Generalísimos, Dictatorships, and Strongmen: Authoritarian Regimes in Twentieth-Century Latin America

To stimulate the spirit of enterprise, Trujillo grants the salt, tobacco, oil, cement, flour, and match monopolies to Trujillo...The all-powerful has a voice like a whistle, with which there is no discussion. At supper, he clinks glasses with a governor or deputy who will be off to the cemetery after coffee. When a piece of land appeals to him, he doesn’t buy it: he occupies it. When a woman appeals to him, he doesn’t seduce her; he points at her.

Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind* 105-106

Perón now attracts more people than all the parties put together. When they call him ‘agitator,’ he accepts the epithet as an honor. VIPs and the fashionably chic chant the name of Ambassador Braden on the street corners of Buenos Aires, waving hats and handkerchiefs; but in worker barrios, the shirtless shout the name Perón. These laboring people, exiles in their own land, dumb from so much shutting up, find both a fatherland and a voice in this unusual minister who always takes their side.

Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind*

In Mexico, power assimilates or annihilates, shoots deadly lightning with a hug or a slug, consigns to grave or prison the impudent ones who will not be bought off with a sinecure. The incorrigible Revueltas rarely sleeps outside a cell...

Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind*

‘You have the right to import a camel,’ says the Minister of Finance. From the TV screen the minister exhorts Chileans to make use of free trade. In Chile anyone can decorate his home with an authentic African crocodile, and democracy consists of choosing between Chivas Regal and Johnnie Walker Black Label... The foreign debt and the suicide rate have increased six-fold.

Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind*

Over the course of the twentieth-century, non-democratic regimes were far more common in Latin America than authentically open democratic political systems. These ranged from muscular populism to brutally repressive military rule to one-party electoral systems. These regimes responded to widely varying external and internal conditions. Why authoritarianism in the region was both so common in concept and so diverse in form is thus a question that defies easy answers, yet it is precisely this conundrum that this course will set out to examine. In doing so, we will question assumptions about popular consent, the meanings of violence and terror, and the nature of “dictatorship.”

Using the loose frameworks of economic restructuring and political reorganization, we will explore how four non-democratic regimes changed the face of their countries and sustained themselves in power. The four case studies—Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Perón in Argentina, Pinochet in Chile, and the Partido
Revolucionario Institucional in Mexico—offer windows onto different aspects of authoritarian rule across the course of the century. The course materials are drawn broadly from recent revisionist waves of scholarship that have often focused on the cultural politics of authoritarianism, as well as older more structuralist interpretations of the regimes.

Three themes will help guide our examinations of these cases: mobilization, modernization, and militarization. Mobilization, broadly defined here, describes the strategies that regimes used to rally popular support behind their cause, often through classic populist public demonstrations but also through personalistic cultivation of clienteles. Questions of cultural politics will appear frequently within this rubric. Modernization describes both the perceptions of ‘backwardness’ that can spur the rise of an antidemocratic system as a ‘modernizing’ response, as well as the reformist policies that regimes undertook in both economic and political realms. Militarization serves as a catchall term for the processes through which authoritarian systems based their rule on surveillance, terror, and violence.

**Writing Assignment**

The readings and discussions in the course will focus on certain aspects of the regimes, with a focus on internal and functional explanations for authoritarianism. These are, however, by no means the only possible approaches to discussing non-democratic systems. The assignment for the course is to research and write a 20 page paper that offers an answer to the question:

*How do we explain the prevalence and persistence of nondemocratic regimes in twentieth-century Latin America, in all their multifarious forms?*

In presenting their arguments, students should utilize at least three sources outside of the assigned course materials. A strong essay will offer a thoughtful, original explanation that draws on examples beyond the four regimes included in the course, though it may focus on a single compelling case.

**Book List**


Course Reader and articles available on Jstor or Project Muse.
Week 1: Introductions
1. **Theorizing Regimes; Problems in understanding Authoritarian Regimes.**
   - *Why are we interested in studying authoritarian regimes in 20th-Century Latin America?*
   - *What elements of 19th Century caudillismo were modern? Which were not?*

Weeks 2-3: Trujillo and Support for Sultanism: Modernization, Clientelism, and Terror
   - *Are authoritarian regimes a response to underdevelopment?*
   - *How does urban authoritarianism differ from rural authoritarianism?*
5. Derby, Chapters 4-Conclusion.
   - In Class Film: “La Fiesta del Chivo”
   - *What does despotism feel like?*
   - *How do changing international contexts shape regimes?*

Weeks 4-5: Peron and the Aura of Populism: Populism, Mobilization, and the Cultishness of Authoritarianism
   - *What is populism?*
   - *What are the symbolic mechanisms for obtaining consent?*
   - *How is control exercised on a day-to-day level? How is authoritarianism gendered?*
    - *How do regimes shape public opinion?*

Weeks 6-7: Pinochet’s Chile: Ideological Authoritarianism, State Terror, and the Cold War
   - Patricio Silva, In the Name of Reason: Technocrats and Politics in Chile (University Park: Penn State UP, 2008). Chapter 5.
Does economic restructuring support or weaken a regime?


How important are ideological projects to dictatorships?


Can consumer democracy offset political autocracy?


In-Class Film: “Chile, Obstinate Memory”

How is dictatorship remembered?

Weeks 8-9: Mexico’s PRI Regime: Cultural Politics, Cooptation, and Soft Authoritarianism


How is authoritarianism articulated on a regional level?


Is cooptation or repression more important to regime success?


Are cultural politics a viable explanation for the survival of authoritarianism?


How does a postrevolutionary authoritarian regime differ?

Week 10: Wrapup: The Problematic Cases


Is authoritarianism ever justified?

20. Conclusion

Why was authoritarianism so prevalent in Latin America during the twentieth-century?