Chapter II
Collective actors and forms of representation

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I. Introduction: noises in the formation of voice

Citizen participation and State action are made possible by organizations and their infrastructure, and by material and symbolic resources including the government apparatus, the media, trade unions, political parties, social movements and NGOs, to name the main ones. Social cohesion cannot be dissociated from these institutional mediations through which individuals weave together — and are woven into — the myriad of interests that tie us to a given national citizenship. And while sentiments may be the same or at least similar, interests tend to diverge. For this reason, the way in which a society processes its social conflicts and organizes the representation of opposing interests through different institutions is at the core of its social cohesion.

If we are to fully understand the contemporary dynamics of constructing a sense of belonging, we must examine the various types of mediations that socialize, integrate, and confer meaning on — even through social conflicts — the sense of being a citizen of a country. In this chapter we will focus on forms of mediation directly linked to political and associative participation. In order to narrow our discussion, we have excluded a number of other dynamics that affect the sense of belonging in its various expressions. We will not discuss, for example, the two-pronged trend of the massification of universities and their waning influence, whether as a political actor or in
their role in forming the power elite who hold key government positions (and have become internationalized by the growing tendency to study abroad and/or work in transnational companies and agencies).

Forms of citizen participation have changed drastically in recent decades. Trade unions, which were critical to 20th century processes to integrate and dignify workers, are losing density. While they continue to play an important role in defending their corporativist interests, in most countries they have lost much of their former protagonism as political actors and as constructors of collective identities. Political parties are also in crisis and often are ad hoc structures that serve as vehicles for individual circumstantial ambitions.

New ways of organizing participation have shifted over to civil society embodied, as we shall see, by professional organizations of social activists (NGOs) devoted to advocacy or social interventions on diverse human rights and environmental issues. In the course of this process, a new type of social activist has emerged, representing a departure from previous forms of political militancy. Most importantly — and this is due to the growing influence of the CM & CI in the representation of our societies — we are witnessing a profound transformation in the grand scheme of intersecting interests in the region. Public opinion has become a leading actor in social life; another indication of the individuation process underway.

Moreover, alongside organized civil society, more or less spontaneous explosions occur periodically (such as “pot-banging protests” and street demonstrations). Such episodes, which are usually associated with dissatisfaction with the government over a traumatic situation such as an economic crisis, corruption scandal, or crime, have triggered impeachment processes against several presidents as well as other measures to address the issue at the root of the particular complaint. Taken to an extreme, such demonstrations are an expression of dissatisfaction with the political system and the way in which representative institutions are operating. This state of affairs is starkly illustrated by the slogan “out with them all” [“que se vayan todos”] referring, of course, to the politicians.

The vacuum created by the crisis of the old forms of representation is filled with new types of participation and demands, which are not expressed in the form of national projects, or even collective ones for that matter. They emerge instead as the visions of actors whose identities are defined at the infra or supra national levels and who promote interests which, while legitimate, do not always strengthen the construction of a common space in society.
2. Trade unions

Introduction

Latin American trade union movements bore little resemblance to the somewhat stylized or idealized European model of an autonomous working class organized from the bottom up — although this did occur in many Latin American countries prior to the populists governments — whose demands for social rights pervaded much of society (Sorj 2005a). This is not to say, however, that they have not played a key role (mainly in urban areas) in the development of labor laws and in advocating for the dignity and defense of workers.

The inclusion of the working classes in the social dynamics and political regimes of the continent was mainly accomplished through the labor market regulation. The establishment of legal guarantees gave workers a voice in the public arena, ensured them a modicum of relief in situations of unemployment, and provided a social safety net for them and for their children, among other things. The regulation of the labor market was the vehicle for inclusion under the import-substitution industrialization model and workers harbored real hopes of being included in the regulatory universe.

It is true that the formal labor market never included them all. The informal sector is ubiquitous in Latin America, its ranks swelled by the many workers who lost their jobs. But the expectation of inclusion always played an “inclusive” role in the region. And that expectation was occasionally met because of traditionally high levels of job turnover, which meant that workers might enjoy periods of formal employment. For this reason, the formal labor market and its regulations became one of the most important, if not the most important, cohesive institutions on the continent.

At the same time, trade union victories, especially those achieved in the public service and state-owned enterprise sectors, contributed to social segmentation and created a situation that could only be sustained by preserving an increasingly obsolete industrial structure. As the ranks of informal sector workers and the unemployed swelled, it became clear that formal sector workers did not constitute the poorest social strata of

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23 This section is based on Adalberto Cardoso y Julián Gindin, "Relações de Trabalho, Sindicalismo e Coesão Social na América Latina".
society and that ultimately, public policy would have to shift its priorities toward those groups. The gradual policy shift towards the poorest sectors of the population, coupled with privatization initiatives, meant that public resources could no longer be allocated, at least not in the same proportions, to support trade union demands. The unions were therefore obliged to revisit their modus operandi. This was the backdrop for the emergence of technocracy whose discourse and social policy targeted the poorest sectors of the population, far from the realities and demands of the labor market.

The labor crisis of recent years, brought about by structural adjustment programs — which in their efforts to extract the State from the economy wreaked havoc on traditional centers for the construction of social, collective identities — ultimately broke the promise of inclusion represented by the formal capitalist economy and formal labor market. Fearful of losing their formal employment and benefits, workers acquiesced to labor relations with fewer rights than before. This slowed the momentum for collective action and with it, the power to safeguard the rights won prior to the reforms. Unemployed, landless, homeless and without rights, poor workers burst onto the scene, demanding some sort of social inclusion from the sidelines of traditional means for the representation of interests.

Latin American trade unions traditionally pursued two overlapping avenues to build their legitimacy and social profile. The first was through their ties to the political system, whether in the form of associations with political parties or through their direct subordination to the State in corporative agreements. The second was direct action in the labor market, which sometimes complemented — and on other occasions supplanted — political action as a factor in the construction of collective identities. Attempts to bargain collectively in labor markets plagued by high levels of unemployment and informal employment (brought about by the profound transformations to productive structure that reduced the momentum to strike along with membership levels) led to fragmentation, a weakening of the topics under negotiation, and collective bargaining agreements with less coverage.

**Structural reforms and the decline of trade unions**

Over the past 20 to 30 years, workplace relations systems (WRS) in Latin America have been altered dramatically by transformations in productive and technological structures and work relations management, as well as globalization processes. These transformations, linked to the adoption of
a set of reforms commonly referred to as the “Washington consensus,” dismantled the import-substitution industrialization model and with it, the physical underpinnings of the social order consolidated throughout the 20th century. To varying degrees depending on the country, these economic changes impacted labor laws, the trade union structure, collective action, capital-labor negotiation models and the State's role in those relations. In short, they had a profound influence on the model of class relations and social cohesion that had operated on the continent for the past century.

In recent years, then, with the partial depletion of the model introduced on the continent in the 1950s, the workplace's role in the construction of cohesion has taken various forms and posed new challenges for trade unionism. The latter has never recovered its protagonism under the previous model and, to date, has been unable to reinvent itself in keeping with the changing times.

Most Latin American countries consolidated their workplace relations systems in tandem with the economic development process based on state controlled import-substitution industrialization. Perón, Vargas, post-Cárdenas Mexican leaders, post-Ibáñez Chileans, and Venezuelan leaders after 1958, strengthened and/or regulated workers even as they expanded government bureaucracies, subsidized industry, created state-owned companies in strategic sectors, established controls over foreign investment, closed domestic markets to foreign competition, and so on. State bureaucracies — which were often closed to political competition due to intermittent experiences with authoritarian regimes — were central agents in these scenarios.

“Developmentalism” as the raison d'être meant exactly that: economic growth with social peace. And social peace was only possible through varying degrees of authoritarian control, which was more or less inclusive of the demands of organized labor depending on the country. In these terms, the inclusion of labor — in a more or less subordinated position depending on the case — was at the heart of nation-building projects across the continent from the 1920s on. And this pact proved durable. It persisted virtually unchanged for decades in most countries, and for 70 years in the case of Mexico.

Despite being introduced, in most cases, in an authoritarian manner, with time labor laws began to shape the expectations and practices of capital-labor relations in increasingly intense and profound ways over the course of the 20th century. The law traced the battlefield and the horizon for the actions of organized labor in Brazil, Mexico, and Chile (up to the
Allende administration when the legal boundaries were swept away), as well as Argentina and Venezuela. The trade union struggle was oriented toward enforcing existing law more than anything else. In this sense, worker identities in countries such as Mexico and Brazil, for instance, were constructed through the mediating influence of labor rights and within the bounds of their own horizons (French, 2004; De La Graza, 1990). In this way, labor rights largely define workers in our societies.

The economic restructuring that commenced in the 1970s in Chile and spread from there to other Latin American countries changed the face of labor relations and social cohesion on the continent. Restructuring programs varied from country to country in terms of the timing and objectives, and the depth and internal coherence of the measures taken. Even so, and taking into account the inevitable risk of oversimplification, one could argue that it represented a continent-wide plan for the relative depolitization of the economy. In other words, it essentially reduced, if not eliminated, the role of the state as organizer of economic dynamics, planner, financier of productive investment — and frequently an entrepreneur too, through state-owned enterprises —, and mediator of capital-labor relations.

Behind the scenes of this depolitization process, the mechanisms for public intervention and economic regulation were genuinely transformed. To disregard this aspect leads to an “economicist” reading of the changes in recent decades in Latin America. The important role of the Washington consensus in this process has oft been pointed out. We must not, however, disregard the extent to which changing capital-labor relations was essentially the result of the inversion of power relations among social actors in the context of a broader international reorganization of the capitalist economy, which included the emergence of new actors such as China and their impact on the competitiveness of the continent’s industries. This is a complex process, one that has involved, at different points in time, international financial institutions, changes in the productive base, and entrepreneurs and political leaders at the national level who perceived in these changing alliances greater opportunities for personal initiatives, something which has been particularly visible in the neo-populist governments of the 1990s (Martuccelli, Svampa, 1997 and 2007).

