THE COVID GENERATION

Many kids in Latin America have missed a full year of school. Can the damage be repaired?

A SPECIAL REPORT
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A new generation of leftist leaders, including Gabriel Boric of Chile, Pedro Castillo of Peru and Xiomara Castro of Honduras, has been elected to address poverty and inequality, both of which have worsened during the pandemic. But it’s fair to say that nothing else politicians do will matter unless they address the 10-alarm crisis that COVID-19 has caused in schools across the region. There will be no social justice in the 2020s, and likely beyond, without urgent attention to education.

Take a deep breath, because the data are grim. While the picture varied across countries, Latin American schools on average were fully or partly closed for more than 230 days, more than any other part of the world. During the pandemic, as many as half of students did not participate in learning or have any contact with teachers, according to a new study. Some now estimate the dropout rate will return to levels last seen in the 1980s. And of course, these trends are even more pronounced among the poor, young girls, and other historically disadvantaged groups.

What to do? Our special report highlights several possibilities. Politicians and educators should work together to improve both technology and curriculums post-pandemic, writes Fernando Reimers of Harvard University (page 30). A program in Argentina (page 18) that targets and engages potential dropouts also seems worth emulating. These initiatives tend to require political will and coordination more than budget. All are better than the current strategy in many countries, which is to resume classes and almost pretend like nothing happened.

Across Latin America, a new generation of leftist leaders, including Gabriel Boric of Chile, Pedro Castillo of Peru and Xiomara Castro of Honduras, has been elected to address poverty and inequality, both of which have worsened during the pandemic. But it’s fair to say that nothing else politicians do will matter unless they address the 10-alarm crisis that COVID-19 has caused in schools across the region. There will be no social justice in the 2020s, and likely beyond, without urgent attention to education.

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As Reimers notes, Latin America is a region where, even prior to the pandemic, 30% of employers cited poor schools as a major barrier to growth, above the 20% global average. Accepting educational setbacks is akin to accepting another decade, or two, or three, of slow growth, rising inequality and a lost generation of youth. That’s a failing grade no one should want.
The COVID Generation

Education threatens to become the most lasting aftershock from the pandemic. Kids — and our countries’ futures — are at stake.

Our special report on the risks, and possible solutions, starts on page 18.

Preventing a Lost Generation
Luring kids back to school is the first challenge. Argentina is trying some innovative ideas.
By Natalie Alcoba

Post-COVID Education Crisis in Numbers
Students were already struggling when the pandemic arrived.
By Emilie Sweigart

A Time for Action
The cost of not closing the gap is too high.
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Nature is helping Venezuelans survive hunger.
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The sector is not ready to face the global race to net-zero.
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Tell us what you think. Please send letters to Brian@as-coa.org

AQ Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter, top left, leads a conversation launching our special report on fake news. Keynote speaker and Brazilian Supreme Court Justice Luís Roberto Barroso, center, joined speakers Carlos Affonso Souza, top right, Marcelo Lacerda, bottom right, and Cristina Tardáguila.

I’ve found extremely difficult to share what happened with @agencialupa and with other Brazilian fact-checkers in 2018. And it is still difficult to see that things haven’t changed much. Read @AmerQuarterly.

Former Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. Martha Bárdenca, Colombian economist Luis Fernando Mejía, AQ’s Winter, and former Chilean finance minister Felipe Larraín, clockwise from Bárcena, discuss the U.S.–China divide and its challenge for Latin America.

Jan-Albert Hootsen @jahootsen Here’s another important article in the runup to Sunday’s presidential election in #Honduras: Could Honduras Shift Left? A Look at Xiomara Castro — by @BrenOBoyle for @AmerQuarterly

Tiziano Breda @TizBreda Excellent piece on what to expect from Xiomara Castro’s candidacy in #Honduras. Congrats @BrenOBoyle, very balanced picture.

Margaret Myers @myersmargaret Very helpful update this morning from @AmerQuarterly’s @emiliesweigart and @GabrioCohen on the state of relations with China among major Latin American economies.

Anthony Faola @Anthony_Faola One stop shopping from @AmerQuarterly on China’s burgeoning relationships with countries across LatAm

Hari Seshasayee @harcito Good summary by @OliverStuenkel in @AmerQuarterly predicting constitutional chaos in Brazil rather than impeachment, given the Centrão’s support of Bolsonaro.

Roberta Braga @RobertasBraga Great piece. @OliverStuenkel puts forth very eloquently what many Brazilians in the US, myself included, have been saying to those who ask us what to expect from the 2022 elections. This is it. @AmerQuarterly

Cristian González Cabrera @cristianfengo Excellent piece on Brazil’s disinformation problem by @mariana_palau in @AmerQuarterly. It’s impossible to imagine @jairbolsonaro’s rise w/o social media. His attacks on women, #LGBT people, and others earned him an increasingly loyal following online.
A girl practices jumping during a ballet class on November 24, 2021, in Rio de Janeiro’s Morro do Adeus favela. Despite practicing without traditional ballet equipment or proper flooring, 30 students – ages 4 to 15 – make up for it with determination to imagine horizons beyond their neighborhood.

PHOTO BY FABIO TEIXEIRA/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES.
The Cholitas Escaladoras climb the 21,463-foot Nevado Sajama in Bolivia on November 19, 2021. The group of Aymara indigenous women used to help their climber husbands at base camp, until 2015, when they started going up the mountains themselves, always wearing traditional clothing.
A Chilean couple share a kiss after the country’s Congress approved a bill legalizing same-sex marriage on December 7, 2021, after years of discussion.

CLAUDIO SANTANA/GETTY IMAGES

Fidel Castro’s typewriter on display at an institute in Havana’s El Vedado neighborhood.

ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES
After the death of Mexican music legend Vicente Fernández on December 12, 2021, fans gather outside the hospital in Guadalajara where he spent nearly five months after an accident at home. Fernández first achieved success in 1972 with “Volver volver,” now a ranchera staple and perhaps his most iconic song.
“People want change. But one thing is change, and the other is saying that we need to restart from zero, that we need to ignore everything that’s been done in the past.”
—Former Economy Minister Mauricio Cárdenas, looking ahead to Colombia’s 2022 election

“You can blame the pandemic, and certainly the pandemic has created a once-in-a-century economic crisis, but the structural weaknesses that the hemisphere had existed well before.”
—Juan Gonzalez, senior director for the Western Hemisphere at the National Security Council

“A lot of these issues that make it hard to do business in Argentina have also led to a lot of resiliency and creative solutions, whether it is on the fintech side of things, e-commerce, or crypto-related startups.”
—Carolina Millán, Buenos Aires bureau chief for Bloomberg

Edu Lyra
Founder, Gerando Falcões

Lyra founded the nonprofit aiming to “turn poverty into a museum piece” by helping Brazilian favelas thrive.

AQ: What is Gerando Falcões?
Edu Lyra: We started Gerando Falcões (Raising Falcons) 10 years ago as a small favela group organizing workshops for schoolkids to empower them to take charge of their lives. Today we are 200 people and reach 138 favela-based NGOs in 25 states, providing services ranging from education to support for local entrepreneurs and citizenship rights for favela dwellers. We try to focus on issues that keep people in poverty, such as low education, lack of job opportunities and domestic violence.

AQ: What prompted you to start the project?
EL: I was raised in Jardim Cumbica, a favela community in São Paulo. My mom worked as a house cleaner and my dad was in prison for robbing banks. As a kid it felt like society was always telling me I had only one future: to be a drug dealer and dead before turning 25. The idea came to me in a dream about kids breaking the mold of poverty. I sold everything I could—a pair of jeans, my notebook—to travel to meet young people who had done that. Their stories became my book Young Falcons. I went door to door with the help of friends and sold 5,000 copies. I used the money to start Gerando Falcões.

AQ: Are there plans to expand your reach?
EL: During the pandemic we raised 70 million reais ($12.7 million) that we sent to 85,000 families via cash cards. We also created a program to sponsor Internet access to students stranded at home, and an education app, which we plan to expand to 40,000 kids by 2023. We have 2,000 recurring donors, and while I was in New York studying to improve my English, we were able to raise almost $1 million. By 2023 we will reach more than 3,700 communities — and by 2100 we won’t need to exist anymore. We hope that we can be agents of change — proof that it can be done, so others follow in our footsteps.

Lyra visits a family assisted by the Gerando Falcões anti-poverty project in Poá, Brazil.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS EDITED FOR CLARITY AND BREVITY
Preventing a Lost Generation

Fresh ideas are getting Argentine students back in the classroom. Are they enough to make up lost ground?

by Natalie Alcoba

photographs by Anita Pouchard Serra

Students attend a learning center run by the nonprofit organization Tejiendo el Barrio (Weaving the Neighborhood) in the outskirts of Buenos Aires.
BUENOS AIRES—Three days a week, Alejo Aracena drifts through the 19th-century doors of Casa Mercado, one of the oldest buildings in the municipality of San Martín, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. With a shock of bleached blonde hair and a slight stoop to his walk, the teenager has a destination: past the leafy pergola, toward the end of the building’s interior courtyard, where a few plastic tables are tucked next to a big blue sign that reads Educación.

Aracena, 14, smiles at the young women preparing math exercises in ballpoint pen. He doesn’t love school, he says, but this place is something different: a learning center funded by the city in an effort to help kids like him catch up and stay in school after the challenges of COVID-19.

“I come here almost all the time, whether I have homework or not, because they explain things to me so that I understand them,” Aracena told AQ. “Before, when school was virtual, (teachers) would send me assignments and it was up to me to figure it out.”

Like many young people in Latin America, the odds were stacked against Aracena when the pandemic shut down in-person schooling. With no Internet or computer at home, his mother had to use a neighbor’s Wi-Fi to download assignments for him on an old cell phone. Her determination helped Aracena stay in school. But without individual tutors like those he’s found at the study center—one of 40 set up in San Martín since February—he might still fall behind.

The center is one of several initiatives launched across Argentina this year to try to prevent long-term regression in student learning. A mix of new tools and old-fashioned persistence, the plans are wide-reaching, innovative and not especially expensive to implement. As such, they may eventu-
ally serve as a model for other countries across the Americas. But first they’ll have to prove they can make a real difference for students like Aracena — and there, it’s still too soon to tell.

“Perhaps it’s what they always needed”

In January 2021, UNESCO estimated that 50% of the world’s children — 800 million students — had either not yet returned to school or had returned under precarious circumstances. Across Latin America and the Caribbean — which outpaced the rest of the world with 20.5 weeks of full school closures and 14.4 weeks of partial closures in the first year of the pandemic — absenteeism and drop-out rates skyrocketed.

