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Great Transformations but no Critical Junctures? Latin America in the Twenty-First Century

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The theme of the 2016 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association was a call for us to think about “Great Transformations,” so this is a very good time to revisit Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier’s masterwork on critical junctures and their aftermath.¹ There is no doubt that during the past thirty years, Latin America has experienced “great transformations.” The debt crisis and neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s arguably constituted a new critical juncture. But Latin American political life has been shaken in the twenty-first century as well by a succession of new global shocks: the Great Recession; the rise (and decline) of China as a *demandeur* of Latin American exports and a source of investment; and the challenges to global democracy posed by the profound tremors in the European Union and the dysfunction of democratic politics in the United States.

What are the implications of these shocks for understanding change in Latin America? Do they constitute new critical junctures? In addressing this question, it is important to note the Colliers’ words of caution at the very end of their book.² They observe that the global shock of the Great Depression did less to reshape the political arena than is commonly thought. The critical junctures that *they* identify—the challenges to oligarchical domination and the incorporation of labor organizations into the political system—were a product of domestic conflicts that came at widely different points in time.

One lesson to draw about the current period is that not all crises—whether international or domestic—necessarily constitute critical junctures. The turmoil that we are now experiencing in the international system may have profound effects on longer-term patterns of democracy, representation, or popular sector incorporation in some countries and relatively little in others. Moreover, these differences may have less to do with contingent choices at the moment of crisis than with differences in the relative weight of key structural factors and “antecedent conditions.”

Let me add a few other points of caution.

First, it is important to distinguish between a “micro” focus on a specific institution or set of institutions and “macro” focus on broader systemic changes. Paul David’s classic essay on the QWERTY keyboard illustrates the first of these.³

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¹ Collier and Collier 1991.

² Collier and Collier 1991, 772-774.

³ David 1985.

On the other hand, the landmark works in the more macro comparative historical tradition—including Collier and Collier⁴—deal with a much wider range of causal variables and, as a consequence, face much greater challenges in untangling the impact of antecedent conditions from the consequences of choices made in allegedly less constrained circumstances.

Demonstrating the contingency of actions is central to the identification of critical junctures and crucial to assessing their causal significance. Comparing cases that respond differently to analytically similar challenges is a partial solution to this challenge. This is what the Colliers do, and Kenneth Roberts’ book on changing party systems in Latin America is also an excellent example.⁵ Each of these works identifies breaks with “antecedent conditions” that appear to generate quite different cross-national paths of institutional change.

But I do not think that comparisons of this sort fully elide the need for counter-factual thinking about what might have happened if the actors in the critical juncture had made different “choices.” As Jack Levy points out, counter-factual analysis is most useful when it adheres to a “minimal rewrite rule”—that is, when it focuses on the effects of small and easily imaginable changes from the real world and on sequences of theoretically plausible short-term responses.⁶ Perhaps we can usefully speculate, for example, about how a failure of the attempted assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand might have affected the actions of competing countries and the prospects of a European War. But it is far more difficult to pose such questions about critical junctures that are defined in terms of the intersecting behaviors of multiple actors in different political arenas. How much weight do you attach to contingent choices of the actors in the “moment” of change, and how much to antecedent factors, at least some of which cannot be fully identified?

Finally, critical juncture analysis gains its greatest leverage when it can look backward, as well as forward. Critical junctures, as Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen argue, should provide “temporal leverage”—that is, the duration of the impact should be substantially longer than the critical juncture itself.⁷ Collier and Collier’s analysis meets this criterion.⁸ The incorporation periods that they identify stretch over one or two decades during the first half of the 20th century, but the resulting aftermath stretched until at least the 1980s.

But this is not always the case. Even when contingent decisions seem important in the short-term, they may not have a causal impact on longer-term developments. In hindsight, for example, there is not much evidence for the once widely-held view that pact-making in democratic transitions would affect the future stability of new democratic regimes. Similarly, in attempting to make sense of the still unfolding and highly confusing changes of the 21st century, we cannot be sure if they will be enduring, if they will be altered by new shocks, or

⁴ Collier and Collier 1991.

⁵ Roberts 2014.

⁶ Levy 2015.

⁷ Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 360-363.

⁸ Collier and Collier 1991.

even if political and institutional arrangements might return to an older equilibrium.

So, what are the alternatives in dealing with all the explosive changes going on around us?

One option is to scale back to a more “micro” approach instead of focusing on broad socio-political change: concentrating, for example, on relatively limited institutional arenas such as legislatures or judicial and criminal justice systems, or on specific policies such as those related to pensions, health, or education. Even taking into account the possibility of spillover effects, a critical juncture with respect to one institution may not constitute a fundamental change in others. This opens up a variety of questions and analytical opportunities. Some institutions—for example, party systems—may have reached a new equilibrium, while new cleavages and modes of incorporation may still be emerging around gender, ethnic identities, or regional differences.

We may also get considerable leverage focusing on the “mechanisms of reproduction”⁹ that might cause some institutions and behaviors to change only incrementally, despite the shocks and turmoil of the 21st century. Roberts’ analysis of changes in Latin American party systems during the 1980s and 1990s, for example, provides a bookend for the Colliers’ analysis.¹⁰ But it remains to be seen if the new alignments that he identifies will persist beyond the first 10 or 15 years of the 21st century. We can begin to gain traction here by examining incentives of political actors to persist or change course.

Attention to incremental forms of political change may also be relevant to other major aspects of contemporary political systems. “Layering and conversion”—“the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones” and “the changed enactment of existing rules due to their strategic re-deployment,” respectively¹¹—seem to provide important tools for understanding why some democracies in Latin America—as well as in the EU and Turkey—have slid backward toward competitive authoritarian regimes. Perverse incrementalism may also be useful for understanding the increasing dysfunctions of democracy in the United States.

Finally, it is important to recognize that in many important respects we may be living in an era of long-term disequilibrium, where old behaviors have changed, but no stable new patterns have emerged. I believe this is what we are currently witnessing in the international system and, at least to some extent, in Latin America as well. Ruth and David Collier, as well as Kenneth Roberts, identified a new equilibrium (incorporation of labor, party realignment) which marked the end of a critical juncture and the onset of an “aftermath” period. As of now, however, it is difficult to conceptualize similar “end points” for current struggles—whether in the international system, among various groups seeking access to the political system, or over even broader issues of economic development and democracy. Our approach to such issues calls for some humil-

ity: an empirical mapping of changes and continuities within and across countries, an identification of the relevant actors, and an analysis of actors’ goals, resources, and political incentives.

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⁹ Collier and Collier 1991, 30-31.

¹⁰ Roberts 2014; Collier and Collier 1991.

¹¹ Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 15-16; Streeck and Thelen 2005, 18-29.