The liberalization of labor markets, products, services and capitals, together with reforms to the State apparatus and the divestiture of much of the government’s productive machinery were the pillars of the reforms
that swept the continent.\textsuperscript{24} At the same time, in countries where the reforms occurred in the context of hyperinflation, trade union struggles were focused on a race against the decline of the purchasing power of workers’ wages. Reining in inflation meant actual income for the poorest sectors of the population and this accounts in part for their passive, if not active, support for the economic policies of the period.

In Venezuela, Chile and Argentina restructuring meant deindustrialization — the “competitive shock” that internationalized capital ownership and reduced industry’s role in the GDP and in job creation. This deepened industrial unemployment, informal economic activity and the precariousness of ties to the labor market, all of which had a significant impact on the strength of organized labor. In Mexico and Bolivia the manufacturing structure was either modified or transferred to other areas of the country boosting employment in this particular sector (even as a percentage of overall employment).\textsuperscript{25} At the same time, however, unemployment rose and the informal sector absorbed much of the labor force in many important regions, as was the case, for example, in the Metropolitan Region of the Federal Mexican Capital.\textsuperscript{26} Poverty also rose in southern Mexico and in many of its major cities. At the same time, productivity increased and, in contrast to the economies of Brazil and Argentina, Mexico’s economy became heavily dependent on exports, mainly to the United States.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} There is an abundance of literature on the content of the Washington Consensus, which in large part guided the reforms, particularly in the 1990s. See, for example, Dupas (2001) and Stiglitz (2002).

\textsuperscript{25} In Bolivia, the population working in the manufacturing industry more than doubled from 1989 to 1997, but nearly \textfrac{3}{4} were concentrated in small family businesses, and semi-enterprises with low productivity levels, primarily in clothing (Montero, 2005; Kruse y Pabon, 2005). Employment in the mining industry, which constituted the heart of the labor movement, declined from 86,000 jobs in 1980 to 69,999 in 1985. This decline has since continued, but the most significant change has been in the composition of the sector, with the growth in cooperativism and the emptying out of state-owned mines (Montero, 2003). And while trade union activity is difficult in the Bolivian mining sector, the situation is even more critical in the new modern manufacturing industries, where it is tacitly understood that organizing is prohibited (Kruse y Pabon, 2005).

\textsuperscript{26} Informal sector workers nationally accounted for 75.2\% of the population in Bolivia, (2002), 54.2\% in Brazil (2004), 51.1\% in Venezuela (2004), 37.0\% in Chile (2003), 69.0\% in Guatemala (2004), 50.1\% in Mexico (2004) and 42.5\% of the urban population in Argentina (2003) (Gasparini et al. 2007).

\textsuperscript{27} The depth and scope of the restructuring process were remarkable. The very structure of capital distribution was altered dramatically and in the same direction: basic urban services, industry, and retail and wholesale operations changed hands, and domestic capital became...
The structural reforms had an extremely destabilizing effect and financial crises swept the region (Mexico in 1994, Asia and Russia in 1997, and Argentina, Uruguay and Ecuador fell one after the other in the wake of the 1999 Brazilian crisis). While we are unable to discuss this fragility in depth here, suffice it to say that the effects of pro-market policies were neither even nor linear. Argentina experienced economic growth almost until the end of the 1990s, but paid a price in terms of greater income concentration and inequality. Unemployment rose in Mexico until the mid 1990s, only to drop consistently after that. In Brazil, poverty levels declined abruptly following the 1994 introduction of the monetary stabilization plan, plateaued in 1998, and then declined once again. In Chile, the costs of the initial restructuring (in the 1970s) were enormous and led to a substantial rise in poverty — which peaked at 40% of the population in the mid 1970s — situating the country among those with the highest levels of social inequality in the world. While the recovery of the late 1980s reduced poverty to 1960s levels, this same was not true of inequality and unemployment.28

Many analysts concur that, although economically efficient in terms of monetary stabilization, and despite improved living conditions associated with curbs on inflation, the restructuring model adopted in Latin America also damaged the social fabric. We must not forget that in most countries, hyperinflation had deepened social inequality and caused substantial losses in the wage worker and retiree sectors. Legitimacy and governability were undermined in favor of speculative sectors. Structural reforms helped control inflation, which boosted the purchasing power of wage-earning sectors. Because of this, organized labor did not universally oppose the measures and its reaction to them varied in form and intensity. This was especially true since, while the thrust of the restructuring process was generally the same, it played out in different contexts in each country.

Indeed, the structural reforms occurred in very diverse settings from the standpoint of the strength of organized labor. In Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico, the traditionally hegemonic labor movement — a key source of support for the political regime and ally of the governing party — lent international capital in a very short period of time. In Brazil, for example, the composition of capital in the automobile spare parts industry shifted from 52% national capital in 1994 to 78.4% foreign capital in 2002 (and 80% in 2006). See http://www.sindipecas.org.br.

28 Although industrial employment in Chile recovered slightly in the 1990s (from 14% in 1982 to 16% in 1996) this was not enough to restore 1970 levels, when 24% of this population was employed in industry. See Campero (2000).
institutional support and legitimacy to adjustment programs. As a result, it lost support from among its bases and its social power and capacity for collective action waned. Chile's labor movement was simply silenced as a political actor. Meanwhile, labor opposition in Brazil gradually petered out due to the effects of market liberalization policies and the privatization of government enterprises, which had undermined one of the pillars of the traditional labor movement. Something similar occurred in Bolivia, but in an atmosphere of acute social crisis during which the labor movement lost legitimacy, opening the door to more rigid antilabor policies. One of the main consequences of the reforms in every country was that organized labor lost the power it had consolidated in the preceding period.

Put another way: the structural reforms adopted as a solution to the crisis of the previous development model involved reducing any “impediments” to the free play of market forces, including the labor market. From this standpoint, established systems of labor relations were treated as simply another obstacle to be removed. This included organized labor as an agent capable of influencing the policies that directly affected its support base. Governments attempted to either attract this agent or exclude it from the playing field. In the three instances of labor support for the reforms, the labor movement had undergone either a profound (Venezuela and Mexico) or significant (Argentina) deterioration in terms of its social presence. As a coparticipant in the power pacts in the three countries, it received its share of the blame for the crisis. In this sense, support for the adjustment measures must also be viewed as a reaffirmation of the labor movement’s role as coparticipant, and therefore a reaffirmation of traditional power alignments and of the hegemony of the most relevant past trends in the organized labor market. In the new context, the trade unions fell victim to their own former alliances.

Nonetheless, the losses in the labor market (due to privatizations and flexibilizations) were offset by the ability of the workers federations (Confederación General de Trabajo — CGT of Argentina, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela — CTV, and the Mexican Congreso de Trabajadores — CT) to maintain their control over the trade union structure. Organized labor was weakened — it lost members, resources and capacity for action — yet there were no significant changes to its internal power structures or its relation to the State. In Brazil, Bolivia and Chile trade unions were generally excluded from the political playing field, although for different reasons. In Bolivia, the veto power of a radicalized labor movement blocked the adoption of measures to surmount the crisis. In
cases where the miners could not be defeated, some mines were shut down in revenge. The trade union movement was also strong in Brazil and in a sense had exercised veto power over previous stabilization policies (Salum Jr, 1996). The Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration, therefore, faced off with the trade unionists, in particular affiliates of the Central Unica de los Trabajadores (CUT) with ties to the Partido de los Trabajadores, while simultaneously seeking support for its measures from another trade union sector (Força Sindical). But none of this reached the extremes observed in Argentina or Mexico, where the hegemonic central was essential to any political agreement. And in Chile under Pinochet, exclusion was simply absolute.

**The situation today**

Now that the most acute phase of the structural reforms is over, the region is seeking new paradigms, or at least “adjustments” to the model. This is even true of Chile, where an advisory council to the Presidency on “Work and Equity” was formed in August 2007. There is even talk of a new era in Kirchner’s Argentina, meaning a total shift in the prevailing development model and accumulation system towards a neo-Keynesianism in economic policy and a new appreciation of trade unions as critical agents of social cohesion. Some analysts even allude to the emergence of a “segmented neocorporatism” in class relations (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007), and the resurgence of the tripartisanism typical of the Peronist period, this time, however, confined to specific sectors of the formal labor market.

Venezuela and Bolivia give the most radical indications of a return to statism. This is being accomplished through the extensive nationalization of privatized (or never privatized) companies and the reinstatement of workers’ protections or the establishment of new guarantees, with the support, or cooptation, of trade unions and rural cooperatives in Bolivia, or of unorganized rural and urban populations in Venezuela. Brazil, Chile and Mexico are examples of the more general rationale of the reform program (in sum, preserving macroeconomic stability through checks on inflation and public accounts). This course, however, involves the cooptation of trade union leaders in the State apparatus and concessions to trade unions. While

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29 http://www.trabajoyequidad.cl/view/viewArticulos.asp?idArticulo=8

30 According to Héctor Palomino in private correspondence.
it may have been possible to construct a Latin American labor relations model in the previous phase, the current situation is one of enormous structural diversity among countries.

In other words, in this post-reform period on the continent, one cannot speak unequivocally of trade union — state relations, or of a trade union position vis-à-vis economic and labor policy. While trade unionism in general was weakened during the reform period, subsequent shifts in economic policy (where they occurred) do not appear to have reinvigorated the labor movement, the two important exceptions to this being Argentina and Bolivia.

The Mexican and, paradoxically, the Argentine experiences reflected continuity. In the latter case, profound changes to the development model did not extend to the relational model between Peronist trade unions and the state apparatus. Despite its pronounced institutional fragility, trade unionism has recovered some of its former protagonism on the Argentine political scene. In contrast, substantial changes have occurred in Bolivia, where for the first time since the revolutionary events of the 1950s, the labor movement is participating in the formation of a grassroots style government. This has breathed new life into the Central Obrera Boliviana — COB — given up for dead at the start of the millennium — although not enough to convert it into a key agent of the new government. Social movements rather than trade unions, comprise the social base of the Movimiento al Socialismo — MAS. In Brazil, labor leaders became co-participants in public administration, even as adverse national circumstances have kept the trade unions themselves from gaining strength. The pre-reform legitimacy enjoyed by trade unions appears to be far from the horizon.