In Argentina, teachers, administrators and government officials are still scrambling to adjust. Schooling here was put almost entirely online in 2020. In that process, more than 1 million students lost touch with their schools, according to government estimates, though a lack of national record-keeping may hide the full scope of the problem.

In response, simply getting students back to school has become a top priority. Outdoor learning centers during the summer months focused on play as a way to reengage the youngest cohort. New learning materials, tutors, games and digital tools have been rolled out. Volunteer-based local organizations have expanded a near decade-long program scouring neighborhoods for young people who have lost touch with their schools. They knock on doors, survey families and map the needs of students: Who dropped out because they didn’t have a computer? Who had to go to work to help their family? Who languished in those months of lockdown, and needs an emotional boost?

After accounting for students who moved or passed school age, city officials found 4.4% students who had abandoned school in 2020. To date, they estimate about 75% have since reestablished their connection.

“We went out to the street, we went out to look for them, always with a super friendly, loving approach,” Melissa Massinelli, the manager for inclusive education for the Buenos Aires city government, told AQ.

“The national government has since vowed to replicate this door-to-door approach under a program called Volvé a La Escuela (Return to School), which earmarked 5 billion pesos ($50 million) to bolster programs that help improve learning environments, including funds for teaching supplies, building repairs and low-cost Argentine-made laptops for high school students.”

Eduardo Levy Yeyati, dean of the School of Government at Torcuato Di Tella University in Buenos Aires, said he had seen “a lot of rhetoric and a lot of good intentions.”

“If you ask the provincial or district authorities what they’re doing, everyone is doing something,” Levy Yeyati, who directs the school’s evidence-based public policy center, told AQ.

But with just a few months since schools have been fully open, and no real assessment done yet, the impact of these programs is still unclear. Even promising pilot programs have limited reach, said Levy Yeyati, who noted that getting students back into the classroom is just the start.

“I think it’s impossible to recover all that has been lost,” he said. “And unless we are able to achieve a greater level of targeting at the time of teaching, it’s very difficult for those who are lagging behind to board the same train. They will board a few wagons behind and they will end up there permanently.”

An emotional toll

Part of making sure that doesn’t happen will mean taking a comprehensive approach to reestablishing schools, experts say. That includes accounting for the pandemic’s toll outside the classroom.

Alegre Sofía, 14, is trying her best to catch up after a difficult year. She’s one of 150 students from Escuela 50 who has been attending extra classes after school and on Saturdays. She lost her father to leukemia in 2019, and when the country shut down during the pandemic, so did her education.

“I didn’t do anything all year. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t,” Sofía told AQ. She’s now making up classes from 2020 and those she’s had trouble with in 2021: Zoom and virtual learning have been a challenge.

“I was on my own all the time at home, because my mom and my sister work. And it being my first year of high school, I needed someone’s help,” she said. “I don’t want to repeat a year, so that’s why I’m here. Plus, the teacher is very cool.”

Sofía’s experience points to larger issues in post-covid education. Agustina María Corica, a Buenos Aires sociologist who studies school abandonment, noted that confinement and isolation have driven an increase in child and adolescent labor, as more children pitch in to the family economy. For many girls, that means assuming more caregiving tasks at home.

“The digital divide in Latin America has also been a major factor: Access to the Internet, to a computer or even a phone that isn’t shared by multiple family members varies dramatically by income level. Education in this context has become a privilege, rather than a right.”

Corica suggests that these social and emotional issues should be considered when devising stay-in-school strategies. While uncertainty and instability are often part of growing up, the pandemic has eroded young people’s ability to project themselves into the future, she said.

“It has to do more with emotional support or mental health than with connectivity,” said Corica.

For Mariana Entenza Saavedra, director of education in San Martín, the pandemic has exacerbated a period in young people’s lives that can already be difficult to navigate.

“There was a lot of loneliness,” Saavedra told AQ.
“There were a lot of children whose parents both died. Learning becomes even harder because that energy is being placed somewhere else.”

Many of these difficulties, in San Martín and elsewhere, predated the pandemic. A report released in August by the Argentine Social Development Institute based on 2019 government data found that 31% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 had not received their high school diploma. Among the wealthiest sectors that number plunged to 12%, while it soared to 52% for the poorest sectors.

Iván Matovich, the education coordinator at the Center of Public Policy for Equality and Growth, a think tank, said there is “a temptation to refer to this moment as a crisis, but if you look back we’ve been talking about the education system being in crisis for decades.” He prefers to describe it as a “fragile turning point” that has the potential to address long-standing needs in the education system.

“We have to be able to improve the monitoring systems to be able to identify students earlier on and adapt to their needs,” Matovich told AQ. Until that happens, it continues to fall to parents to pick up the slack. Verónica Gómez stopped working as a caregiver for the elderly and bought a blackboard during the pandemic so she could help her five children with their virtual studies.

“As mothers we have the basics, and in the pandemic we put in a super-human effort to try to help them out, but it wasn’t enough,” she said after dropping off her 10- and 12-year-olds at Escuela 50. Committing to extra schooling wasn’t easy at first. “Bringing them here is a sacrifice, I don’t live close,” she told AQ. “But their education is important. And I see the results in them. They put in the sweat, and they say to me, ‘Mom, I have to finish.’”

Alcoba is an Argentine-Canadian journalist based in Buenos Aires. She writes extensively about the women’s movement in Argentina, and is interested more broadly in collective organization in Latin America.
Reading levels were already lagging ...

In 2019, half the region’s 10-year-olds were unable to read and understand a simple text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of 10-year-olds below proficient reading level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developed world average</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional average</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... and then Latin America had the world’s longest COVID-related school shutdowns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% of school weeks that were partially or fully closed from March 2020 to November 2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and Northern America</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern and Southeastern Asia</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and Southern Asia</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Africa and Western Asia</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many kids simply dropped out of school by late 2020 ...

Experts warn actual dropout rates are likely much higher than the numbers below for 6- to 17-year-olds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Dropout rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... which may push dropout rates back to levels last seen in the 1960s.

Estimated likelihood of Latin American students completing secondary school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Without COVID-19 PANDEMIC</th>
<th>With COVID-19 PANDEMIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While in-person learning returned in many countries by November 2021, school closures were still affecting over 70 million children.

Percentage of students receiving face-to-face classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data not available for Brazil. Percentages calculated based on the total enrollment of students from pre-primary to secondary school and the number of children and adolescents benefiting from face-to-face classes. Source: COVID-19 Education Response: Update 30, Status of School Reopening, United Nations, November 2021.

Without addressing education, the pandemic's effects will be felt for years to come.

COVID-19 severely tested the social infrastructure of countries across the globe, laying bare countless shortcomings that have contributed to the tragedy we have experienced over the last 20 months. In Latin America, the impact of the pandemic has been disproportionate: The region accounts for 18% of global cases and 30% of the deaths, despite representing less than 9% of the world’s population. And when it comes to education, the pandemic’s long-term effects will be felt for decades to come.

As of February 2021, about 120 million school-age children lost at least a full academic year of education. A generation of young people, particularly the most vulnerable, will suffer lasting consequences because of this lost time in the classroom. According to the World Bank, after a year of academic closure, 71% of students in lower secondary education were not able to understand a text of moderate length, compared to 55% pre-pandemic. And the data indicates that these statistics will continue to worsen if schools do not fully reopen.

But educational quality in Latin America was a problem long before COVID. PISA results have persistently lagged even in the region’s best education systems. Latin America must invest in education as its highest priority if it is to compete in the future and provide quality jobs to its population. This requires thoughtful and smart investment, not just more of the same. It also means that teachers need to be willing to accept guidance on how to teach for the future. Educational systems must emphasize reading, writing, science, math and technology skills from the very beginning of a student’s education. And as students approach high school with a strong skills base in reading and math, technical apprenticeships and entrepreneurship should be prioritized to prepare students for the work force.

As we emerge from COVID, Latin America must embrace this opportunity to improve educational infrastructure — or it will risk losing its greatest asset: its youth.
The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems worldwide, but the challenges in Latin America have been particularly acute. Policy choices across the region led to the longest average school closures of anywhere in the world. But when classrooms finally reopened, parents’ mistrust of government stopped many from sending their children back. Meanwhile, limited Internet connectivity and lagging digital skills made alternative forms of learning perhaps even less effective in Latin America than they were elsewhere.

All told, access to education and enrollment rates in the region could be set back 10 years or more as a result of the pandemic — with grave consequences for economic growth, political stability, democratic governance and efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Not since the “lost decade” of the 1980s has Latin American education faced such a profound threat.

There are three paths that governments, civil society, parents and teachers can take in response. If they learn from the past, and choose wisely, the pandemic could be a springboard to remake Latin American education better than it was before. Choose the wrong path, however, and the stagnation and learning losses of the 1980s are sure to return — and worsen.

The good news is that many in the region have already shown a way forward. From Brazil to Mexico, local governments, universities and the private sector have faced COVID-19 with collaboration and fresh ideas. But a truly better future will take an even larger dose of ambition.
Catching up

To understand where Latin American education needs to go, it helps to first understand how far it’s come since the 1980s, when budget cuts in response to the region’s debt crises led to stagnation in enrollment rates and student achievement. Not surprisingly, these effects were most keenly felt by lower-income families, as inequities in education spending deepened and students without access to private education fell further behind.

In response, governments in the region supported reforms that produced visible gains, including increases in compulsory education requirements, which led to a significant increase in schooling levels across the region. By 2020, Latin America enjoyed almost universal enrollment for primary and lower secondary school. Overall the number of children out of school fell from 15 million in 2000 to 12 million in 2018, according to UNESCO. In that time, the share of students who completed primary education rose from 71% to 92%, while lower secondary education completion rose from 59% to 81% and upper secondary education completion increased from 42% to 65%, all above global averages.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. One in three children between the ages of four and five in the region does not attend pre-school. Only four out of five stay enrolled between the ages of 13 and 17, and 14% of students that age are still in primary school as a result of chronic repetition. Educational opportunities remain stratified by socioeconomic status: More than half of children from low-income families in rural areas fail to complete nine years of basic education. Overall, half of Latin American students fall below minimum reading literacy rates by the time they're 15, according to OECD assessments.

COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues — and now threatens to reverse recent gains.

School completion rates in Latin America and the Caribbean

The region made steady progress in education prior to the pandemic. By 2020, Latin America enjoyed almost universal enrollment for primary and lower secondary school. Overall the number of children out of school fell from 15 million in 2000 to 12 million in 2018, according to UNESCO. In that time, the share of students who completed primary education rose from 71% to 92%, while lower secondary education completion rose from 59% to 81% and upper secondary education completion increased from 42% to 65%, all above global averages.

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COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues — and now threatens to reverse recent gains.

It may sound utopian, but there are already signs that ambitious change is taking place.

