POL4F
Political Economy of Latin America: Brazil and Bolivia
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This module examines key issues of the political economy of Latin America, adopting a comparative lens to the study of Brazil and Bolivia. Latin America was subject to colonial rule for over three centuries and, roughly two hundred years after the liberation from Spain and Portugal, the legacies of colonialism are still vivid. Over the past century, the region has experienced a variety of political regimes, from military dictatorships to liberal democracies and diverse experiences of populist rule. Furthermore, the continent has experimented with a wide-ranging set of development strategies, such as import-substitution industrialisation under a developmental state, the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’, and commodity-based, export-orientated models. Throughout these different political regimes and development strategies, and in spite of a recent decrease of income inequality, Latin America has continuously been regarded as the most unequal continent in the world, with complex distributive patterns spread across race, class and gender dimensions.

Underneath these commonalities, national experiences vary widely, with Brazil and Bolivia representing substantially different trajectories. Bolivia is a small, landlocked economy with a per capita income well below half that of Latin America as whole, whilst Brazil is the region’s largest country in terms of territory, population and the size of the economy, even if its GDP per capita is close to the average. Whilst they share a colonial history, the latter’s form was substantially different in the two spaces, not least because of the central role of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in Brazil’s economy. During the twentieth century, both countries had dictatorships, democracies and populist regimes, but Bolivia had a revolution in 1952 whose goals reached much further than anything attempted in Brazil. In the beginning of the 2000s, both countries elected left-leaning presidents riding on a wave of popular discontent, but springing from different processes of social mobilisation and leading to regimes with contrasting political and economic dynamics. Overall, Brazil and Bolivia are social formations with similar, yet sufficiently distinct political economies, to allow for a thorough exploration of Latin America through a comparative lens.

The module adopts a mostly chronological approach to the two countries’ history since European conquest, exploring how key processes and dynamics unfold over time. It begins with a discussion of colonialism and its different forms in Brazil and Bolivia, moving onto the processes of nation-building and state formation that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The next lecture explores the revolutions, military dictatorships and attempts to build a developmental state in the mid-twentieth century, leading, in the next one, to a discussion of re-democratisation, the transition to neoliberalism and the reconfiguration of social movements. The fifth lecture deals with a more transversal topic, that of intersecting patterns of inequality, whilst the sixth analyses the rise – and in the case of Brazil, also the fall – of the so-called Pink Tide, the left-of-centre governments that were in power during the 2000s and 2010s. Throughout the lectures, four central concerns that will be explored, albeit with different emphases depending on the session, are the countries’ insertion into the world economy; state forms, political regimes and their intertwining with economic processes; race,
class, gender and their articulations; and the role of social mobilisation in contesting and reproducing the political economy of these countries. Students should expect to acquire a good understanding of these dynamics in Brazil and Bolivia, as well as a good grasp of these countries’ historical formation and modern histories.

GENERAL READINGS

Students should read the following books before the module begins, as a general background. For Bolivia, please read:

For Brazil, choose one of the following (the first is preferable, but there are limited copies available in the libraries):

The following books will be used throughout the module, if not always as mandatory readings. Between them, they offer a great overview of key issues in the political economy of both countries and are thus recommended for students wishing to delve deeper into their subjects.

Finally, the following books are good references for Latin America, Bolivia and Brazil. When approaching a topic for the first time, or to get an overview of an historical process, they are often great resources.


**ESSAY/SUPERVISION QUESTIONS**

1. How, if at all, are current patterns of social inequality in Brazil and Bolivia related to colonialism?

2. Why are state capacities so different across its dimensions (policing, development-promotion etc.) and across space in Brazil and Bolivia?
LECTURES AND READINGS (* READINGS ARE MANDATORY)

1. COLONIALITY AND ITS LEGACIES

This lecture focuses on the colonial history of Brazil and – what came to be, after independence – Bolivia, drawing out the enduring effects of colonialism in both countries. It compares the economy of the countries, their demographics, and their different patterns of forced labour, studying throughout how they gave rise to distinct social and political formations. In particular, this session explores the differences and similarities between the social hierarchies of the two countries during the initial centuries of colonisation, contrasting Bolivia, centred on a mining economy with the use of forced indigenous labour, and Brazil, where sugar plantations and the slavery of peoples from Africa and their descendants predominated.


Schwartz, S. B., 1987. Plantations and peripheries, c. 1580 – c. 1750. In: Bethell, L. ed. Colonial Brazil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 67-144. (There are long and detailed descriptions of several aspects of Brazil’s economy here. It is not necessary to apprehend all of the details, so read through this text selectively.)


State formation & Nation-building

Focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth century, this session explores the processes of state formation and nation-building in Bolivia and Brazil. It builds upon the preceding lecture to examine how the newly-independent countries attempted to construct, over the next centuries, modern states and nations out of their colonial heritage. It draws particular attention to how ideas about race, racial purity and *mestizaje/mestiçagem* were key elements in the construction of national identities. This session also explores how economic structures and processes and local sources of power interacted with, constrained and enabled the development of a centralised and unified state in both countries.


3. DEVELOPMENTALISM, POPULISM, DICTATORSHIPS AND REVOLUTIONS

This session explores economic and political processes of the mid-twentieth century, connecting economic developments to a series of political changes Brazil and Bolivia
experienced. In the case of Bolivia, it focuses on the 1952 revolution and its unfolding, exploring its role in nation- and state-building, how its goals, actors and political forms changed over time, and its attempts to promote social and economic development. In the case of Brazil, it focuses on the development strategy of import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) and the associated creation of a developmental state, analysing the several different political forms through which they happened, including different dictatorships and versions of democracy.


4. RE-DEMOCRATISATION, NEOLIBERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

This session explores the mostly-synchronised transition to neoliberalism and to democracy in Brazil and Bolivia, during the 1980s and 1990s, and the ensuing dynamics of social mobilisation. It traces how both countries underwent profound economic changes, including a transformation of their insertion into the world market, a redefinition of the state’s role in the economy and rising inequality. It then explores how these changes, in conjunction with re-democratisation, altered the political arena and the space for institutional participation and extra-institutional mobilisation, leading social movements to reframe their languages, goals and strategies.


5. INTERSECTIONAL INEQUALITIES

This session takes a deeper look into one of the defining traits of Latin American societies, namely high levels of multidimensional inequality. In particular, it explores how gender, class and race are key structuring factors of inequality in both countries, although articulated in different ways. Drawing on topics discussed over the past lectures, it discusses the colonial roots of inequality in Latin America, the association between the productive structure of these economies and income inequality, the role of the state in reproducing and contesting social hierarchies, and the prospects for building more equal societies. It draws out and explores how patterns of inequality vary in Brazil and Bolivia, relating the findings to the countries’ histories, social hierarchies and developmental trajectories.


This session explores the rise and – for Brazil – the fall of left-of-centre governments in Latin America during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Drawing on the topic of lecture 4, it discusses how rising popular dissatisfaction during the 1990s led to the election of left-of-centre presidents in the early 2000s, albeit through substantially different processes. In Bolivia, there was a cycle of reorganisation of social movements, including the wide use of extra-institutional tactics and contentious politics, that led to the creation of a political instrument – the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS) – and the election of Evo Morales in 2005. In Brazil, there was a long march towards the institutionalisation and moderation of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party, PT), with little recourse to popular mobilisation, leading to the election of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002. This session traces the different paths to power of Evo Morales and of Lula to contrast their implications in terms of development strategies, political dynamics and social implications.