The situation has changed considerably in Venezuela, but in the other direction. The Chávez government has excluded the traditional trade union movement and encouraged a new, pro-government sort of trade union activity. Meanwhile, the redemocratization of Chile has finally created space for trade union activity, although its evident fragility has kept it from playing a relevant role on the new political scene (which, by the way, has preserved the macroeconomic model of the previous administration).

The trade union structure in many countries on the continent is still encumbered by the historical administrative and/or political control exercised by State officials and political parties. Despite the democratization processes that have taken place in several of these countries in the 1970s and 1980s, and more recently in Mexico, trade unions must still contend with the legacy of more or less heteronomous relations with the state, whose
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influence affects everything from internal organization to fundraising, and from legitimacy to the potential for collective action. Across the continent, moreover, the burgeoning informal sector has become a barrier to trade unionism, despite the efforts of trade union centrals (in Bolivia and Argentina for example) to extend their membership base beyond formal salaried workers. Peasants affiliated with the COB in Bolivia, or unemployed members of the CTA in Argentina (the most successful examples) have become important organizations in their own right — autonomous from the trade union centrals. Internally, however, there have been power struggles with formal salaried employees and they do not always manage to develop a common agenda for mobilization.

During the reform period, each of these countries exhibited a general trend toward the fragmentation of the trade union structure, whether at the level of leadership, the grassroots, or in some cases, from top to bottom. What is most significant, however, is that the “changing times” did not necessarily help to reverse this fragmentation process. In Chile, the grassroots were pulverized, while in Venezuela, the trade union leadership and locals have proliferated. In Mexico, fractures have been observed mainly at the level of trade union centrals, similar to what has been occurring more recently in Brazil, although in the latter case, the labor movement had been fragmented from the start.

Bolivia is an example of the potential reversal of the general trend toward fragmentation, as the COB regains ground in the trade union movement. It is nonetheless obliged to coexist with a myriad of other social movements now competing for the loyalty of the workers, particularly in the informal sector. For its part, Argentina has undergone a national reconstruction process encompassing traditional institutions such as the CGT and the Partido Justicialista. The CGT, however, shares the space for labor disputes with the CTA and new social movements, although it is currently spearheading a movement towards the partial reconcentration of collective

31 The Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), made up of federations and confederations, is known for accepting affiliates from grassroots organizations, student groups and academic sectors as well as salaried workers. One of its main organizational affiliates today is a peasant confederation: the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB). This opening up to peasant groups dates back to the 1970s (Zapata, 1993). Even so, the statutes ensure that a miner will lead the Central. The Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) has promoted the individual affiliation of workers and encouraged the formation of a powerful nontrade union organization: the Federación de Tierra y Vivienda [Land and Housing Federation] which represents the unemployed.
bargaining. As with other areas, however, it is still premature to evaluate the longevity of current trends.

Beyond the structure of organized labor, economic changes had a considerable impact on the power of the trade unions, measured in terms of affiliates and the capacity to carry out actions such as strikes and collective bargaining. The decline in membership is probably the most telling indicator of this trend, although data of this nature are not always reliable or totally comparable. Having said this, in all of the countries under study the overall trend is too strong to ignore. In Argentina, the percentage of affiliates dropped from 60% of the Economically Active Population (EAP) in 1975, on the eve of the military coup, to 36% in 1995 and 24% in 2002—an overall decline of more than 60%. A country with historically low affiliation rates, Mexico showed a similarly significant decline from 14% of the EAP in 1992 to 10% in 2002. Affiliation levels remained relatively constant in Brazil, but at a very low level, fluctuating between 18% and slightly under 20% of the EAP from 1988 to 2005. In Chile, affiliation rates rose steadily to reach 21% in 1991. This was followed by a gradual drop, which leveled off at 15% of the so-called “dependent population” until 2005 (14% in the metropolitan region of Santiago). Significantly, under the Allende administration, trade union affiliation in Chile had peaked at 32% of the EAP (Roberts, 2007: 24).

Venezuela and Bolivia appear to have experienced the heaviest losses in the shortest time frame. In the former case, the affiliation rate among the employed population dropped from 40% at the beginning of the 1980s to 28% in 1999 (Gasparini et al., 2007: table 6.a), with estimates placing it at approximately 15% in 2004. In Bolivia, the affiliation rate dropped from a high of 25% in the early 1980s to under 9% at the end of the 1990s (Roberts, ibid.).

32 The data for these three countries are drawn from Cardoso (2004: 22). The 2005 figures for Brazil are calculated directly from the national household survey: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilios (PNAD).
33 This includes salaried employees and workers in the service industry, excluding public administration. See Dirección del Trabajo (2006: 9). Note that the EAP is the reference population for the three cases mentioned. In Chile it refers to the employed population, excluding public servants.
35 There are discrepancies in the data for Bolivia. Montero, for example (2003) reports a drop from 25.6% in 1989 to 19.7% in 2000, with a decline from 17% to 10% in the unskilled workers segment. According to Gasparini et al. (2007) affiliation declined from 30.9% in the mid-1990s to 22.5% in 1999. While the figures differ, however, they all point to a significant decline in trade union density in the country.
The four countries for which reliable statistics on strikes were available (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and México) reflect a similar downward trend in strike activity during the adjustment period. Now that the storm is over, however, the inclination to strike has not recovered its previous levels. A possible exception to this might be Argentina under Kirchner, although not enough time has transpired to speak of a new strike-oriented cycle in the country. The same has been true of collective bargaining. In general, declining membership and capacity for collective action has hampered the ability of trade unions to run interference, through collective bargaining, on the two labor flexibilization measures typical of productive restructuring processes in the context of economic adjustment: internal or functional flexibility and external flexibility.

In Brazil, Argentina and Mexico the trade unions either failed to negotiate job continuity issues or were ineffective in their efforts to do so. In many cases, the bargaining process itself served as a means to reduce workers’ rights and narrow the scope of regulations governing job conditions issued under the law or through collective agreements. Argentina appears to be the exception in this regard, with the introduction of new subjects into the bargaining guidelines under the Menem administration. Here too, however, negotiations over job security were nonexistent.

With the most acute reform period over, Argentina and Brazil are showing a relative reversal in the trend toward deteriorating wage and job conditions. There has been a turnaround in the previous downward curve in employment and real wages, while poverty and social inequality have declined. In Chile, although the job situation was already in recovery mode by the end of the Pinochet government, this trend has continued and deepened under the “concertation” governments, particularly in the past few years, with a rise in real wages and decreases in inequality. In Mexico, in contrast, real wages have continued to decline or are stuck at levels 33% lower than the figures preceding the 1994 crisis (Salas y de la Garza, 2006), although unemployment rates remain quite low. The panorama is more complex in Venezuela where poverty and unemployment rose early on in the Chávez administration, followed by a reversal of these trends more recently.

The transformation of the productive system and economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s heightened insecurity in the job market. According to Latinobarómetro 2006, even with the turnaround in the economic growth forecast (with 2007 being the fifth consecutive year of positive figures), 67% of all Latin Americans reported that they feared losing their jobs sometime
in the next twelve months. This figure 70% in Bolivia and 68% in Brazil. According to the International Labor Organization's Global Employment Trends 2006, self-employment, unremunerated jobs, or domestic work accounted for 40% of existing employment. These workers are not covered by social protection benefits under labor laws or collective bargaining agreements.

**Perspectives**

Whether they chose a path of subordination to governments with respect to structural reforms, or opted for confrontation (and ultimately defeat), Latin American trade unions reflected the political limits inherent to their traditional association with a certain economic development model. When the crisis of this model demanded a profound shift in direction, the unions revealed themselves to be essentially conservative structures, incapable of adapting to the new realities of increasingly globalized economies and demands for fiscal stability. They were therefore hampered in their ability to participate in the quest for new directions in their societies. Faced with increasingly vociferous criticism of the inefficiency and political manipulation of state-owned enterprises, and the often inappropriate protection of obsolete industrial companies and sectors, the labor movement was unable to propose new alternatives. Some of this conservatism (a typical feature of trade unions in most countries) is tied to the inability of the leftist parties with which they frequently were associated to adjust their programs in response to the changing times.

The combination of these divergent trends — persistent or mutating institutional pacts and economic transformation, albeit in different directions in different countries — do not lend themselves easily to generalizations. It would seem that the enormous challenge for social policy to promote social cohesion on the continent is to recognize that people whose lives depend on their capacity to work are entitled to the rights associated with that capacity, rather than unjust or violent exploitation or deprivation. The main issue is how to reorganize the regulation of the workplace in a context in which job and company stability is increasingly scarce and fluidity is a sign of the times.

Different approaches and strategies have been gradually taking shape since the reform program rendered the main elements of the old model of government-trade union relations obsolete. Particularly called into question is the tradition in which improved economic and employment conditions
are contingent exclusively on State arbitration. A union’s capacity to exert political pressure no longer seems to be the only tool of organized labor, all the more so since its present role in economic policy-making is particularly modest (mainly due to the new social alliances forged in the 1990s).

Ironically, this transformation opens up virtual space for the autonomy of organized labor and for a redefinition of trade unions as social actors with a relevant role in the internal life of companies, in the negotiation of working conditions, and in job preservation. It is a role, however, that requires trade unions to distinguish the reality of professional relations from political strategies — and ultimately from the viability of a model that consisted of leaving the former to management for all practical purposes and focusing labor struggles solely in the area political pressure. In many cases, trade unions have begun to operate in other arenas, in particular the professional recycling of the unemployed, and this has enabled many former workers to reestablish themselves as microentrepreneurs or work in some capacity in the informal sector. Because of this situation, which has been further complicated by the informal sector, purely economic, or purely political strategies are no longer productive. This poses a challenge which, at least at the moment, the trade unions have not dealt with successfully.