Three ways forward, one big opportunity

Paradoxically, the current crisis could encourage a cycle of reforms to tackle these challenges, and make education more inclusive and more relevant to the needs of a changing, complicated world. This will only happen, however, if stakeholders on all sides of the equation take the right approach. Their options are denial, retrenchment or ambition.

The first of these would be the worst. Policymakers in the denial camp might think their job is done once schools are fully reopened. But this would ignore the profound effects that two years of a pandemic have already had on education systems: learning loss, disengagement, student dropout, teacher burnout, and a growing lack of trust among the public, education authorities and governments.

This is especially true for students from lower-income families, where limitations on home-learning have been compounded by the health, economic and social effects of the pandemic. Internet connectivity and the digital skills divide between high-income students and teachers and their lower-income peers offer prime examples. While overall 77% of 15-year-olds in Latin America have Internet at home, the figure is just 43% for students from the lowest-income quintile, according to the World Bank.

Retrenchment, meanwhile, would perceive of the status quo as a worthy goal. It would aim to recover pandemic-related learning losses and enrollment rates, perhaps through a combination of added school hours and hybrid learning, though driven by awareness of new fiscal constraints. But prior to the pandemic, 30% of employers in Latin America blamed a poorly educated labor force as a serious constraint to productivity, compared to 20% worldwide. Why simply try to return to the way things were?

By contrast, an ambitious mindset would aim to build back better. The goal would be nothing less than a renaissance in education, to prepare students with the skills they need to improve their circumstances and those of their communities well into the future.

Such a rebirth of Latin American education would rest on the pursuit of three simultaneous goals: improving the effectiveness of education while the current pandemic persists, recovering and rebuilding educational opportunities post-pandemic, and making education systems more resilient to future disruptions and better equipped to prepare students.

Achieving these goals will first require a full diagnosis of how the educational context has changed with the pandemic. Educators and governments will need to develop new teaching strategies that can both respond to those changes and be adapted to future outbreaks. Finally, Latin American countries need to improve the capacities of teachers, administrators, students, families and education systems writ large.

Coherence and alignment among these goals and the policy response will be critical, bringing together all sides of the education equation to pursue common strategies. A fragmented or siloed approach—one in which teachers are taught how to use digital platforms but household connectivity remains unchanged, for example—won’t be enough. Nor will simply trying to make up lost ground by adding to already overloaded curricula. Instead, learning plans need to be accelerated and reprioritized.

This may sound utopian, but there are already signs that such ambitious change is taking place.

Opportunity in crisis

In a recent study, my colleagues and I identified a range of education innovations developed during the pandemic. Many of these were aligned with...
An education renaissance may look different from country to country. But a framework exists.

an ambitious vision for the future of education recently proposed by an international UNESCO commission.

In Brazil, for example, a lack of national education leadership led state governments and civil society organizations to generate their own approaches to teaching during the pandemic. These included the creation, in record time, of a learning program in the state of São Paulo to sustain education through a variety of delivery systems. An online platform to support learning and student assessment was supplemented with television, radio, WhatsApp and printed learning packages. Crucially, this came alongside programs to help teachers and school principals improve their own skills as well. The project was the result of unprecedented collaboration among the state government, the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, and the support of several state business leaders and companies.

Meanwhile, state governments in Mexico developed improvements to a national TV education program. Officials in Guanajuato, for instance, developed an online program of interactive home study guides and provided regular, real-time feedback to students.

In Colombia, the International Rescue Committee developed audio-based education materials to address Venezuelan refugee students’ social and emotional development needs, a facet of education that was integral to teaching during the pandemic in ways that could well have lasting effects on how these institutions define their missions in the future.

In Chile, for instance, President Sebastián Piñera called on the rectoras of the Universidad de Chile and the Pontificia Universidad Católica to join together to help the government develop a range of policy responses to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The Catholic University helped public school systems reprioritize their curricula, with a focus on helping teachers understand and expand their role in supporting social and emotional development for students.

The variety of examples suggests that an education renaissance may look different from country to country. But a framework exists. COVID-19 led to one of the most serious crises in the history of education in Latin America. But it has also created new partnerships between public and private actors and produced unprecedented innovations. Maintaining the priority on improving education, sustaining collective leadership and deepening innovation would help restore faith not just in education institutions, but also in government, democratic rule and, most of all, a better future.

Is Gustavo Petro Leaving Behind Progressives?

The left-wing candidate for Colombia’s presidency is building new alliances, and straining old ones.

by Mariana Palau

When Gustavo Petro edged himself into the second round of the 2018 presidential race, socially progressive movements that had worked on his Humane Colombia campaign produced unprecedented innovations. Feminists were an integral part of that campaign, with Ángela María Robledo, a widely respected advocate for gender equality policies, as his vice presidential candidate. Petro’s platform was the only one to promote progressive priorities such as eliminating sales tax on feminine hygiene products, supporting the LGBTQ+ community, and phasing out Colombia’s reliance on oil and gas. He ultimately lost, but his 8 million votes positioned Petro as the most prominent left-wing politician in the country.

Fast forward to 2022. Petro, an economist by training, is running for president for the third time. His party, Humane Colombia, is part of a new political movement, the Historic Pact. Petro will undoubtedly win the Pact’s March primary and will face center and right-wing candidates in Colombia’s presidential election in May. Except this time around, many believe Petro can no longer claim to represent socially progressive voters. He has left them behind as he tries to expand his 2018 voter base by building alliances with more traditional politicians.

His new allies include figures like Roy Barreras and Armando Benedetti, who have previously sided with Álvaro Uribe, a former president and Petro’s nemesis on the right; and Juan Manuel Santos, another former president who is seen...
as part of the elite progressives often dislike. Petro is also flirting with Luis Pérez, a former governor of Antioquia province and author of a book that glorifies Uribe. In November, Petro embraced Alfredo Saade, a Christian leader who is pro-life, rails against homosexuality, and is against legalizing marijuana.

These new alliances are a slap in the face for thousands of progressives to whom Petro owes his success, but he seems to see some mathematical sense in this change. Saade says he can deliver 1 million faithful Christian votes. Pérez could help improve Petro’s performance in Antioquia, a province he has always lost to uribistas, as Uribe’s supporters are called. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Petro could expand his 2018 voter base without new alliances. His support of Hugo Chávez and a tumultuous term as Bogotá mayor from 2012 to 2015 created a “voter ceiling” that somehow he needs to shatter.

Yet his new style of doing politics is alienating those who were once faithful to him, most notably feminists. Many have become some of his fiercest critics. Sara Tufano, a former ally and herself a rising star among Colombia’s progressive feminists, told Mañanas Bla with Camila Zuluaga, a popular radio program, that Petro is an authoritarian who stimulates fanaticism among followers. Juana Añadador, who worked with Petro when he was mayor of Bogotá, publicly reminded him that a progressive movement has “red lines,” such as women’s rights, abortion rights and LBTGQ rights.

It is not the first time Petro has irked his feminist allies. In late 2018, he single-handedly decided his party would support Holman Morris, a loyal friend who had been accused by three women of abuse, to run for mayor of Bogotá. Petro sidelined the feminists who condemned this decision, including his former running mate Robledo, who was then trolled by his devotees on social media. Petro has tried to divide feminists into “us” versus “them,” claiming the movement is ruled by urban elites and promising to make it more about poor rural women. And he recently declared he is no longer pro-choice but instead pro “abortion-zero,” his idea of a utopian society where education and opportunities are enough to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Many in Colombia wonder if Petro’s opportunism will alienate a significant number of progressives who voted for him in the past. For now, that seems unlikely, as it is not yet clear who else they could vote for. For progressives, the only alternative to Petro could lie in the center-left alliance, the Coalition of Hope. Its presidential candidates, however, are all upper-class white men who polls say middle- and lower-class Colombians are having trouble sympathizing with. The Coalition of Hope’s candidates include Sergio Fajardo, a mathematician and former governor who has also previously run for president, and Alejandro Gaviria, a former health minister and director of Los Andes University in Bogotá. The Coalition will hold a primary in early 2022 to decide their candidate.

The odds currently favor Petro. Polls show more than 45% of Colombians would vote for him, though it would be premature to cry victory. The Coalition of Hope is desperately trying to attract progressives and aggrieved Colombians. Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential hopeful who was held hostage by the FARC for six years, has become a trusted mediator tasked with bringing the center’s politicians together. She has asked Francia Márquez, an internationally renowned environmental activist and the only influential feminist who remains part of the Historic Pact, to ditch Petro and join the center. If she does, Petro might lose the only link he still has to progressive voters, especially feminists.

But if the center continues to fail to attract progressives and the millions of Colombians who feel left behind by years of uneven economic growth, the country will have its first radical left-wing president; the right stands little chance of winning, thanks to President Iván Duque’s extreme unpopularity. Petro is a protectionist who has flirted with price controls, expropriating property and forcing the central bank to lend money to the government, a combination that could prove catastrophic for Colombia’s fragile economy. But he has already shown he can easily switch his political values if that is what it takes to win the presidency. Indeed, it wouldn’t be surprising if he morphs into a reborn progressive as the race gets tighter.

Palau is a Colombian-American journalist.
Julia Tagüeña Parga

A decorated physicist is accused of organized crime. She says politics and revenge are to blame.

by Brendan O’Boyle
Tagüeña couldn’t foresee how her case would be -

The charges against Tagüeña and her colleagues started with a complaint from conacyt to the attorney general’s office, alleging that former employees and advisory board members had colluded to transfer millions of dollars from the council to the board over a six-year period. The attorney general alleged that the money had been used inappropriately for trips, meals and other expenses. Tagüeña, who at that time served in conacyt’s leadership before moving on to lead the advisory board, was also accused of having a conflict of interest in authorizing public funds for a project run by her physicist husband. The new conacyt leadership attempted to bar her from holding a public job for 10 years. “All the receipts were provided and everything was approved,” said Tagüeña, who maintains she is “completely innocent.”

In December, a federal court shut down the effort to bar Tagüeña from future jobs. But while a judge has twice refused to issue arrest warrants in the broader case against her and her colleagues, the attorney general’s office has insisted on keeping its investigation open. In the meantime, the public scrutinizing and accusations have upended Tagüeña’s professional and personal life. “The situation has kept me from organizing my future. I’m living in the present, day by day,” Tagüeña said.

