dictatorship. Only in 2011, under President Dilma Rousseff, was a National Truth Commission set up, triggering a reaction on the part of the armed forces and the new right. In 2016, Bolsonaro dedicated his vote for Rousseff’s impeachment to former army officer Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, one of her torturers during the dictatorship. Once he became president, Bolsonaro ordered the armed forces to commemorate the military coup as a “revolution” that had saved the country from communism.

This revindication of the dictatorial past has also manifested itself in right-wing parties that have not won presidential elections. In Peru, the conservative confluence that united the administration of President Dina Boluarte and the legislature reinstated Fujimori’s signature to the 1993 Constitution; it had been removed during the transition to democracy in 2000 after the authoritarianism of his decade-long presidency. In Chile, Kast has repeatedly voiced approval of the Pinochet dictatorship.

EXCLUSIONARY AIMS

The revalorization of the colonial period (and its obverse: the devalorization of Indigenous peoples) and of the more recent authoritarian era of the 1970s (and its obverse: the devaluation of the political and social pluralism that Latin American democracy built) prepare the ground for the specific programmatic aims of these new right movements. They share the goal of reconceptualizing and restricting the citizenship regimes in their respective countries.

The new right has not been effective in uniformly restricting citizen rights in all countries in the region; some proponents have not even come to power yet. But its historical discourses pave the way for policies that conspire against inclusive citizenship. There is a will to exclude the groups whose rights have been expanded in recent decades: Indigenous peoples, women, sexual and gender minorities, and Afro-descendants.

The Milei administration, for example, abolished the Ministry of Women and the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism; closed the “Women’s Room” in the Casa Rosada; scrapped the National Registry of Indigenous

Communities; and accused homosexuals of committing pedophilia and advocates of “gender ideology” of promoting child abuse.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro argued that Afro-descendants “do nothing and are of no use even for procreation,” whereas Indigenous people were “evolving” and “increasingly resemble human beings.” He canceled any new recognition of Indigenous lands, cut social programs for Afro-descendant communities, and reversed health plans for LGBT people.

In Peru, following the 2021 elections, the right tried to annul more than 200,000 votes from high Andean areas with overwhelmingly Indigenous populations and fraudulently forestall the inauguration of leftist Pedro Castillo as president. During Boluarte’s presidency, following Castillo’s impeachment, the right has justified brutal repression that resulted in 50 murders in areas with a majority Indigenous and/or peasant population, which were Castillo’s strongholds. Without direct changes to the formal citizenship regime, political and civil rights have been eroded under the stewardship of the Peruvian right. In Chile, far-right presidential candidate Johannes Kaiser has referred to Mapuche groups as “terrorists” and questioned whether it had been a good idea to grant women suffrage.

These are manifestations of the contemporary right’s reactionary and anti-universal outlook. For adherents of this new right, conflict is not something that can be processed or negotiated: they seek to exclude their political adversaries. Rereadings of history facilitate the demonizing and dehumanizing of opponents, who are defined not by differing programs but by irredeemable identities. This is expressed in language like “populist orcs,”

“baboons,” and “mental parasites,” to cite a few of Milei’s favored expressions. On the reactionary right, no one would claim, as Thatcher did, that their greatest achievement was to inspire the reformist leader of an opposition party.

The new right’s rereading of the past sows the seeds of exclusion. It mobilizes nostalgia for “natural” hierarchies that liberals and leftists sought to dismantle. Of course, this counter-enlightened, restorationist drift is occurring well beyond Latin America. US Vice President JD Vance, for instance, has repudiated the cosmopolitan tradition on which his country was founded in favor of a nationalist vision anchored in territory. The transit from Washington to Madrid has global components.

Although the advance of the reactionary right is sometimes portrayed as an unstoppable wave, there are many reasons to suggest that this is not the case. Paradoxically, the very ideological transformation that defines the new right also constrains it. Although they seek ideological hegemony, the radicalism of these parties limits their electoral potential. The number of reactionary citizens is not that large.

Hispanist militancy and reputation-laundering for dictatorships have some of the hallmarks of fickle elites overrepresented in the public sphere. In other words, the right seeks hegemony by means of anti-hegemonic tools. This undermines its ability to erode democracy. The more ambitious the new right becomes, the less likely it is to fulfill its ambitions. Although it accuses the center-right of being *derechita* (timid little right), it wields far less transformative power than neoliberalism did thirty years ago. ■