Even as we acknowledge that trade unions in Latin America frequently were either distanced from the poorest sectors or politically co-opted (and sometimes even corrupted by that cooption), we should not underestimate their historic relevance or the need for a collective defense of workers. Obviously the challenge is how to update these mechanisms in the context of globalization, technological changes, and individualization. It has become increasingly vital to leave behind the vision that confines social policy to the poorest sectors and idealizes a market devoid of adequate labor laws. A new social model for the region must be developed through a dialogue involving the public technocracies responsible for social policy (which tend to focus on the neediest sectors made up mainly of non-wage earners who are less sensitive to labor market conditions), economic policy-makers (whose main goal is often to preserve macroeconomic equilibriums, efficiency and competitiveness), and workers and trade unions.
3. Political parties

We begin with the obvious and that is the widespread dissatisfaction with political parties in Latin America. Public opinion surveys situate political parties squarely among the institutions that inspire the least trust in the population. Pervasive political disaffection with traditional parties leads people to become increasingly receptive to “antiparty” appeals. This has weakened, if not totally transformed, the party-dominated landscape that described the political scene in the latter half of the 20th century. In this context, our analysis could focus on changes at the ideological level (nationally and internationally) and in society that have eroded the constituencies of the traditional parties or on the institutional reforms that influenced the functioning of the political party system and could potentially rechannel its actions in the near future.

From the crisis of representation to institutional reformism

Institutional reformism, which along with economic structural reforms was high on the Latin American public agenda, was geared toward rebuilding the representational connection and restoring the ties between civil society and political parties. The catchphrase was simple and persuasive: bring the representative closer to the represented. A whole battery of measures was proffered with this goal in mind, foremost among them political decentralization, expansion of the electoral supply, and the democratization of the parties.

A general evaluation of the reforms implemented yields a decidedly ambiguous balance. While it is true that, as in Bolivia and Ecuador, heretofore unrepresented sectors found a voice — and this is certainly positive — the most pronounced cracks in the social structure were refracted towards the political parties, weakening their capacity for political coordination and governance. Even a cursory examination reveals that the reforms opened the doors to elected authoritarianism, gave expression to deep societal fissures, and further destabilized governments, which were hard-pressed to remain upright amidst the social and political tremors that followed the institutional reforms.

36 This section is based on Ana María Mustapic, “Del malestar con los partidos a la renovación de los partidos”; Luis Alberto Quevedo, “Identidades, jóvenes y sociabilidad: una vuelta sobre el lazo social en democracia.”
Let us look briefly at the principal reform initiatives, which took on different hues in each country:

a) Political decentralization focused on establishing new representational spaces at the local level. The attendant redistribution of political power impacted political parties in several ways. It contributed to the collapse of the traditional party system and the emergence of outsiders in Venezuela and Peru, to political and territorial polarization in Bolivia, and to the fragmentation of the party system in Colombia y Ecuador.

In the Peruvian case, for instance, against a backdrop of profound economic crisis, President Alan García launched a regionalization process in 1988 that required the election of subnational authorities. In doing so, he sought to decompress the difficulties besetting his administration and hold onto spaces of power for his party, the Partido Aprista Peruano, which was unlikely to prevail again in the next presidential elections. The initial decentralization process — termed chaotic by some analysts — was also short-lived: Alberto Fujimori's April 1992 self-coup dissolved the regional governments and replaced them with provisional regional administration councils under central government jurisdiction. The Toledo administration later reactivated the decentralization process in what some observers qualified as an improvised and precipitous manner. As a result, political forces were left fragmented and the ties between local and national organizations were extremely tenuous.

b) The expansion of the electoral supply was accomplished through more lenient laws on the establishment of political parties and nominations. Colombia and Argentina showcased this measure. The resulting proliferation of parties and slates brought with it two negative consequences: first, elections fraught with confusion and opacity, which undermined citizens' right to cast an informed vote, and second, party leaders who were increasingly focused on internal nomination processes and competition.

Decentralization measures were initially introduced in Colombia in 1988 under the conservative government and one of their earliest manifestations was the election of mayors. The 1991 constitutional reform deepened the process by adding elected governors, the nomination of independent candidates, and Senate elections based...
on a single national district. At the same time, traditional political parties were becoming atomized by more lenient regulations that allowed and encouraged individual political parties to present several slates for a single post. The proliferation of slates, coupled with the personalization of political rivalry, left the party system fragmented and anarchical. Another political reform was instituted in 2003 to bring some order to this complicated scenario by discouraging the trend toward fragmentation.

c) The opening of primary elections to nonparty members was intended to democratize the internal life of parties and weaken their oligarchical machinery. Where this measure was implemented — and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico offers a good illustration —, it had a paradoxical effect: increased participation did not lead to the nomination of more popular or competitive candidates in general elections. This was hardly surprising since primaries usually give voice to those with the strongest preferences — the militants — who, when it comes time to vote, tend to place more weight on their traditional ideological leanings than on the expectations of public opinion.

Perspectives on the dissatisfaction with political parties

The democratization of the party — citizen link has turned out to be far from the panacea promised by the institutional reforms. The formulas used to envision representation in party — citizen terms have not lived up to expectations. There are two explanations for this from a schematic perspective. The first has to do with the unevenness of the reforms: what was achieved in one area was lost in another. The second is more general and relates to contemporary sociological realities that conspire against the expressive function of political parties: increasingly fragmented social sectors, new interests and preferences, the media’s agenda-setting role, and an ever more alert and informed public opinion.

In a panorama such as this, we believe that the conventional approach to representation should shift from its exclusive focus on the party — citizen link to examine of party — government relations. The justification for this new perspective lies in the convergence of three elements. The first is drawn from a principle of democratic theory: since the counterpoint to the mandate to govern is the obligation of governors to be accountable, it follows that the
exercise of power is part of the representative link. The second is derived from political sociology: at this stage of their historical trajectory, political parties have shed many of the characteristics usually associated with the ideal model (representation, mobilization, the development of platforms and a vision for the future, and the ability to articulate the interests of broad social groups), while retaining one that is critical to democratic life: the power to choose who will exercise political power on behalf of citizens and to establish a government. The final element to buttress this proposal comes from empirical observation: a close look at public dissatisfaction reveals that it is nourished, more than anything else, by complaints about the performance of the authorities.

We should begin our examination of the party — government relationship by pointing out a distinction. While the party — citizen relationship must be evaluated in terms of how eloquently parties articulate interests and preferences, party — government relations must be examined in terms of the level of cohesion in party interactions with elected officials. The level of cohesion has ramifications for representation inasmuch as it strengthens government performance. In effect, where cohesion is strong, the party acts as a shield to protect the government from the maneuverings of the opposition. It also helps to close the information gap by acting as a conduit for public policy. Moreover, it raises the political bar for government action and reinforces the latter’s credibility by conveying its support for official decisions. These sorts of contributions show that parties not only count when it comes to getting votes, but are inherently key instruments for the consolidation of government capacity. Their status as key instruments depends on the level of cohesion and traces potential courses to follow in strengthening party — government relations.

One such course is situated in the electoral sphere: the ideal number of parties matters. An excessive number of parties is negative for various reasons. First, it does not help simplify the options available so that the voter can make an informed, useful decision. Second, it does not facilitate the role of filtering demands, and finally, it dilutes accountability for government actions by making it harder to identify and weigh the influence of those involved in the decision-making process. At the same time, the minimum number of parties — two — poses the risk of excluding some sectors from representation and can foster occlusive practices intended to keep out new competitors. In terms of electoral systems, the quest for greater cohesion in party — government relations places more emphasis on the collective — party component over the individual one.
Another course has to do with the way in which parties are organized. Some have adopted a model that distances the party from governance issues. This is based on the principle establishing the incompatibility of holding elected office while simultaneously exercising a leadership role in the party. In this way, for example, the government leader — or an opposition leader in the parliament as the case may be — may not play a leadership role in the party. Such a practice or rule introduces a factor of tension and competition between the two leaderships and the first one to suffer the consequences ends up being the government leader and his or her ability to govern. In the long term, however, the damage extends beyond the government to the party as well.

These two courses of action have to do with institutional conditions which, in principle, favor cohesion in party — government relations. In order for this virtual objective to become real, a third element must be introduced into the equation. It involves the type of interactions between government policy-makers and sectors with varying degrees of proximity to the party ranging from legislators to affiliates and sympathizers. What is important here is the creation of informal opportunities for participation through which different groups can engage the policy debate.

The combination of these three factors helps shape party — government relations and encourages cohesion, paving the way for public policy-making with more resources. There is a corollary to this picture: improved government administration by political parties can bolster voter support. To state this in terms of the distinction we have been using, the effects of cohesion in party — government relations can narrow existing gaps in party - citizen relations.

The approach proposed here is not without limitations. It has the merit, however, of recognizing that, in the framework of contemporary sociological realities, gaps in representation are hard to bridge; a rapprochement between political parties and citizens is an ever-elusive goal, as the outcomes of institutional reforms have shown. Party — government relations are, in this sense, a potential strategic locus in the quest to support and re-legitimize party organizations and as such, may constitute a promising alternative to address the prevailing dissatisfaction with representation.

Beyond political parties?

However important this course of institutional reconstruction — the future of which is uncertain at present — may be, however, we must stress another
major reason for the crisis of political parties today. Since, as so many
analysts have pointed out, we are living in a time when legitimacy — an
essential ingredient for policy-making and the basis for state intervention
in democratic societies — is scarce, perhaps the overriding concern of
the ruling classes in our countries revolves around renewing their pacts
of meaning with citizens, rather than creating an institutional framework
associated with the classical ideal model (political party system, institutional
mediations, strengthened parliamentary structures, and so forth). All of this
in the framework of societies that have witnessed a mutation of the classic
political panoramas of modernity towards other types of interlocutors
(video politics, new leadership, social movement activity, etc.).