“We are not the enemy”

Tagüeña’s conflict with the López Obrador administration was far from inevitable, not least because she supports much of what the president is trying to accomplish. “I am convinced my country needs improvement and I was completely in agreement with many of the problems that this government is trying to solve,” Tagüeña said. She’s also one of the country’s foremost scientists, beloved in academic circles and a true Mexican success story.
The AQ Profile

Taqüeña has long wanted the general public, particularly women and girls, to value science. As a high schooler in the 1960s, she remembers how the space race “made physics fashionable” and “suddenly science became something that was useful to the government.” To try to make physics popular again, she has written numerous textbooks and provided expertise in the planning and management of science museums. An exposition on energy that she designed for Mexico’s Universeum science museum remains “one of the best things I have done in my life,” she told AQ.

In November, even as the charges against her and her colleagues drew international scrutiny, Taqüeña was awarded the Public Understanding and Popularization of Science Prize by the World Academy of Sciences. She was staying busy when AQ spoke to her: teaching an undergraduate course on renewable energy engineering, co-writing a paper on research policy and speaking on a panel about science as a human right.

Though Taqüeña and her colleagues’ legal future is uncertain, the case against them has highlighted the resonance of anti-corruption politics in Mexico, as well as the changing — and challenging — efforts to clean up government, said Eduardo Bohórquez, the executive director of Mexico’s chapter of Transparency International.

“The concept of what is considered corruption is changing, and the López Obrador administration has been pursuing a lot of behaviors that legally speaking may not be corruption,” Bohórquez told AQ, noting that what may have once been judged as administrative failures on the scientists’ part are today being evaluated differently.

Taqüeña said she is open to a better way of doing things and will accept criticism “in the normal way science accepts criticism: based on data.”

“What I don’t want is to hear something from an ideological point of view,” Taqüeña said.

At the time of publication, Taqüeña had contacted the Inter-American Court of Human Rights about the charges against her. She had not faced a judge and was hoping that the attorney general’s office would close her case. She was worried, she said, but noted that the episode was not just about her, or about any one scientist.

“What happens on this issue will decide what happens to this country.”

An uncertain future

2022 Elections

A closer look at the leading candidates in this year’s presidential races

Costa Rica

Feb. 6

Sérgio Fajardo

Gustavo Petro

José María Figueres

Lineth Saborío

José María Villalta

Brazil

Oct. 2

Jaír Bolsonaro

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

Ciro Gomes

Sérgio Moro

Álvaro Dias

Oscar Iván Zuluaga

Colombia

May 29

Sergio Fajardo

Rodolfo Hernández

Gustavo Petro

Oscar Iván Zuluaga

Notes: Costas Rica survey includes candidates leading December polls by the Centro Nacional de Investigaciones; Brazil survey includes candidates leading December polls by the Center Foundation of Brazil. Colombia survey includes candidates leading December polls by the Centro Nacional de Investigaciones

Ideology AQ also asked a dozen nonpartisan experts on Costa Rica, Colombia and Brazil to help us identify where each candidate stands on two spectrums: left wing versus right wing, and nationalist versus globalist. We’ve published the average response, with a caveat: Platforms evolve, and so do candidates.
HOW HE GOT HERE

Alvarado, an Evangelical Christian singer, surprised the country by taking first place in the first round of the 2018 presidential election, capitalizing on conservative populism, opposition to a judicial move to legalize same-sex marriage, and a growing appetite for change.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

With legislative investigations ongoing into the ruling Citizens’ Action Party (PAC), and rival José María Figueres weighed down by old corruption allegations, Alvarado may be able to take advantage of anti-establishment sentiment. After receiving criticism in 2018 for vague stances on economic issues, his positions are now clearer.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

While polls suggest Costa Ricans remain divided on the issue of same-sex marriage, it has lost much of its urgency as a rallying political force. Alvarado’s defeat by 1.5 points in the second round of the 2018 election suggests his support may have a ceiling. Other candidates will compete for the anti-status quo vote.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Evangelical Costa Ricans, who make up 25% of the country’s population, voters with conservative stances on cultural issues, and those frustrated with the economic situation and the political establishment.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Alvarado has pledged not to raise taxes, and vows to continue with the /PAC/LAC/CAC/AC agreement to by the current government. Of December 2021, he has proposed renegotiating a deal with the /PAC/LAC/CAC/AC. He was defeated in the runoff by the current president, Fabricio Alvarado Quesada, an Evangelical Christian singer, who surprised the country. It was those who put these issues on the table.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

Figueres is the son of former President José Figueres Ferrer — “Don Pepé,” as he is often known — a charismatic figure whose social reforms, introduced after the Costa Rican Civil War in 1948, laid the foundations for the country’s modern society. After the younger Figueres became president himself in 1994, he underlined the welfare programs his father put in place. Now, he is seeking a second term as his National Liberation Party (PLN) suffers a prolonged dry spell, last winning a presidential election in 2006.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Figueres led early polls, commanding high name recognition on account of his famous father and his own years in office. If he can keep the PLN united behind him, Figueres may benefit from the country’s most sophisticated party machine.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Keeping the PLN together is a tall order: Rolando Araya, a more left-leaning figure within the big-tent party, mounted his own presidential campaign after losing the nomination to Figueres. The PLN, along with the governing PAC, has high rejection in polls. Meanwhile, for a new generation of young Costa Ricans, the name Figueres and the PLN as a party may carry less significance.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Older Costa Ricans who still look fondly on Figueres’ family and party, and those looking for the return of a familiar political face to the helm.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Figueres’ program promises to put the country on track to push unemployment below 5%, keep the fiscal deficit below 3%, and achieve greater than 5% sustained economic growth by 2030 through pension reform and innovation in green energy, digital services and public-private export ventures. As of December 2021, he has proposed renegotiating a deal with the IMF agreed to by the current government.

HOW SHE GOT HERE

Saborío was head of the public prosecutor’s office and served as the country’s first female vice president from 2002 to 2006 during Abel Pacheco’s presidency. She was the primary of the Christian democratic party PUSC with twice the vote of her nearest competitor; campaigning on her experience and perspective as a woman.

WHY SHE MIGHT WIN

Saborío has a record free of corruption allegations and a more built-out economic team than other candidates on the Christian right. She is also the only woman in the field. The PUSC has lower rejection than other mainstream parties.

WHY SHE MIGHT LOSE

Saborío spent several years out of the political spotlight, lowering her name recognition. The put in a disappointing performance during the first presidential debate and has avoided several others. (The debates played an important role in the last election.) Fabricio Alvarado’s decision to run in this election threatens to split the vote on the Christian right.

WHO SUPPORTS HER

Traditional supporters of the PUSC, who have dwindled in recent years. In 2018, the party did best in the north and center regions of the country, but their candidate at the time, Rodolfo Piza, finished fourth.

WHAT SHE WOULD DO

Saborío is emphasizing economic growth and cost of living issues, pushing initiatives to lower the gas tax, boost the economy in rural areas and lower the cost of green energy. In contrast to Figueres, she has pledged to defend the agreement with the IMF initiated by the current government.

HOW SHE GETS HERE

With social media savvy and a strong track record on ecological issues, social welfare and opposition to free trade, Villalta represents a progressive, young left in a race dominated by high-profile figures on the right. Despite his political experience, Villalta’s hold on spending plans could baffle an anti-establishment sentiment. His anti-corruption stance and clean record is also attractive as an alleged government bribe ring has elevated corruption to the forefront of the national dialogue.

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WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Young people and progressives in urban areas make up the bulk of Villalta’s support, though he has the potential to capitalize on anti-corruption sentiment among centrist voters.

WHAT SHE WOULD DO

Villalta has proposed cracking down on corruption by limiting bail in corruption cases, establishing oversight of offshore transfers, and closing fiscal loopholes in the tax code. He is also supportive of a broad set of progressive causes, including advancing labor rights, supporting a green transition, labor rights and cutting down on resource extraction.

HOW HE GETS HERE

Villalta has served several terms as a legislator with the Broad Front, a left-wing party, and was its candidate for the presidency in 2014. His current campaign repeats the themes of his previous run, with a strong focus on climate mitigation, workers’ rights and social programs. He was chosen as the Broad Front’s nominee for a second time in October 2021, announcing his decision in San José’s Park of Social Quarters.

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Sergio Fajardo 65
FORMER GOVERNOR

HOW HE GOT HERE
This is Fajardo's third presidential bid. A former mathematician and professor of physics and newspaper columnist, Fajardo gained pop-ularity and international recognition for reducing violence and improving infrastructure as the mayor of Medellín from 2003 to 2007. He was the governor of Antioquia from 2012 to 2015, and has not run for higher office since.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM
Fajardo's moderate positioning, with a platform that blends center-left and center-right policies, has garnered support from a broad coalition. He has the support of the centrist party Unión, as well as several smaller parties that have formed a coalition with him.

WHAT HE WOULD DO
Fajardo has pledged to strengthen the rule of law, promote economic development, and invest in education and infrastructure. He has also proposed increasing minimum wages and improving labor rights.

Rodolfo Hernández 76
INDEPENDENT

HOW HE GOT HERE
A civil engineer and businessman who specialized in house- construction, Hernández is running for the presidency for the second time. He has served as the mayor of Bucaramanga and as the president of the League of Anti-Corruption Leaders, a movement that he created.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM
Hernández has a strong base of support in Santander department, where he grew up. He also has the backing of a number of smaller parties and independent candidates.

WHAT HE WOULD DO
Hernández has promised to strengthen the rule of law, promote economic development, and invest in education and infrastructure. He has also proposed increasing minimum wages and improving labor rights.

Gustavo Petro 61
HUMANE COLOMBIA
SENATOR

HOW HE GOT HERE
Petro is an economist by training and a former M-19 guerrilla who later promoted the group's disarmament. He has served two terms in the lower house of Congress and one in the Senate. Petro was the mayor of Bogotá from 2012 to 2015. He received 41% of the votes in the runoff of the 2018 presidential election.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM
Petro's leftist and anti-establishment stances could resonate with voters seeking major change following the pandemic, an economic slump and an unpopular right-wing administration. His second-place finish in 2018 secured him a seat in the Senate, where he has positioned himself as a vocal leader of the opposition. Petro has consistently led in most opinion polls.

WHAT HE WOULD DO
Petro has said that a continuation of Colombia's neoliberalism will eventually "destroy the country" and has proposed a tax increase on the 4,000 wealthiest Colombians. He plans to halt new oil exploration in an effort to eventually wean the country off of extractive industries and transition away from fossil fuels. Petro has also stated he would support putting President Iván Duque on trial for the violence committed by security forces during the 2020 protests.

Óscar Iván Zuluaga 62
DEMOCRATIC CENTER
FORMER FINANCE MINISTER

HOW HE GOT HERE
A one-time steel executive, Zuluaga's political star began to rise as President Álvaro Uribe's finance minister during his second term, from 2007 to 2010. Zuluaga ran for president in 2014 and earned the most votes in the first round, but lost to Juan Manuel Santos in a runoff. He secured his party's 2018 presidential nomination in a November primary.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM
Conservatives with fond memories of the Uribe years, and those worried about the left taking power who don't think a centrist is the right choice. Zuluaga also has fans in the private sector who remember the boom years of the late 2000s.

WHAT HE WOULD DO
Zuluaga has made gestures toward the center by stating that he would increase the minimum wage by 10% and has spoken about the need to teach English in public schools and train youth in digital skills. He has emphasized public safety and said he would pursue what he has dubbed "Democratic Security 2.0," borrowing the term from Uribe's security policy during Colombia's armed conflict.

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BRAZIL

Jair Bolsonaro 66

Liberal Party

President

HOW HE GOT HERE

Bolsonaro's 2018 election victory heralded a new alliance between social conservatives and pro-business forces, and a rejection of the status quo politics that led Brazil into its worst economic crisis on record. However, his government struggled to boost investment and economic growth even before the pandemic, which devastated Brazil amid Bolsonaro's frequent denialism of the virus's severity and the efficacy of vaccines.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Bolsonaro says he remains committed to the pro-market sector, which has thrived in recent years.

IDEOLOGY

Explained on page 63

LEFT WING

GLOBALIST

NATIONALIST

RIGHT WING

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva 76

Workers' Party

HOW HE GOT HERE

Bolsonaro retains solid support among his conservative base, about 35% of the Brazilian electorate. His supporters bet that will be enough to get him into a runoff against Lula, where an increase in welfare programs could help him win enough working-class votes to eke out a victory.

HOW HE MIGHT LOSE

Bolsonaro's poor handling of the pandemic, and his constant fights with institutions including Congress and the Supreme Court, have left many Brazilians fatigued and eager for order of the Bolsonaro years. He has focused on consensus-building so far in his campaign, and his rejection ratings are lower than other major candidates in the 2022 race.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Social conservatives including Brazil's growing evangelical Christian community and the rank-and-file of the military and state police. Small business owners and the agricultural sector, which has thrived in recent years.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Bolsonaro says he remains committed to the pro-market agenda of his finance minister Paulo Guedes, who has given no indication he plans to leave. But the duo have mostly failed to implement reforms, partly because of the pandemic. Bolsonaro's alliance with the "Centrul" bloc of legislators, which is mostly interested in pork for its constituents, may serve as a brake on efforts to shrink the state in a second term.

IDEOLOGY

Explained on page 63

LEFT WING

GLOBALIST

NATIONALIST

RIGHT WING

Ciro Gomes 64

Democratic Labour Party

Federal Finance Minister and Governor

“How the country is sinking, people are dying of hunger. Meanwhile (all the other candidates) are clowning around and mimicking each other.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

A well-traveled politician who served as a governor and a minister in multiple governments including Lula’s, this is Gomes’ fourth presidential campaign, following a third-place finish with 11% of the vote in 2018. These days, he casts himself as a leftist alternative to Lula while also flattering with parts of the center-right.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Gomes seems like a longshot, but could prevail if something unexpected happens to derail Lula’s candidacy.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Lula simply is not having enough oxygen for other left-of-center candidates. Gomes is also mistrusted by many across the ideological spectrum in Brazil’s political class because of his long career of bitter public clashes. Many leaders in his own party could pressure him not to run, to allow their lower house and state assembly candidates to campaign with Lula instead.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Well-educated voters and others from the urban middle class, who lean left but reject the corruption and other decay under the Workers’ Party’s 14-year rule. His power base is in his home state of Ceará, and out of the northeast.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Gomes’ detailed plans include a strong industrial policy that would boost exports, as well as an emphasis on green growth. But his difficult relationships with Brazil’s political class may make implementation difficult.

IDEOLOGY

Explained on page 63

LEFT WING

GLOBALIST

NATIONALIST

RIGHT WING

Sérgio Moro 49

Workers' Party

HOW HE GOT HERE

A previously obscure federal judge, Moro won international renown in the mid-2010s for overseeing the sprawling Lava Jato (“Car Wash”) corruption case, which sent many powerful figures to jail, including Lula. Moro then served as Bolsonaro’s justice minister but resigned, alleging the president’s attempts to interfere in the Federal Police. In 2021, Brazil’s Supreme Court ruled Moro was not impartial as a judge in the Lula case, further tarnishing his image.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Many Brazilians still see Moro as an anti-corruption hero capable of purging the current political class. His path is to steal away enough of Bolsonaro’s supporters to pass him and enter a second round against Lula, where he could then rally broad support from conservatives, centrists and business leaders.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Despised in roughly equal measure by the left (for jailing Lula) and right (for “betraying” Bolsonaro), Moro has the highest negative ratings of any major candidate except Bolsonaro. Polls suggest there is not much demand for a so-called “third way” candidate.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Business elites, some influential media commentators, law enforcement figures, and centrist types turned off by Bolsonaro’s response to COVID.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Moro is essentially promising to deliver on Bolsonaro’s original promises to crack down on corruption and encourage private-sector investment, though he has struck a somewhat more centrist tone. However, Moro’s lack of support in Congress — where many legislators despise him because of Lula’s — raises serious questions about governability if he is elected.

IDEOLOGY

Explained on page 63

LEFT WING

GLOBALIST

NATIONALIST

RIGHT WING

ISSUE 1, 2022

Americas Quarterly
The biggest economic, financial, and business stories of the week in a fast paced, snackable and easy to understand format for the next generation.

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“A Madness Without Parallel Since Don Quixote”

The unlikely story of Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico — and how U.S. aid helped a ragtag band of patriots win back Mexico’s freedom from the French.

by Edward Shawcross
When Princess Carlota heard that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated, she was delighted. “Here, the mood is excellent,” she wrote from Mexico City to her husband, Maximilian I, the emperor of Mexico. Their hope: Lincoln’s demise would mark an end of U.S. resistance to their monarchy. But it was not to be.

The improbable story of how an Austrian archduke and a Belgian princess ended up on the throne of Mexico in the 1860s begins in France. There, the emperor Napoleon III dreamed of a “Latin” sphere of influence in the New World, with France as the leading voice. In fact, the term “Latin America” was first coined in Paris in the 1850s, and for some it was an intellectual justification for these imperialist designs. Many French thinkers believed the region was naturally suited to monarchy, like the southern European Catholic nations.

A later French president, Adolphe Thiers, called that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated, she was delighted. “what hatred I would have for these French, and how much I would make them suffer.”

To escape the combined forces of the French army and Mexicans loyal to Maximilian, Juárez retreated northwards, but by 1865 he had gone almost as far as he could. He set up an alternate capital in Chiapahua City, close to the U.S. border and almost 800 miles from Mexico City. As one of his support-ers noted, “Our enemy is the most powerful in the world and the head of our government is in the corner of the most distant state of the republic, without money, credit or army.”

When the American Civil War ended in April 1865, that seemed about to change. The United States, along with all other Latin American nations apart from Brazil, had refused to recognize Maximilian’s empire. Yet so long as the Confederacy endured, Lincoln felt unable to offer more meaningful support to Juárez. An arms embargo prevented weapons from reaching Mexico, though Lincoln was expected to lift it. That was why Carlota welcomed his assassination. She and Maximilian hoped that his successor, Andrew Johnson, would recognize their regime.

Maximilian sent a delegation to Washington, eager to strike a deal with Johnson, but the emperor’s men were ignored. Instead, Juárez’s representative, Matías Romero, remained the only diplomat from Mexico with whom the Americans dealt. And Romero had an impressive address book: Among his high-society friends was American Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant. Romero organized balls and public banquets at New York’s famous Delmonico’s restaurant to pressure the U.S. government not to reach a compromise with France. Lincoln’s son attended one.

It worked: Under Johnson, the arms embargo was lifted. Men, money and supplies poured over the border. One U.S. businessman alone sold Juárez’s forces 5,000 Enfield rifles, 1,000 pistols, 6 artillery pieces and 20,400 rounds of ammunition — not to mention 1,308 pairs of underwear and 815 frying pans.
Rescue at the border

Despite the influx of supplies, Juárez’s future looked bleak. In the summer of 1865, French General Auguste Henri Brincourt marched almost 400 miles across northern Mexico with some 2,500 men. His mission: Seize Juárez, or drive him out of Mexico. It would be, Brincourt confidently boasted, “the last military act” of the French intervention.

“I am writing to you comfortably seated on the presidential armchair of citizen Juárez,” Brincourt wrote on August 15, 1865, in a letter to his uncle. “Yesterday we made our triumphant entry in this capital”—Chihuahua City—marking “the end of the Mexican war.”

The war, however, had not ended. Juárez had merely made one more retreat, to El Paso del Norte (today’s Ciudad Juárez), only 55 miles north. But Brincourt could not pursue him. Bellicose comments from Grant had terrified Napoleon III. Fearful that border clashes with U.S. troops might spark war with the United States, the French emperor ordered his troops concentrated in the interior of Mexico, and commanded Brincourt to go no further.

Without French soldiers to defend the northern states, towns fell one by one to Juárez’s partisans, while the U.S. increased pressure on Napoleon III, informing him in December 1865 that friendship between the two countries was impossible unless France ended its intervention in Mexico.

With Maximilian’s empire nearing bankruptcy, unable to pay for the French army to stay in Mexico, Napoleon III’s decision was an easy one. After receiving the U.S. threat, he wrote to his protégé announcing that the French would withdraw. Without French military and financial support, the Mexican Second Empire had little chance of success. Maximilian’s government limped on, but as Juárez’s supporters gained strength, he ruled an ever-smaller part of Mexico. Carlota returned to Europe to beg for more men and money, but Napoleon III was unmoved. She suffered a nervous breakdown on a trip to beg the pope for Catholic support—and never returned to Mexico.

With French assistance cut off, Maximilian’s regime collapsed in the face of a resurgent nationalist movement, a similar fate to the one that would later meet regimes backed by U.S. intervention in the 20th and 21st centuries. Two months after the last French troops left in March 1867, Maximilian surrendered after a brave but futile siege at Querétaro. He asked for his closest officers and friends to be spared: If blood must be spilled, then let it be only his. Along with two of his top generals, he was executed by firing squad on June 19, 1867. Moments before his death, he turned to his executioners and declared in Spanish, “I forgive everybody, I pray that everyone may also forgive me, and I wish that my blood, which is now to be shed, may be for the good of the country. Long live Mexico, long live independence.”

Juárez’s resistance had kept republican government alive in Mexico. But U.S. aid played an important part, too, and Juárez wasn’t afraid to express his gratitude. He told one former Union officer who thanked him for never recognizing Maximilian, “The U.S. Civil War begins.

July 1861
Benito Juárez emerges victorious after a three-year civil war in Mexico and suspends debt payments, infuriating Europe.