In the area of political representation, however, many analyses prefer to
cling to some sort of “institutional reconstruction” as if it were a perpetually
latent civic demand. Following this train of thought, we would find
ourselves before a definite shortage of the democratic institutions typical
of the 20th century, in the context of 21st century capitalism and cultural
and symbolic practices. Yet although citizens may experience a certain
amount of discomfort at the absence of points of reference that restore a
sense of security, it is difficult to imagine that most of our societies harbor
any nostalgia for the institutional past. What is more, many Latin American
countries have never had solid, long-lasting institutions or political party
systems. Citizens seem more inclined to adapt to the cultural and political
codes of neocapitalism even though they miss, of course, the long-term
social securities promised by the capitalism of the last century.

Indeed, behind the current crisis in representation, a mutation is in
progress: the search for other “links in the political community characterized
by the central role of mediatic leadership in the construction of political
identities or by the direct presence of citizens who in some circumstances
seem to prefer to represent themselves” (Cheresky, 2007: 12). An extreme
case, and one that is clearly problematic at the moment, is embodied by social
actors — and frequently individuals — who place so little trust in the existing
political party system as to have the deeply-rooted conviction that the latter
is incapable of representing them in the diversity of their interests.

One of the underlying questions (and a recurrent one in recent political
analysis) consists of understanding how these structural transformations
impact the political cultures of our countries. It is hard to pinpoint a single
answer. The political arena is muddied by the proliferation of conflicts and
by specific, immediate demands that frequently take an extra-institutional
route and an “all or nothing” approach that precludes any possibility of
a negotiation of interests. Imagine intensifying social protests whose protagonists often display a steely intransigence in their positions. Or “indignant communities” that moralize and personalize public issues propelling onto the scene an active, but anti-institutional citizen who, while not to be discounted, seems much more conscious of her rights than her duties, distrusts the state, politicians (“let’s get rid of them all”) and institutional structures, and takes refuge in the media.

But this too, could be the basis for a new type of relationship with political institutions. One in which, as in many other places, the demands for representation or participation give way to a democracy subject to strong mediatic oversight (including the new electronic media) and in which public opinion — with its moods and instability — reinforces its particular brand of influence. This is a growing trend in countries which have never had a political party tradition to speak of, or those in which the institutionalized party system has, in fact, collapsed in recent years.

As important as these trends are, at the moment it is impossible to imagine that political parties will disappear. For this reason, and despite the intensity of these anti-institutional moods, the cohesive role of political parties must be revisited from a different standpoint. In any event, it is in this joint evolution that legitimization by means of the party — government (as opposed to the traditional citizen — party) route could be a fruitful strategy. Parties ultimately will be evaluated less for their capacity for social representation (a function increasingly assigned, as we will see, to the CM & IM) than for their ability to make available a varied political supply and to actually serve as effective agencies for the rotation and selection of leadership teams. In all likelihood, the future of political parties lies in their enhanced organizational efficiency, in their capacity to offer political proposals, and in their protagonism in improving institutional governance in our countries.

The current is not flowing universally in this direction. And yet we must stress that in recent years, and despite their shortcomings, the political leaders of the region have succeeded in managing severe — even extremely severe — crises without undermining the space for democracy. Suffice it to recall recent experiences in Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Peru, and even Colombia). In many of the countries mentioned, it was the very system of democratic life that was in dispute in various ways. And in all of these cases, with variations and sometimes operating on the edges of legality, political solutions were negotiated. This does not auger a regeneration of parties — as indicated by their scant legitimacy in public opinion — or their improved organizational structure. But it is a significant indication of
a new capacity for regulation in the framework of democratic party politics in the region and of the fact — unprecedented in recent decades — of the return of the military to their barracks.

4. Civil society

Civil society came to embody solidarity and social change in the post Cold War public sphere. Due to its power of evocation and its potential to articulate the hope for a better, world, the notion of civil society has tremendous influence over the structure of public perception and over the role different social actors confer upon themselves. Above and beyond its evocatory power, we must address certain unremitting political questions: what is civil society’s actual impact in the realm of its social development activities? What is the nature of the relationships between national and international civil society? To what extent, and within what parameters, can it act as an intermediary between individuals, social groups, and political power structures?

Civil society and the political system

After a century of dormancy, “civil society” returned to vogue in the context of the struggle against authoritarian military regimes in Latin America and against totalitarian communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In these contexts, civil society constituted an extremely heterogeneous array of actors united around the common goal of struggling for the democratization of political regimes. By all indicators, once this had been accomplished, civil society would prove to have been an ephemeral phenomenon. To the contrary, it has become a core concept in the political life of societies in the developed and developing worlds alike.

What happened? The power of civil society in the social imaginary is an expression of, and a response to, the crisis of representation in contemporary democracies, in which political parties have lost their drawing power and


38 The notion was commonly employed in the 18th and 19th centuries, beginning with Adam Ferguson.
their capacity to produce innovative visions for society. This is particularly, but not exclusively, true of parties associated with socialist utopias.

In developing countries, civil society is regarded as a sphere capable of short-circuiting state institutions (which are considered corrupt and inefficient). This makes them attractive to international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations system, which have come to regard the NGO community as an ally in the development of a transnational agenda designed to break the nation-state monopoly in channeling international cooperation.

Civil society has thus been resurrected by very different international ideologies and actors. It is however an autonomous actor tailored neither to rightwing thinkers who believe such associations will contribute to a reduction in the state’s role (and social expenditures) nor to the leftist model of a radical breach in relation to the market and state.

Nongovernmental organizations, NGOs, are the main actor in contemporary civil society. What are the NGOs? Civil society associations (cultural and sports clubs, professional and scientific societies, Masonic lodges, philanthropic organizations, churches, trade unions, etc.) were present throughout the 20th century. They directly represented a specific constituency. Contemporary NGOs, in contrast, assert their legitimacy based on the moral force of their arguments rather than their representativity. This is something new: a group of organizations that promote social causes without having received any mandate from those they purport to represent.

Traditional philanthropic organizations characteristically do not represent their public either, but then again, they have never claimed to be the voice of their clientele. The church, for its part, operates on the premise that its mandate comes from God. Revolutionary parties viewed themselves as the vanguard with which the working class ultimately would identify and affiliate. Moreover, although they were motivated by powerful humanitarian moral values, the original intent of the precursors to contemporary NGOs — the Red Cross, Action Aid and Oxfam, for example — was to aid their beneficiaries, not to become their mouthpiece.

In this sense, the NGOs constitute a genuine revolution in the domain of political representation. Their precursors are the organizations and individuals who fought against slavery, or later advocated on behalf of consumer rights. But even taking into account these antecedents, the representation of public causes and public debate in the 20th century was channeled mainly by trade unions and political parties, in other words, by representative organizations.
The NGOs, this new phenomenon of representation without delegation — or more aptly, self-delegation without representation — channel the creative energy of social activists towards new forms of organization which are separate from the public whose needs they purport to represent, or at least do not establish a very clear link with that public. The most obvious examples of this are NGOs in developed countries that support social groups and causes in developing countries.

Based on a human rights (and ecological) discourse, NGOs situate themselves as demanders of governments (and of international organizations) rather than as vehicles for access to state power. In this sense, they express and reinforce a political culture peripheral to, and distrustful, of governments, setting themselves up as ethical agents before a pragmatic state, or a moral conscience before an amoral system. As such, they are simultaneously voice and exit, a mechanism for participation that tries to avoid being contaminated by political interests and power plays.

Lacking the direct support of the community they purport to represent, NGOs rely on external resources. In contrast to most traditional civil society organizations that operate with a volunteer base, NGOs are directed by professional teams and constitute a significant source of employment. And because they lack a stable, homogeneous social base able to exert political pressure through direct mobilization, they frequently work through the media to advance their agendas. In sum, they are professional groups engaged in social critique — without the explicit delegation of any broader social group — expressed through activities whose impact is contingent on media coverage.

While many NGOs in the developed world receive a significant portion of their funding through voluntary contributions, dependence on foreign funding has become a critical issue for most NGOs in developing countries. NGOs are, in fact, an important channel for international cooperation. But this type of funding also imposes restrictions. The NGO world can only be understood as a link in a more extensive chain in which funders play a crucial role. Whether directly or indirectly, donors are key players in the development of NGO agendas. And while the latter have the capacity to influence their funders, the struggle for survival compels them to accommodate the donors’ agendas.
NGOs in Latin America

The universe of NGOs began to diversify in Latin America beginning in the late 1960s. Established by means of external support, their main objective was to participate in the resistance against authoritarian regimes. In recent decades, the proportion of European funding of Latin American NGOs has decreased, with the exception of the poorest countries, and tends to be more concentrated in Africa and Eastern Europe. At the same time, local public funding sources have increased.

In several countries, such as Brazil, NGOs and corporate sponsored foundations proliferated and, influenced by the socially responsible business discourse, became increasingly involved in social projects. In other instances, the state began to make ample use of NGOs, more often than not to support organizations with direct links to partisan groups or individual politicians. This sort of support frequently has erupted in corruption scandals whose demoralizing effect ultimately erodes the credibility of all such organizations. In any event, the independence of NGOs is ultimately circumscribed by the need for funding, which is always tied to some sort of conditionality.

International NGOs also have a strong presence in Latin America. These organizations became relevant political actors in the struggle to influence national agendas in specific areas, such as the environment, indigenous rights, and human rights. Most national (and multinational) NGOs are based in developed countries, where they obtain most of their funding and where many of their associates reside. The agendas of northern NGOs reflect the priorities of their own societies. The difference is that most southern NGOs depend on support from outside their countries. It is not, then, a network of equals, but rather an NGO world founded on an asymmetrical power structure. Even the smallest northern NGOs are in a position to act on the international stage, while the main southern NGOs only obtain support to act nationally.39

The assertion that Latin American NGOs became a substitute for the state and its social policies is unsustainable, since the capacity of NGOs to distribute public goods is extremely limited. The stronger the economy of the

39 In this sense, the world map provided in *The State of Global Civil Society 2003* (Mary Kaldor et al.: 2004), shows that civil society overall reflects the north-south bias, insofar as it is mainly driven by advanced countries: the main criteria for estimating the density of global civil society relate to the existence of international NGOs (Helmut Anheier and Hagai Katz, 2003).
country, the more this argument is confirmed. In Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, to cite only the most important economies of the continent, it is not reasonable to argue that NGOs are situated to substitute state policy. Governments generally contract them to implement local services, while the most creative among them develop innovative practices which, if absorbed by the state, can have an impact on society. Obviously, in order to pursue such an innovative function, these groups cannot simply operate as project generators with foreign funding and budgets removed from the local realities which ultimately are extinguished when the funding pipeline is cut off. The situation is different in the poorest countries such as Haiti, Nicaragua or Bolivia, where NGOs channel essential international cooperation to the poorest sectors.

As instruments of social development, the challenge in Latin America is not whether NGOs have the potential to replace the state, but rather how to empower them to become autonomous partners of the state equipped to administer innovative projects that can be articulated as social policy and to engage in a more transparent relationship with the political system and social movements.

As disseminators of causes, advocacy NGOs had, and continue to have, a significant impact. Success stories include the policy to combat AIDS in Brazil, one of the most successful in the world, or the struggle to preserve the memory of the disappeared in Argentina. The success of these initiatives is explained in part by the fact that, in both cases, they directly mobilized mainstream social sectors. Their more diffuse influence in human rights and environmental protection also cannot be underestimated.

International foundations or NGOs have espoused certain causes whose political and social impact, if not the cause itself, could be challenged, at least in terms of their ideological underpinnings and priorities. While the environment is clearly an important cause, national priorities should be determined by means of domestic public debate rather than by a foreign headquarters. The same goes for support provided to indigenous movements in Central America and Andean countries or, as we will see later, the black movement and racial quotas policy in Brazil. In other words, along with good intentions, political agendas and visions that have not been subject to internal public debate in the “receiver” country are often exported indiscriminately.

We must not forget that NGOs are impregnated by the local political reality. Their role and relevance in democratic systems depend on the degree of democratization in a particular society and its political system.
The less democratic the society, the greater the potential that the NGOs will isolate themselves from the political system and national institutions, will be silenced, or will become instruments of authoritarian sectors.

5. The changing profiles of the militant

Dissimilar as they may be, the three types of transformation we have described can be interpreted from the standpoint of political/citizen militancy and the attendant individuation process. In essence, citizen participation is premised on certain archetypes found in the intersection of the observable behaviors, idealized collective representations, political ideologies, and sociological models that comprise the main profiles of commitment. The latter, in turn, at their own level and in their own way, inform the evolution of collective action and beyond that, a certain link with political life or “doing politics.”

At the risk of being somewhat formulaic, one can observe in the aforementioned transformations the metamorphosis of the profile of citizen commitment. The old profile of trade union militant or revolutionary gives way to a more immediate, pragmatic brand of activism grounded in communication and networking skills. The old single-minded and absolute commitment is diffracted into myriad forms of intersection between the public and the private, which are more temporal and professionalized. In many cases, this commitment leaves open the possibility of withdrawal: voice, then, is interspersed with an unprecedented capacity for exit.

The demise of the classic militant

The profile of the Latin American trade union militant never really fit with that of the leftist political party militant. While the latter were usually volunteers, the trade unionist rapidly became a professional. The former frequently faced off with the latter inasmuch as there were significant differences between the interests, generational backgrounds, and social origins of the two groups. And yet they had something in common. Both were highly politicized and their commitment — even if it was only actually put into practice during a finite biographical phase — was experienced as a total “vocation” to which one “dedicated one's life.”

We reiterate: there has always been an enormous gap between trade union militants (and their perpetual dependence on political leaders and...
parties) and leftist political party militants, whose visions of society were — in very different ways depending on the country — more ideologically autonomous and less socially embedded. In the 1960s, however, this very real disparity was blurred by the emergence of a new group of militants, many of whom were coming out of the middle classes and universities and defined by a nationalistic revolutionary option. This type of militancy was so cloistered in some cases that it would have been excessive to speak of “ideology,” to the point that the interpretive systems it produced were not at the service of any specific social actor (Touraine, 1988).

The political experience of these militants unfolded in structures with varying degrees of organization, usually quite closed, and always hierarchical. Personal life often became little more than an extension of militant life. A strongly biased political formation led to a discourse saturated with references to the leader (in the populist tradition) or to doctrinal texts (in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, subsequently reinterpreted by Maoism and Fidelism). The formation of “cadres” was a crucial element in revolutionary militancy and a core element of its “mystique:” it embodied a commitment that was, or was purported to be, permanent and radical. For many of these militants, who were strongly influenced by the Cuban revolution, the horizon seemed to expand with limitless opportunities for social change that was customized at will, to the point that it seemed as if militant determination and political leadership alone could set the course of history.

This notion was brutally eclipsed. In some cases it vanished as a result of military repression (military dictatorships in some countries of the southern cone essentially cut off the transmission of militant memory between generations). In other cases it was the result of the professionalization of political parties or of social changes in the 1980s and 1990s that reduced the space for political volunteerism in the region.

In any event, the first big change — which in a way set the others in motion — was nothing more than a gradual acceptance of the exigencies of democracy by a new generation of militants. This process remains ambiguous among some militants, as evidenced by the recent return to populist temptations (which we will discuss later) and the persistence of a certain revolutionary ideal. Nonetheless, between the figure of Che Guevara and the approach of Sub-comandante Marcos, or between Fidel and Chávez, a profound metamorphosis of form and substance has taken place.

With the restoration of democracy in the 1980s, many of the old-school militants embarked on a painful transition process. Clashes between exiles, former prisoners, the new activists and the militants who had remained
in their country of origin created situations in which many struggled to find their place. In some cases, a gradual purging of the ranks occurred within partisan organizations. In others, and even more overtly, the past and the present collided and many trade union activists discovered that the old ways of operating, pressuring and negotiating politically had been depleted. Essentially, what was occurring was not only this new generation’s failure to adapt, or its readaptation, but also the crisis of its militant profile. In the Latin America of the 1990s, there was little space left for the leftist or revolutionary militant.

The pragmatic activist

The individuation process underway is also evident at the level of citizen participation. There are many reasons for this evolution and they vary from country to country, but in general a new social activist is taking shape. One observes in many instances a rationalization of political commitment, in which more weight is assigned to the professional role; in other words, individual skills are put to work in support of a particular cause in exchange for economic remuneration. To borrow Max Weber’s famous distinction, the “vocation” of yesterday’s militant is juxtaposed with the “profession” of the new activist. This new profile has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the figure of the past: political activism is an income-generating pursuit; more credibility is assigned to professional expertise; there is more concern over actual results and the services provided to adherents; networking skills take precedence over the ability to build vertical organizations; and, of course, communication skills definitely prevail over ideological rhetoric. In some cases, certain material and status-oriented incentives have replaced those associated with ideological identity.40

The income-generating aspect, or at least the larger dose of pragmatism in activism, accentuates the widening gap between parties, trade union activities, associations, NGOs, and citizens. This marks an important distinction with the situation in the 1970s when the militant had ties (albeit often only at the level of discourse) to a social movement, a trade union, or at the very least, a neighborhood association. In this context, any

40 We should point out, however, that many university and party militants still carry out their partisan activities without remuneration. And we should not forget that in the past, many registered party members or grassroots militants pursued and obtained public posts, which is a different sort of income-generating power for a militant.
action in the public sphere was automatically regarded as political. Today the boundaries between social spheres, while still porous, tend to be more clearly defined: new activists are more “pragmatic,” less ideologized, and more inclined to circulate among political-degradable organizations and even, as we have just seen, among NGOs defined more by their moral or assistential activities than purely political conflicts.

The new activist profile, then, is defined by economic professionalization and pragmatism. The latter is manifest in its rejection of all or nothing ideological visions in favor of more immediate, tangible results. This is observed in the proliferation of neighborhood associations or women’s groups where, once the objective is achieved — access to electricity, potable water, a specific demand — the mobilization tends to disperse. In Argentina and Venezuela this phenomenon has come to involve middle class sectors heretofore unaccustomed to such protests. But it is also visible in areas previously considered bastions of revolutionary militancy. Despite the presence of partisan groups in university politics, for example, in many countries of the region, activism has become autonomized in its leanings and students’ associations focus increasingly on specific university-centered problems.

Added to this is the awareness, among many young people as well as some trade unionists, that political activity can be nothing more than a transitory phase unless it is converted into a professional, income-generating activity. Activism is regarded more lucidly and without false illusions as a transitory and specific practice. A change that can only lead to the conclusion that there has been a crisis in the militant commitment, even more so since the democratic experience facilitates, just as in so many other places, a privatization of individuals, particularly youth. What is happening, most likely, is that the individuation process underway in the region has compelled an acceptance of more space for personal and family life, which can no longer be sacrificed for a political commitment. In the wake of this process, a necessary separation of spheres is taking place. And despite its evident limitations, this is an important means of fortifying democratic culture. Even more so when this equilibrium is sometimes sought by militants, such as in the case of feminism, have politicized the personal sphere.

A different profile of public commitment is taking shape. It is marked not just by the decline of the public figure or waning political passions, but by the emergence of new ways of connecting to the public sphere that may be less absolute, less demanding, but are by no means less active. Some involve the professionalization of activism, while others reflect a desire for participation, association and solidarity. Despite their differences, however,
both of these avenues for involvement are united by a desire to dissociate personal life from civic commitment or to associate the two realms in the context of a particular lifestyle (in areas such as alternative consumption or in family relations). Individualization processes subterraneously reinforce this transformation. To the point where many actors value their participation in a movement no longer as a “vocation” per se, but as a venue in which to develop skills, carry out initiatives, discover personal traits, and assert rights. In sum, they feel like citizens, but with a different profile. What separates yesterday’s militant from the activist of today is a tangible ideological and political crisis, alongside an individualization process that has nourished new forms of citizen involvement.