January 1862
Fleets from France, Spain and Britain arrive in Veracruz to force repayment of Mexican debts.

April 12, 1861
Fort Sumter in South Carolina is bombarded by secessionist forces. The U.S. Civil War begins.

April 19, 1862
The French invade Mexico, reneging on a promise not to interfere with its internal affairs.

May 5, 1862
Battle of Puebla: Generals Ignacio Zaragoza and Porfirio Díaz beat back French troops.

June 10, 1863
After French reinforcements arrive, Mexico City falls to the invaders.

April 10, 1864
Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian accepts an offer by France’s Emperor Napoleon III and Mexican monarchists to take the throne of Mexico.

April 1865
U.S. Civil War ends. An embargo on U.S. arms sales to Mexican forces is lifted, and Mexican republican partisan activity intensifies.

January 1866
Napoleon III tells Maximilian he will withdraw his troops from Mexico. Maximilian’s days are numbered.

June 19, 1867
Maximilian is executed after Querétaro, his last stronghold, falls to Juárez’s forces.
Foraging in a Land of Plenty

Venezuelans eke out a living among falling fruits and blooming trees.

PHOTO ESSAY

Andrea Hernández Briceño

Ripe coconuts and mangos fall to the ground: a boon for a hungry population.

Once buoyed by a flourishing oil industry, an increasing number of Venezuelans now rely on the ecology of their backyards to keep food on the table. In a country with almost 8 million undernourished citizens, droughts influenced by a changing climate add to shortages and poverty in keeping food out of reach for many.

Andrea Hernández Briceño’s work documents how food insecurity is contributing to a return to subsistence agriculture on the outskirts of Caracas, Venezuela’s capital. As the government remains unable to provide for the basic needs of its people, Venezuelans turn to nature instead — a precarious solution.
FORAGING IN A LAND OF PLENTY

Luis Calzadilla, formerly a construction worker, now relies on subsistence farming to provide food for his family. He plants taro, yucca, corn, bananas and beans on his vegetable patch in the San Isidro area of Caracas.

“Everything is not lost. We should take advantage of the things we have.”

— LUIS CALZADILLA
Briyit Pérez watches over her niece, Mariángela, while drying clothes in the Catia neighborhood of Caracas. Finding work is hard. Mariángela's mother left Venezuela in search of better opportunities. More than 5.6 million Venezuelans have left since 2014, but remittances declined sharply over the past year amid the pandemic and the global economic crisis.

A teenage mother holds her baby's milk bottle in front of a bougainvillea shrub in La Guaira, near Caracas.
A man scales a quenette tree in Patanemo, a town up the coast from Caracas, looking for ripe fruit.
Mango in hand, Joseph Chacón (12) looks out toward his mother’s home in San Isidro.

People from the town of Chuspa dance along packed streets and pray for abundance during a festival honoring St. John the Baptist.
Freddy Flores pulls his horse toward Patanemo. His family doesn’t earn enough to shop in the supermarket. Instead, they live off the land, trading what they hunt and growing their own food.
FORAGING IN A LAND OF PLENTY

Before the pandemic, Puerto Cabello was home to a bustling commercial area. Now Ángel (18) sells fish among shuttered shops on a largely deserted street.
FORAGING IN A LAND OF PLENTY

“I help myself with what I harvest from the vegetable patch. We eat from it and I give some vegetables to my neighbors.”

— FELIPE ARRIJOA

Felipe Arrioja poses in front of the dry riverbed that snakes around San Isidro. An unemployed construction worker, Arrioja has dealt with waves of drought and electricity rationing by tending a vegetable garden he started in 2015.
The Huge Risk Facing Latin American Oil Companies

The region’s big energy firms are mostly lagging in the transition away from fossil fuels. More can be done.

by Luisa Palacios and Francisco Monaldi

After a rash of net-zero pledges from oil-producing and oil-consuming nations alike at the COP26 summit in Glasgow, Scotland, last November, the future of Latin America’s oil industry is in jeopardy. The region’s national oil companies, especially in a few laggard countries like Venezuela and Mexico, must act quickly or be left behind by the global energy transition, with grim consequences for national economies.

It’s unclear how long the process of decarbonization in the world energy market will take, but what is clear is the threat it presents to the market for oil and the rents that come from its extraction. Latin America, especially, stands to lose from a decline in oil demand: It has the second largest oil reserves in the world after the Middle East. But Latin American oil production involves higher costs and higher carbon intensity than the Middle East, which makes it less resilient to drops in demand. The faster the decarbonization process ends up being, the more disruptive it will be for the region.

Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia are particularly dependent on oil exports and revenues. Bolivia and Trinidad and Tobago depend on natural gas. The small nation of Guyana is poised to become the largest per capita oil producer in the world, just as the window for developing its reserves may be closing. Though Argentina, Brazil and Mexico are not as oil-dependent, oil and gas are among the largest industries in each country in terms of fiscal revenues, exports and investments. Latin American national oil companies also have significant macroeconomic importance as providers of oil rents, generators of foreign exchange receipts and issuers of foreign debt.
When the region's national oil companies are listed on stock markets, they are among the largest companies in terms of market capitalization. Investment by large international oil companies (IOCs) looks set to cool off. Recent announcements by some of the largest European IOCs (BP, Shell, Total) tout accelerated plans to diversify their business models into renewables. Judicial pressure on Shell in the Netherlands, as well as shareholder pressure on the boards of Exxon and Chevron, suggest the appetite of the traditional oil majors for investment in Latin America could drop or change focus into low-carbon projects. The pressing question is whether the world-class capabilities of national oil companies from China and India, or perhaps private equity investors or smaller companies.

It's too soon to pick winners and losers, given the uncertain pace of the energy transition, but it's clear who is currently better poised to adapt. Among the major national oil companies, Brazil's Petrobras and Colombia's Ecopetrol, the only national oil companies in the region to pledge net zero by 2050, are emerging as regional leaders. Petrobras is positioning itself as a low-carbon producer able to survive in a low oil-price environment, even deep into the energy transition. Petrobras has stated that it can produce its prolific pre-salt offshore fields at $35 per barrel. At 2.85 million barrels per day of oil and gas production, Petrobras is the largest producer in the region and the only national oil company with a clear path to significant production growth in the next five years. The company has been shedding assets as part of a divestment program responding to the need to deleverage and concentrate its expenditures to fulfill its production target of 3.3 million barrels a day by 2025. Becoming leaner and concentrating efforts on making its pre-salt fields less carbon-intensive might be Petrobras' niche as a geopolitically attractive alternative to OPEC.

Colombia's Ecopetrol, meanwhile, is leading the pack in terms of diversification of its business model. Ecopetrol is rethinking its business strategy, diversifying into non-fossil sources of revenue, with the acquisition of TSA, an electricity transmission company. While offshore gas might have potential, Colombia's and Ecopetrol's low reserves relative to production and potential environmental concerns about shale leaves the field open to bold moves into other sources of energy, with the country even exploring hydrogen. On the other side of the spectrum, Venezuela's PDVSA and Mexico's Pemex are clear strugglers with few immediate prospects for improvement. Without a significant policy U-turn, these two national companies and their oil assets will be at the forefront of the discussion about stranded assets in the region. Exploitation of Mexico's deep-water and shale reserves are being put on hold by a state-centric oil and gas policy that is scaring off private investment. With its strategy directed by the government of statist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), Pemex is sinking money into expanding refining capacity at a time of worldwide refining overcapacity, making the Mexican company less resilient to the energy transition. Ironically for AMLO's defense of national energy sovereignty, these decisions are making Mexico more dependent on imports to satisfy its present and future energy needs, given the budget constraints of both Pemex and the government.

Venezuela, of course, looks worse. The severity of the institutional deterioration of both PDVSA and the government, macroeconomic policy dysfunction, the anti-private sector policy framework, and significant geopolitical constraints (sanctions) are all serious obstacles to Venezuela's ability to navigate the energy transition. The national oil company — with its high carbon intensity and high methane emissions, not to mention its serious governance issues — creates significant liabilities for future reconstruction of the oil industry. Only a significant change in the current political and policy framework would allow Venezuela a chance to properly tap into its ample gas resources, develop its potential for carbon storage and maximize its renewable energy potential.

That leaves Argentina and Ecuador, whose national oil companies — YPF and Petroecuador, respectively — are still a question mark. The high share of natural gas in YPF's portfolio means the company has a head start in the decarbonization strategy vis-à-vis some of its peers. Its ability to generate quicker returns on investment with short-cycle shale production plays in its favor. But poor financial performance, the country's macroeconomic imbalances, the government's solvency issues, and the high cost of its shale are worries. Ecuador, meanwhile, is trying to enact more pro-private sector policy changes, while environmental concerns around oil production could disrupt its plan to aggressively increase oil output in the next few years.

As for Guyana, beneficiary of an ongoing bonanza after the discovery of a large reserve in 2015, the small country seems intent on maximizing revenues over the next 10 years, potentially reaching 770,000 barrels a day by 2050. As a newcomer lacking technical capacity, Guyana is relying on a consortium of IOCs led by Exxon. A realization that the window of opportunity is closing is serving as a check on nationalist tendencies that have inflicted damage on some of the country's regional peers, particularly in times of high oil prices. The challenge for Guyana and its neighbor Suriname will be to succeed where others have failed and use proceeds from the oil boom wisely.

The energy transition also represents an opportunity for the region's energy importers. Chile, the most conspicuous example, has made significant inroads into the renewable space and it is today the country with the most potential in hydrogen, which many see as the fuel of the future. The country also stands to benefit from the increased demand for critical minerals for electrification such as copper and lithium.

The energy transition represents real challenges, but also opportunities for countries and national oil companies in Latin America. With oil prices currently high, the time is right for the region's oil industry to take note of decisions being made today to adapt to a net-zero world and use their windfall profits to plan decarbonization strategies. That will ensure they retain access to capital and even export markets in the carbon-neutral future.

**Fossil fuels remain a big source of revenue for Latin American governments**

Moving away from hydrocarbons poses significant financial uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of government revenue from carbon-intensive sources</th>
<th>% from sustainable energy sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>28.54%</td>
<td>71.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>23.51%</td>
<td>76.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>12.15%</td>
<td>87.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>90.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>8.37%</td>
<td>91.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>5.14%</td>
<td>94.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: GFLAC ÍNDICE DE FINANZAS SOSTENIBLES 2020
NOTE: GOVERNMENT REVENUE FROM SUSTAINABLE SOURCES IS MOSTLY FROM INTERNATIONAL AID.
Most experts agree that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s proposed reform of Mexico’s energy sector will delay its transition to cleaner fuels. Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico City’s environmental scientist-turned-mayor, is not among them. For now, congressional opposition and horse trading have stalled López Obrador’s attempt to return state producer CNPE to the center of Mexico’s energy industry. But in the administration’s ongoing sales pitch, Sheinbaum remains a central — and credible — figure.

The 59-year-old was part of an IPCC climate change panel that won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, and has bolstered her green credentials since becoming mayor in 2018 — including through a massive expansion of rainwater collection programs, significant investment in modernizing waste management, and reforestation projects.

She couches her support for the reform, in press conferences, interviews and on social media, in terms of “energy sovereignty.” Though some private electricity generation has been permitted in Mexico since the late 1990s, López Obrador presents his plan foremost as a corrective to constitutional changes implemented by his predecessor in 2013. Those changes, he said, sidelined CNPE and left consumers at the mercy of rent-seeking private producers.

Most analysts, however, say that by giving dispatch priority to CNPE-generated electricity (rather than to renewable production, as the 2013 reform mandated), the proposal would make Mexican electricity not only more expensive, but also
THE ENIGMA OF CLAUDIA SHEINBAUM

M, an implicit coronation of presidential succession with Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard in the race to worse for the environment. is a significant hydropower producer, but only 11% of its clean energy generation comes from wind and solar.

This isn’t the first time Sheinbaum’s ardent support for López Obrador’s so-called fourth transformation of Mexico has come into apparent conflict with her reputation as an innovative problem solver.

“Sheinbaum is loyal to an illogical ideology, and on the other she has a highly logical technical outlook,” said Ana Lilía Moreno, a program coordinator at México Éválúa who has analyzed López Obrador’s reform proposal. “Those two things clash.”

How to square the circle?

Mexico’s next presidential election isn’t until 2024 but, in the words of one prominent local journalist, “(Sheinbaum) would say she’s not campaigning to be a candidate, but her supporters would.”

Among those supporters may be López Obrador himself. Most polls show Sheinbaum leading or tied with Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard in the race to represent Morena, López Obrador’s party, in the next election. Whoever wins the nomination, officially through an internal survey in 2023, will likely begin the national race as the favorite.

Hints of López Obrador’s preference for Sheinbaum have become harder to ignore. A photo of the president holding her arm aloft after a public event in September 2021 reminded many of the so-called dedazo, an implicit coronation of presidential successors that was standard practice during decades of one-party PRI rule.

Sheinbaum has also appeared to align herself more closely with the president after local elections last June in which Morena was trounced in Mexico City. Some party weightily reportedly blamed Sheinbaum’s lack of political acumen for the loss. In July 2021, the mayor replaced her government secretary of the 2013 reform while she’s been in office, with the stated goal of both her and López Obrador’s political agenda: reducing inequality or, in administration parlance, “for the good of everyone, first the poor.” Sheinbaum’s doctoral thesis on residential energy use, part of which she researched under the presidency of Calderón, begins, “Sustainability? Ask the indigenous people of Chiapas” — an apparent reproach of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, her alma mater), Sheinbaum has also worked with the private sector on local development projects. The city has even benefited from the president’s “we have our own numbers” leadership.

Sheinbaum vs. Ebrard

The Morena frontrunners’ national favorability ratings have recovered since the Mexico City metro collapse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
<th>Metro Collapse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>Claudia Sheinbaum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Marcelo Ebrard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Sheinbaum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Ebrard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sheinbaum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In support of her position, Sheinbaum noted that the president had banned fracking despite Mexico’s continued dependence on natural gas. She also claimed that climate gains from wind projects in Oaxaca — one of Mexico’s poorest states and home to some of the most significant wind energy potential in the world — had come “at a cost to local communities.”

Despite her ideological alignment with López Obrador’s political project, some observers believe a Sheinbaum presidency would look more like her technocratic, data-driven city administration than her own, “for the good of everyone, first the poor.”

A technocrat at heart?

It is in this context that Sheinbaum’s view of the 2013 reform, and the continued efforts to unravel it, can be understood. In a speech in March 2021 commemorating the Cárdenas expropriation, Sheinbaum said she was “convinced” that López Obrador’s energy policy would strengthen Mexican sovereignty and “reduce environmental impact including, yes, mitigating climate change.”

When not in government, Sheinbaum’s academic pursuits have married energy sustainability with the stated goals of both her and López Obrador’s political agendas: reducing inequality or, in administration parlance, “for the good of everyone, first the poor.” Sheinbaum’s doctoral thesis on residential energy use, part of which she researched under the presidency of Calderón, begins, “Sustainability? Ask the indigenous people of Chiapas.” — an apparent reproach of the top-down imposition of energy policies on marginalized communities.

“Sheinbaum without any doubt has a clear ideological compass: She’s of the left and a lupaobra-dorista,” said Genaro Lozano, a political analyst and professor at Universidad Iberoamericana. But, he said, “She’s more pragmatic than she seems.”
In certain Brazilian circles, the rewriting of history has already begun: Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 election victory was an aberration, an accident, the product of a now-discredited corruption investigation that unfairly put the rightful winner, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in jail. Now free, Lula is leading Bolsonaro in polls for this October’s election by 10–20 points or more. As the thinking goes, the fever of the last four years will soon break, and Brazil will return to its normal left-of-center point of equilibrium.

Richard Lapper’s book *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* is a powerful counterargument, full of richly reported stories and data showing the country’s conservative movement is here to stay, even if its now profoundly unpopular leader ends up being shoved aside. The book’s title refers to the bloc of legislators in Congress representing, respectively, Brazil’s agribusiness, evangelical Christians and gun lobbies—all of which have enormously expanded their numbers and influence in the past 30 years. Even for specialists, some of the details here are eye-popping.

Lapper starts with a fresh look back at what conservatives originally rebelled against—the Brazil left behind by 14 years of Workers’ Party (PT) rule. The problems of that era are well-known: The worst recession in Brazil’s history, endemic graft, and a years-long rise in crime that, by 2016, made 68% of Brazilians say in polls they almost constantly feared becoming a victim of violence, more than double the percentage of Mexicans who said the same. Meanwhile, the Brazilian state expanded to reach a bloated 38% of GDP, much larger than peers like Mexico (28%) and Chile (25%) and even bigger than China (34%) and Russia (33%), crowding out the private sector and acting as a clear brake on long-term economic growth.

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### Nonfiction

*Beef, Bible and Bullets raises the question: Will Bolsonarismo survive Bolsonaro?*

Reviewed by Brian Winter
All this explains the “liberal-conservative” alliance of business leaders, gun-toting anti-crime types and social conservatives that began to take shape even before Bolsonaro’s election. The growth of the evangelical community, from 6% of Brazil’s population in 1960 to an estimated 35% today, has radically and perhaps permanently changed what Brazilians want from their politicians. One of the best passages of the book involves a group of preachers in a favela in Uberlândia, in Minas Gerais state, who had repeatedly voted PT prior to 2018. But the party’s emphasis on gender and LGBTQ rights alienated many. One plaintively told Lapper: “God showed me that I should vote for Bolsonaro.”

The truth of course is that Bolsonaro has delivered, at best, mixed results to these constituents. Homosexuals have gained a greater voice on issues like adoption, but there are two examples that suggest otherwise. The first is his idol Donald Trump, who, against all odds, now looks well-positioned to return in 2024. The other is Lula, whose rise from the ashes reminds us that Brazilian politicians, from Getúlio Vargas to Fernando Collor and José Sarney, very often get a second (or third, or fifth) chance at glory. Even if he loses, both Bolsonaro and bolsonarismo may be here to stay.

It’s this “look back” that provides the narrative structure of Vásquez’s phenomenal novel. Volver la vista atrás immerses the reader in the lives of three generations of Cabreras, real people whose stories Vásquez remakes into fiction. As the crushing weight of the 20th century’s political violence falls on their private, intimate lives, the paths they will never set foot on again remain indelible in their memories.

Threatened by Nationalist rebels under General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War, Sergio Cabrera’s grandfather flees with his family to the Dominican Republic. But there, another ferocious dictatorship looms: that of the merciless Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. They flee again, spending brief periods on the Haitian border and ending up in Colombia in 1945. There, Sergio’s father Fausto hears for the first time about the Communist Party, the guerrillas of the Eastern Plains and the revolution that was about to kickstart 50 years of bloodshed.

Struggles between right and left in Colombia mirror the unstable political landscape of Spain before the Civil War. “You’re not old enough to remember,” Sergio’s uncle Felipe tells him, “But that’s how it was. That’s exactly how it was.” As Fausto commits himself to the life of a revolutionary, young Sergio and his sister Marianella are caught up in a swirl of communist fervor that takes the family to Miaoist China.

Abandoned by his parents, who return to Colombia to join the struggle there, Sergio grows up amid the ferment of the Cultural Revolution. Forced to follow his father’s commands to prepare for the revolution, he joins the Red Army. At 19, finally returning to Colombia backed by violent repression and far-left insurgency, Sergio becomes a guerrilla fighter in the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). In the jungle, he must survive punishing marches, hunger and disease before he can earn the chance to get away — and become the distinguished filmmaker he is at the book’s outset.

Vásquez’s novel is an indelible portrait of the extremes of conviction, a deep probe into the mysterious origins of the fanaticism to which we are all susceptible. Why write a novel about a real-life person, and not a biography? The author’s own words best describe his reasons for navigating the murky waters between fact and fiction. Upon receiving the Mario Vargas Llosa 2021 Biennial Novel Prize, Vásquez thanked Sergio and Marianella Cabrera, not only his subjects but his personal friends, “for the trust with which they placed in my hands their memories, their documents, their lives, so that I could reimagine them through the novel, [the form] we humankind beings have invented to narrate the world.”

Del Valle is a lawyer and writer based in Berlin.

Volver la vista atrás intertwines memory and political violence in this fictionalized portrait of a real-life guerrilla turned filmmaker.

By Fernanda Melchor

Fiction

Volver la vista atrás

by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Paperback

416 pages

Reviewed by Oscar del Valle

J u a n G a b r i e l V á s q u e z’s l a s t e s t n o v e l b e g i n s i n n o c u i l l y e n o u g h: Sergio Cabrera, a Colombian filmmaker, is being honored in Barcelona with a retrospective of his career. He’s also having a family reunion. Seeing his wife and his two children for the first time in a while, he’s hoping for a second chance. Maybe, he thinks, his life could resume its normal course. Then, an unexpected phone call brings the news that his father has died.

Cabrera finds himself undergoing a more personal kind of retrospective, reckoning with his relationship with family and the influence of a radical left-wing father. The book’s title, which translates literally as “look back,” is borrowed from a poem, “Caminante,” by Spanish modernist Antonio Machado, which describes life as walking down a path whose steps we can never retrace.