6. The emerging public

Transformations in the sphere of collective action have significantly changed representation in Latin American societies. As in many other regions, the relative decline of social mobilizations and socialist ideologies, coupled with the representational crisis of the political party system, has caused a shift in representation in the direction of the mass media. In the preceding chapter we examined the role of the CM & IM in transforming social bonds in the region. Here we will discuss their new role in political cohesion and representation in our societies. In any case, the fading influence of social mobilization has been more than offset by the advent of new media-centered mechanisms for the representation of interests and identities.

It is not only through collective mobilizations that a society processes its conflicts and divergent interests. It also does so through an expanded public sphere in which the role of the CM & IM is increasingly relevant. In this sense, Latin America has not been exempt from one of the sweeping transformations of the late 20th century, namely the consolidation of an increasingly active, diverse, and autonomous public sphere that encompasses the principal self-representations produced by contemporary societies. A public domain in which it is necessary to distinguish between an opinion, a space, and a dynamic.

Public opinion

At once industry, show, mediation, reflection, debate and language, the CM & IM are the main vector for a public opinion that has become the
springboard for the expression of social divisions and differentiations. We experience social cohesion in large part because the CM & IM transmit an image of society to us, its debates, and its conflicts.

This is not the place to introduce what reception analysis has taught us over the past fifty years, but the point is important enough to at least provide a general framework. In Latin America, as in many other regions, public opinion is susceptible to all sorts of suspicions (since it is susceptible to control or influences). This sentiment is even more powerful in Latin America than elsewhere because distrust was based on a dual social bond in which it was stylish for the "natural" hierarchy to perpetually condemn "the masses" for their incapacity to develop their own opinions and for their propensity to be "manipulated" or "alienated." It does not matter that empirical studies have failed to corroborate the thesis of the direct influence of the CM & IM on individual opinions: it has been the underlying assumption from the start and, as such, is unshakable.

Of course, public opinion in the region, as in other areas, is subject to an array of controls, ranging from insidious or publicity-driven propaganda, to the desire of political authorities to exercise varying degrees of direct control over broadcasts, or to the powerful monopoly of large, private economic groups over the mass media in the region (suffice it to recall the role of the Globo system during the military dictatorship in Brazil, or Televisa in Mexico). And yet despite these evident influences, public opinion remains an arena in which multiple, opposing, antagonistic visions jockey for position, are represented, circulate, and are debated, increasingly on the Internet.41

In light of the individuation process underway we must be more vigilant about the actual processes that shape public opinion. Avenues of persuasion are less linear. Messages are decoded based on diverse social experiences, which are becoming more diverse by the day. Public opinion, no matter how evanescent, is the fruit of the perpetual collision of representations in which social actors vie for influence and to make their voices heard. The notion of a sole transmitter broadcasting coherent and homogeneous messages to a shapeless mass of isolated, captivated individuals does not correspond to any real social situation. Individuals predate cultural and informational broadcasts. Different social groups perceive and interpret

41 Although this should not be idealized as a public space on the margins of the realities of society and has even posed its own challenges for the construction of the public sphere. See Bernardo Sorj, 2006.
ideologies, messages and codes in different ways, in function of their class, gender, generation, cultural formation, place of residence, and so forth. This process has been sharply accentuated by higher educational levels and the diversification of the CM & IM in the region.

In Latin America, however, if one leaves aside important studies by certain experts, this more conflictive conception of public opinion has fallen — and falls — short because the classic thesis of the social atomization inherent to the masses (and the “ideological availability” this would imply at the level of individual consciences) was perpetuated by a dichotomous vision that pitted “decent” folk against the “rabble” or the “aware” against the “alienated” (by definition passive and incapable of critical opinion). The fact that individuals in the region are important consumers of programs (particularly television programs) or that the inhabitants of suburban working class neighborhoods purchase a television ahead of most other consumer items, generally has been interpreted as an unequivocal sign of their alienation. The individuation process forces us to revisit this thesis. This is absolutely not to say that in Latin America, as in other regions of the world, individuals are not influenced by the CM & IM, but rather that this influence is complex, even more so when the very process of influencing is subject to social struggles. It is a work in progress involving an enormous number of actors with diverse interests (journalists, owners, consumers, politicians, and so forth).

Under the influence of public opinion, one observes a tendency towards the uniformization of thought and lifestyles alongside a growing individualism. The communities of the past see their restricted identifications weakened by a plethora of images and messages targeted towards individuals. Of course, this paradoxical process of standardization and singularization does not engender equality. The CM & IM maintain or reinforce social and cultural inequalities, and while lifestyles are constantly being recreated under their influence — with different rhythms for different social actors —, the fact remains that the uses to which the messages are put are fundamentally unequal. Be that as it may, as we alluded to earlier, the CM & IM ultimately create “publics” with different cultural sensibilities which, in their diversity, accentuate the mosaic of interests and identities that make up contemporary societies. An identitary diversity that complicates, obviously, the capacity for representation of social actors through established conflicts, to the point that individuals seem to be more mobile than group identifications.

This process has been reinforced in recent years by the advent of the Internet and cable and the proliferation of channels (to which many social
categories have access, sometimes even through illegal means which in some countries involves up to nearly 40% of low income sectors). Still the CM & IM, and television in particular, are one of the most powerful factors of national cohesion. Television is where the crux of the political debate is organized, where the main national collective emotions are played out (need we even mention those lay rituals of communion that are the soccer selection?). Of course this process is more open today than before, producing a more reflexive vision of nation, one that is constantly held up for comparison with other nationalities and social contexts, but no less cohesive for all that.

The public space

If the CM & IM are involved in the formation and expression of public opinion, it is because the latter lends itself to being expressed in a particular domain that has expanded decidedly in recent decades. A genuine public space has been constructed where society can air its issues and expose them to debate and discussion. The mechanisms through which this occurs are many and the effects may be counterproductive, particularly when the media agenda imposes its rhythms on the political agenda. The public space in the region has nonetheless become a critical sphere of democratic life. It would be futile to take an optimistic or pessimistic view of this here. The important thing is to gauge the magnitude of the transformation. Let us not mince words: the change has literally been enormous in a lapse of barely thirty years.

The tension between opinion and representation is as old as democracy. Parallel to the legitimacy obtained at the voting booths is another more tenuous one: that of public opinion. For a long time this opinion came from the “street,” from “pamphlets,” from certain prestigious commentators, or from police reports. Today it “is expressed” in opinion polls which sometimes comment on, and sometimes precede, political decisions. Of course, this sort of opinion can never be the pure manifestation of an actual opinion, since it is always crafted by experts and star communicators. Opinion is determined by the nature of the questions (and ultimately the power of the one doing the asking) and by the commentary of those who “interpret” the polls. In this sense, the public space is an arena where we are not so much told what to think, but rather which things we should be thinking about. The power lies in the hierarchy of the topics of debate. But this is not to say that the public space is merely a domain perverted by the powerful. It is a
perpetual battleground, although the barriers to entry are not the same for every actor.

The CM & IM also have radically transformed democracy in the region. The transition has been faster in Latin America since political party democracy has always been weak, to the point that populist leaders were frequent and the consolidation of a democracy of opinion ultimately a reality that insinuated itself like an inevitable next step. And yet the change happened. The old charisma of certain populist leaders is being replaced by the growing personalization of power around figures whose aura generally derives more from the office held than from any exceptional characteristics they might possess. The democracy of opinion profoundly changes the politician's job description. Communication skills become critical: one must “appear” on television and know how to make a good “showing.” One must have an appealing face and voice. One must master the “sound bite” (which a key group of experts is constantly working to refine); one must learn to communicate with different audiences. The downsides are well known. Political programs disappear or cede ground to the polls. The essence of the political game is concentrated in the election of the candidate. The short attention span of opinion prevails over the long time span of reforms. A sphere of power is woven by the connivances among journalists, media magnates, and political leaders. Politics becomes a show and images are its inevitable weapon.

Many of these criticisms are valid. And fair of course, if they are judged in relation to a rational and autonomous subject. They resonate less, however, when examined from an historical standpoint. In Latin America the formation of public opinion in the strongest, broadest sense of the term coincides with this mediatization and ultimately, with the construction of this public space, accompanying it, and feeding on it. Public opinion is more active in the region today than it was in the past. It encompasses more actors and ensures that new voices are heard and through new channels. This sometimes has a destabilizing effect on traditional social actors who often have no other choice but to express themselves on behalf of the “excluded,” since the latter air their views through other mechanisms. Sometimes, as we have seen, this exacerbates the trade unions’ representational difficulties since informal or unorganized sectors are able to make their voices heard and are even manipulated by other social actors.

While an informal worker would naturally have less political information than someone with a college education, he or she is more informed now than in the past. What is more, the authorities are increasingly taking note
of public opinion, a signpost of the democratization underway in the region. Public debate is structured around it: it is in front of that virtual reader or studio audience that options are compared and contrasted. The objective of many collective mobilizations is to obtain visibility in the public space, to make sure that the CM & IM cover their petitions, so as to broaden the radius of discussion surrounding their cause. Moreover, as we have indicated, this process changes the profile of political militants because public opinion requires new skills and because the public space implies and imposes a new rationale in the selection of candidates.

The public sphere

From some perspectives, the affirmation of public opinion and the public space can be said to have occasionally followed a unique course in Latin America. From the standpoint of the recomposition of the public sphere as a whole — and the resulting dynamics in terms of the representation of culture and interests —, however, connections can be drawn with comparable evolutions in other societies (Dubet, Martuccelli, 2000).