Abandoned by his parents, who return to Colombia to join the struggle there, Sergio grows up amid the ferment of the Cultural Revolution. Forced to follow his father’s commands to prepare for the revolution, he joins the Red Army. At 19, finally returning to Colombia backed by violent repression and far-left insurgency, Sergio becomes a guerrilla fighter in the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). In the jungle, he must survive punishing marches, hunger and disease before he can earn the chance to get away — and become the distinguished filmmaker he is at the book’s outset.

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Volver la vista atrás

by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Alfaguara

Paperback

416 pages

Review

The Revenge of Power

By Moisés Naím

February 22, 2022

Macmillan

Hardcover, 320 pages

Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World

By Jeremy Friedman

January 4, 2022

Harvard University Press

Hardcover, 368 pages

FICTION

Moldy Strawberries

By Caio Fernando Abreu

April 5, 2022

Archipelago

Paperback, 200 pages

Paradises

By Fernanda Melchor

March 2022

New Directions

Cloth, 128 pages

NONFICTION
Film

Drama
A Swedish–Costa Rican director traces the tension between religious dogma and female desire.

Reviewed by Ena Alvarado

When asked if she believes in the Virgin Mary, Clara, the protagonist in Nathalie Álvarez Mesén’s debut feature, Clara Sola, responds flatly: “I can do whatever I feel like.” Though she seems self-assured, her words reflect aspiration more than reality. After all, Clara is a 40-year-old woman tightly controlled by those around her, with little to no say over her own movements, health, or even clothes. Her is a constricted life, and Álvarez Mesén’s intimate film reveals what becomes of it when these decades-old community bonds come undone.

In the rural Costa Rican village where Clara lives, everybody knows she’s a healer. Because she can perform miracles, her family and neighbors believe she can communicate with the Virgin Mary. At her mother’s behest, Clara entertains visitors — sick people eager to heal — and presides over communal prayers at home. The work of a saint is a full-time job. When she gets time off, we almost always see her alone, wandering in the rain forest. Nature is where Clara feels most at ease. So it comes as no surprise that after years of quiet endurance, her small acts of rebellion materialize with the help of animals, trees, water and dirt.

Shortly before a mass, for example, Clara decides to lie on the muddy ground. When she goes on to greet fellow churchgoers in her sullied white dress, her mother is incensed. “The Virgin told me to do it,” she offers as an excuse. A few days later, learning that her white mare, Yuca, might be sold, she releases her by a river. The family spends hours trying to find the horse, but their search is in vain. Yuca stays free. Clara’s revolts lead her closer to nature, and perhaps most importantly, they enable release. This liberating process is best exemplified by the most persistent and powerful urge that Clara works to actualize: the full expression of her sexuality.

The clash between sexual desire and freedom is at the heart of Clara Sola, and in this sense, Álvarez Mesén’s film addresses an age-old Christian conflict. Clara is often turned on, especially by the telenovelas she watches with her family, yet whenever she begins to masturbate, she is chastised and forced to rub her fingers in red chili peppers. In line with the prevailing view in Clara’s village, her mother calls her “vile” and “disgusting” whenever she gives way to these unauthorized sexual feelings. More than anybody else, Clara must aspire to emulate the Virgin, that “New Eve” who remedied primeval woman’s original sin.

The traditional Catholic notion of sex as tainted derives from Saint Augustine’s reading of the Book of Genesis. For Augustine, concupiscence, or libido, split from the human will when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Until that moment, as the literary historian Stephen Greenblatt has argued in The New Yorker, Augustine believed humans were perfectly free, for the only period in their entire history. Afterward, “because they had spontaneously, inexplicably, and proudly chosen to live not for God but for themselves, they had lost their freedom.” Clara turns this cause and effect inside out. For her, lust strengthens freedom, not the other way around. Through an exploration of her sexuality, she gains the ability to assert her individuality, and this newfound autonomy inaugurates a return to nature that is not inscribed in Christian terms. Clara Sola’s invocation could not be clearer: Reentry to paradise does not require a purification of our desires. It demands an embrace of them.

Alvarado is a writer and former assistant editor at The Atlantic
**Music**

**AQ’s Winter Playlist**
A pyrotechnic Brazilian pianist and a Mexican “witch” turn tradition inside out.

*by Sebastián Zubieta*

**Brazilian composer and pianist André Mehmari** is in high demand. Recent projects include music for film and television, the opening of the 2016 Rio Olympics, and for the ossetf, Brazil’s leading orchestra. He has performed all over the world (including at the Americas Society in New York in 2013), and is also a prolific recording artist.

Mehmari’s piano albums are often virtuosic, drawing equally from jazz, Brazilian styles, and classical music. His latest release, *Notturno 20>21*, veers towards reflexive serenity, but with smatterings of his characteristic fireworks. Alongside eight of Mehmari’s original compositions and one by Brazilian composer Hèrmesco Pascoal, the album features eight classical pieces written from the 17th to the 19th centuries that the pianist uses as starting points for improvisation, in the way that a jazz musician approaches a “standard.”

It’s a new spin on a longstanding tradition: Musicians in Europe and the Americas have been improvising on previously composed pieces for centuries. Church authorities during the Baroque period, for example, complained repeatedly about singers’ penchant for ornamenting their songs too much, rendering them unrecognizable.

In that sense, Mehmari’s approach on this record resembles that of his predecessors. Tarquinio Merula’s 1638 love song “Folle è ben che si crede” declares, “Only a fool can believe that vain flattery will turn me away from my true love.” Mehmari’s version keeps the original harmonies (with a few twists) and builds a delicate melodic filigree over the 17th-century original that manages to keep the song recognizable throughout. *Notturno 20>21* was recorded during the pandemic in Mehmari’s studio in the Serra da Cantareira, just north of São Paulo. According to the pianist, the album reflects his state of mind. “Music has the power to save us, it grounds us so that we can find our true bearings and forces us to reflect on our lives.”

**Mexican artist La bruja de Texcoco** released her debut album in 2019 and a handful of singles since the beginning of the pandemic, including “Chéni” (“fear” in the indigenous Purépecha language) and a cover of Cornelio Reyna’s mariachi classic “Carta invisible.”

La Bruja de Texcoco also has a fascinating origin story, as she revealed in a profile published on the Bandcamp music site. Violinist Octavio Mendoza Anario was playing at a party when a woman fell ill. A healer in attendance urged her to help. Mendoza, replying that her only magic was music, performed the Catholic anthem “El Pescador”—and the woman recovered.

When the healer prodded her to identify herself to the devil she had just expelled, she declared, “I am the Witch of Texcoco!” Thus did Octavio become La Bruja de Texcoco. As colorful as this story is, her music, on the cutting edge of the *son* tradition, is even more remarkable. Her harp playing and expressive voice anchor her songs firmly in the *son* tradition, but the arrangements expand the music in unexpected and evocative directions. In just under four minutes, “Chéni” delivers a message of freedom and empowerment traveling from a seemingly standard *son* introduction of dreamy harp chords, through verses in a Pan-American dance beat reaching through to an extended instrumental section that sounds like a mariachi party, with violins, and trumpets, but also incorporating *concheras* (a traditional guitar built on armadillo shells not found frequently in mariachi bands)—all capped off by an ending that any party band could play.

Her version of “Carta invisible,” released in a compilation in honor of songwriter Reyna’s 80th birthday, created in collaboration with Mexico City-based producer Demián Galvez, adds dance inflections to this classic road trip song, along with harp effects and an unsettling ostinato that resonates with the disconcerting message of the song: Why would anyone send a love letter written in invisible ink? La Bruja de Texcoco is a remarkable trans artist who has been fighting stereotypes in the world of traditional Mexican music for years.

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Notturno 20>21
André Mehmari
Estudio Monteverdi
Brazil

Chéni,
Carta invisible
La Bruja de Texcoco
Self-released
Mexico

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Music is director of the music program at the Americas Society
26TH BRAVO BUSINESS AWARDS
On Friday, November 12, the BRAVO Business Awards featured an exclusive dinner at the Perez Art Museum Miami: Chobani’s Hamdi Ulukaya, Grupo Bancolombia’s Juan Carlos Mora, and Medina Capital’s Manuel D. Medina.

2021 COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS CEO ROUNDTABLE & SYMPOSIUM VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
On Friday, November 12, Council of the Americas hosted a private CEO Roundtable in Miami focused on Sustainability Imperatives for Business. Top speakers included Rodrigo Kote Lima from Microsoft, Juan Carlos Mora from Grupo Bancolombia, Felipe Bayón from Ecopetrol, Erika Herrera from Belcorp and Fernando Iraola from Bank of America. Following the CEO Roundtable, COA also hosted a virtual conference anchored by two BRAVO Leadership Conversations featuring Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami & Manuel D. Medina from Medina Capital, and Cristina Palmaka from SAP & Blanca Treviño from Softtek.

2021 COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS SYMPOSIUM & BRAVO VIRTUAL SERIES
Starting July 2020, Council of the Americas’ BRAVO Leadership Forums became virtual. During this time, COA hosted a select group of global business leaders in BRAVO Leadership Conversations and dynamic COA Symposium panel discussions to address the most relevant topics impacting business in the Americas, including ESG, sustainability, the future of work, tech for good, digital transformation, fintech, and leadership. The Symposium culminated with two BRAVO Leadership Conversations recorded in person in Miami on November 12 featuring Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami & Manuel D. Medina from Medina Capital, and Cristina Palmaka from SAP & Blanca Treviño from Softtek.
LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

Slow to moderate GDP growth is projected for most of the region in 2022. However, high inflation and the impact of a 30% spike in hunger levels from 2019 to 2020 point to prolonged suffering for many.

### GDP GROWTH

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>Chile</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
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<td>4.8%</td>
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<td>2.8%</td>
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### HUNGER LEVELS

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<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
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<td>27.4%</td>
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### PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATING

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<th>Country</th>
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<td>Argentina</td>
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<td>Brazil</td>
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<td>Peru</td>
<td>Nicolás Maduro</td>
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</table>

Sources: GDP growth forecasts, inflation rate; Bloomberg (January). Unemployment rate, government deficit as percentage of GDP: Bloomberg (December). Fiscal response as percentage of 2020 GDP: 30% International Monetary Fund (October). Hunger levels: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (November). Undernourishment is defined as the condition of an individual whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide, on average, the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active and healthy life. Note: Figures rounded to one decimal place.

Presidential Approval: Argentina, Management & Fit (December); Brazil, PoderData (December); Chile, Plataforma Cádiz (December); Colombia, Invermedia (December); Dominican Republic and Guatemala, Consulta Móvil (October); Ecuador, Perfiles de Ópina (November); Mexico, El Financiero (December); Peru, Ipsos (December). Note: Figures rounded to the nearest percentage.

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