The main change is easily summarized: despite the differential influence of each actor, from this point forward, no one actor can impose its will in the public sphere. Today neither the political system sensu stricto (states and parties), social mobilizations (trade unions, NGOs), nor public opinion (surveys, CM & IM) can unilaterally guide the social debate. Of course the essence of political negotiation remains under the purview of governments and leadership still carries considerable weight. There is, nonetheless a trend toward the gradual autonomization of social actors (as exemplified not only by the consolidation of civil society in the region, but also by the independence imposed on certain trade unions by the economic turnaround). Above all, however, the public space currently wields an unprecedented degree of influence that enables it to expose the incongruities between electoral expression (the forces represented in parliament or representative entities) and the more volatile state of public opinion.

This interplay transforms — albeit with significant variations among countries — the way in which the region’s societies represent and negotiate conflicting interests. By employing a very schematic approach and examining each of these domains successively, we can discern the dynamics at the core of the processes underway. What we are witnessing is a new equation between the power of action and the power of representation.
a) The political-institutional system retains its decision-making capacity even though it is no longer the only actor endowed with the legitimacy and instruments necessary to impose certain decisions. At the same time, however, its capacity for social representation and analysis is sharply diminished relative to social mobilizations and in particular the shift towards the CM & IM and public opinion experts. Of course the modernization of administration and tangible progress in the production of technically more reliable national statistics somewhat mitigate this assertion, while not essentially altering the course of the power shift.

b) From this standpoint, collective mobilizations are in an unprecedented position. On the one hand, their capacity for direct intervention has evolved unevenly, diminishing in some instances (as we have seen with the trade unions) while expanding in others (NGOs). At the same time, and this is a substantive change, their rationale for action has been transformed. Their role is no longer limited to the defense and representation of certain interests or identities: collective mobilizations are increasingly directed towards alerting public opinion and eventually the establishment. Although ultimately their target audience is always the political system, collective mobilizations increasingly function as alternative channels of representation and alert through the CM & IM.

c) The CM & IM are characterized by an imbalance of power that is virtually the inverse of that observed in the political system. While their capacity for action is limited (contrary to what many journalists believe, press-driven information campaigns often never yield a practical result), their capacity to represent society surpasses by far that of the political system. It is through the CM & IM that our societies know or fail to know each other, the implication being that citizens are more actively engaged, even if only in terms of their growing capacity to comment on current events.

This recomposition of the public sphere accounts in large part for the overlapping ills observed among members of each of these domains. Actors in the political system fear society as an unknown and unfathomable quantity (hence the reign of opinion polls and communications experts, which have stepped in to allay this fear) — and, when confronted with unexpected social mobilizations — as ungovernable. Many of these actors even blame their current difficulties on the media, whose sensationalistic
tendencies supposedly incite all social actors to vie for visibility. This panorama is complicated by the fact that the media also paradoxically encourage, whether directly or indirectly, a reduction of the public space, as people’s retreat *en masse* into the private, personal realm. It should come as no surprise then, that studies on the indifference, depolitization, apathy, cynicism, and lack of participation of “low intensity citizenship” (as O’Donnell asserts) or the “precarization of citizenship” often lay the responsibility for this on the doorstep of the mass media, particularly in urban areas.

Changes in their relative import or influence have fostered a sense of ambivalence among actors in social mobilizations: politicians do not listen to them nor are they audible in the CM & IM, and yet they persist in their efforts to “influence” the former and “be covered” by the latter. Even more so since the alliance between the media and the targeted, emphatic protest of social mobilizations plays out in what is, in fact, a media-dominated terrain.

Lastly, the important thing in terms of the principal actors in the CM & IM is to affirm their differential capacity to represent society as they constantly confront the political powers with their practical limitations, whether by underscoring the perpetual gap between promises and actions or by monitoring their actions and denouncing acts of corruption. In other words, the media, in its critical activism — including campaigns fueled by powerful economic interests — should not forget its origins: the power differential between its considerable capacity for representation and its relatively weak capacity for action. Its impact is relative, to the point that even the CM & IM’s constant condemnation of acts of public corruption ultimately has the effect of banalizing corruption itself.

In any event, this structural transformation has enormous consequences that simultaneously support and magnify the current individuation process. Collective mobilizations and political parties are no longer the only pole of expression for conflictiveness in society. Moreover, their capacity for identitary representation has eroded considerably. At times, we appear to be witnessing the divorce of the domain of the functional representation of interests (which continues to correspond to political institutions and representative actors in the literal sense such as trade unions and parties) and the figurative representation of society (in which the CM & IM play a decisive role). Of course, not all individuals have the same capacity to maneuver in these domains. For many people, particularly those of more modest means, protection is still found in collective mobilizations. But
even among those sectors, the defense of interests is tendentially distinct from the expression of identities, and their knowledge about the societies in which they live has tended to increase and no longer depends on a single source. Some engage the debate or articulate an opinion, while others display no interest whatsoever in the debate, and still others are doubtlessly incapable of making a decision about many issues. But everyone is being transformed significantly. Previously, one was either an actor or lived in alienation. Today, everyone participates either as actors or spectators and frequently, as actors, spectators and commentators of public life.

7. Conclusions

Social cohesion is indivisible from a society’s capacity to organize dialogue and conflict among opposing interests. This was traditionally the role of trade unions and political parties (excluding those associated with revolutionary or fascist ideologies), which channeled and dealt with social problems through the intersection of the social and the institutional. Trade unions and political parties clearly played a unique role in Latin America since, as we will see in the final chapter, the preponderance of the state was such that social actors were usually weak or dependent on the activities of the state.

But despite the evident historical continuity, this sort of assessment does not do justice to the contemporary situation, which is characterized by something other than the mere accentuation or deterioration of secular trends. As we have seen, underlying the economic and political shifts of recent decades, the very nature of trade unions is being questioned, together with their role as mixed agents of public co-regulation and collective contestation. Caught in the global inversion of the balance of power between capital and labor (and the consolidation and occasionally the expansion of the informal sector), facing new public technocracies which view them with caution and the emergence of political leaders who have found it necessary to dismantle the former labor power structure in order to impose their own, trade unions are finding it difficult to define their new role.

The balance is even more negative when it comes to parties — and especially to politicians — which are widely distrusted by citizens, sometimes to an extreme. It is a sentiment that the sweeping reforms of recent years have yet to truly eradicate. Their capacity for social mobilization has been
significantly eroded and this, more than anything else, has transformed them from militant-based organizations to professionalized groups serving as channels to government office. (This is even the case of the Partido de los Trabajadores in Brazil which had promised to be a renovating force.) In this context, their dual role of representation and participation has deteriorated considerably. Nonetheless — and because they will continue to be an essential agent of public administration for the foreseeable future — efforts to improve their organizational effectiveness may be the key to revitalizing their role in social cohesion.

In recent decades, the nebula of civil society and the NGO community has joined these two traditional actors on the Latin American stage. While their relevance is often overstated, their presence has nonetheless transformed the institutional life of many countries. As we have described, they play the curious role of relegitimizing collective action while simultaneously delegitimizing government action, particularly in countries with less developed government infrastructures. This frequently spurs different actors to step up their initiatives which, when carried out through extragovernmental channels and often featuring explicit criticism of government inefficiency — fosters a sense of trust towards these associations and distrust toward the state.

Such transformations have contributed to the decline of certain forms of political participation while simultaneously triggering the emergence, under the more general imprimatur of the individuation process, of a new activist profile. One that seeks an equilibrium between the public and the private based on new foundations. One in which the objective of participation is also interpreted from the standpoint of personal experience and most importantly, one which recognizes, if only implicitly, the well-founded need for a separation from the domains of personal life.

But the most significant change registered has been the consolidation of a more dynamic and diverse public sphere. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of this. Conflicts and politics, while still the virtual monopoly of certain social groups, are increasingly a matter of debate — and with no possibility of backtracking given the publicity involved. It is necessary to debate and rebut, to appear in public and withdraw from the public eye, to attempt to influence public opinion and be constantly ensnared by it. But above all, in such unequal societies in terms of power, to be able not only to express one's voice through the vote, but to be sought out by the powers that be, conveys a new sense of citizenship at the level of the imaginary. Here too the profundity of the democratization and individuation processes in course
is manifest. Growing legitimacy is accorded public opinion — granted, this refers more to the middle classes than low-income sectors at the moment. In any event, it is no longer possible for any particular actor to be unaware of its influence.

It is interesting to contrast these manifestations of collective stances or mediatic expression (voice) with the individual emigration strategies (exit) examined in the preceding chapter. Dissimilar as they might seem, both are part of the same process through which actors confront social difficulties. This is doubly true since, as we have discussed, underneath its façade of “individualism,” emigration cannot be dissociated from an entire spectrum of collective resources and frequently emerges — thanks to migratory networks — as a form of belonging to an ethnic or regional group. Most importantly, however, and above and beyond the differential of emigrant statistics from different countries, as emigration takes root in the imaginary of the region, it opens up an escape valve, a “frontier,” that discourages collective mobilization and participation.

As stated in the preceding chapter, the idea is not to pit “individuals” against “society” but rather to understand the often ambiguous role that the palpable increase in individual initiatives plays in social cohesion. While it was long believed that growing expectations would lead inexorably to an institutional blockage or overflow, today it is important to acknowledge the broader spectrum of responses that actors find, collectively or individually, to address social problems. These initiatives, however, are not viable unless they are translated at the institutional level.

There is no clearer illustration of this than the consolidation of a significant informal sector in many Latin American countries. While it has facilitated — facilitates — the “individualized” management of a societal deficiency, it is likewise impossible not to acknowledge the many “crisis” elements inherent to such a solution. It is not helpful in this context to offer dubious ideological praise for the virtues of individualism. To the contrary, once having recognized the proliferation of individual initiatives in the region, what is required, far from a certain collectivist nostalgia, is the development of public policy and collective actions capable of accompanying and sustaining these expanding capacities. In the absence of such policies, and sometimes without any horizon at all before them, actors will increasingly turn to individualized solutions and continue to feel alienated from the establishment. On this point, the future of social cohesion requires a departure from the contemporary dialectic between a shortage of voice and an excess of exit.