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Lessons from the Monetary and Fiscal History of Latin America

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ABSTRACT

Studying the modern economic histories of the ten largest countries in South America and Mexico teaches us the lack of fiscal discipline has been at the root of most of the region's macroeconomic instability. The lack of fiscal discipline, however, takes various forms not measured in the primary deficit. Especially important have been implicit or explicit guarantees to the banking system, denomination of the debt in US dollars and short maturity of the debt, and especially large transfers to the private sector, especially in times of crisis that are not part of the budget approved the national congresses. Comparing the histories of our eleven countries side by side, we see that, rather than leading to an economic contraction, in general fiscal stabilization leads to growth and that rising commodity prices are no guarantee of economic growth nor are falling commodity prices a guarantee of economic contraction.

Keywords: Monetary policy, Fiscal policy, Debt crisis, Banking crisis, Off-the budget transfers

JEL Codes: E52, E63, H63, N16.

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1. Introduction

When we started this project in 2012, our hypothesis was that the inability, or unwillingness, of governments to limit their spending to their own ability to raise tax revenues has been the driving force behind the macroeconomic instability that prevailed in Latin America during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In 2019, at the end of the road, after overseeing the application of our common framework to the recent macroeconomic history of our group of eleven countries, we conclude that our hypothesis is, in general, correct.

To make this point in a more precise way: currently in the region there is one dramatic case of a country that has not learned that lack of fiscal discipline leads to bad economic outcomes, Venezuela, and three problematic cases, Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil. The problems in each of these four countries reinforce our conclusion that our hypothesis is correct in the sense that the underlying cause of the problems is lack of fiscal discipline.

- The virulent economic crisis that has led to hyperinflation, economic misery, and political chaos in Venezuela that unravels as we write these concluding lines started when the government did nothing to rein in spending in spite of a sharp fall in oil revenues.

- During 2018, Argentina went through a recession that followed a run on its currency and a dramatic increase in country risk that led the country to ask for IMF support, a very unpopular measure. The fiscal deficit in Argentina, which had been either negative or small until 2010, started to grow at that point. The principal condition on the IMF assistance was that Argentina rapidly reduced its deficit.

- Brazil, a country that was considered one of the giants of the emerging world a decade ago, is agonizing over a high deficit that has persisted for several years. The probability of the new government succeeding depends, to a large extent, on its ability to tame the fiscal deficit.

- Bolivia is less problematic than Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Nonetheless, the increase in external debt caused by increasing deficits since 2012, coupled with a loss of foreign reserves

due to a de facto fixed exchange rate, are reminiscent of policy mistakes in the 1970s that led to the debt crisis and hyperinflation.

Thus, the current state of affairs in the region suggest that the main lesson of the last decades has not been learned by some of the countries. The amount of pain and misery imposed on the people of Venezuela and the uncertainty faced by Argentineans and Brazilians has a feeling of deja-vu about it that, as opposed to hurricanes and earthquakes, seems self-inflicted.

This is not a statement regarding left versus right, regarding more government or less government, or regarding more or less redistributive policies. To be precise, the key variable in our main hypothesis is not the size of government. What matters is not how much the government spends, rather what matters is the difference between how much the government spends compared to how much it raises in revenues. Norway provides an example that clarifies this distinction: the government of Norway spends more than any Latin-American government as a fraction of total output. The government of Norway raises even more revenues, however, to the point that it owns assets that are worth more than twice the GDP of the country. No fiscal clouds appear on the horizon of Norwegians.

The cross-country analysis in this volume makes clear that those countries with large and sustained deficits ended up having substantially more macroeconomic instability than the countries that did not. For instance, Chile and Argentina ran large deficits in the first half of the 1970s, compared, for example, to Paraguay and Peru, and therefore faced much more macroeconomic instability during that decade. Chile made structural changes to its fiscal policy following its debt crisis in the early 1980s while Argentina did not. Sure enough, while Chile managed to have very stable macroeconomic indicators, the 1980s were a sequence of crises for Argentina. Eventually, in the 1990s, Argentina did make a structural change on its deficit and managed to stabilize the economy until the end of the decade.

Paraguay and Peru, as mentioned above, had relatively conservative fiscal policies in the 1970s. As a consequence, macroeconomic instability was relatively low. For example, inflation in Paraguay was, on average, 11 percent per year while in Peru it was 26 percent per year. While

Paraguay maintained fiscal discipline, Peru started spending beyond its means during the 1980s, a process that led to hyperinflation.

The lesson seems to have been learned in most of the region. It is worth mentioning an interesting anecdote from Paraguay, which we learned when we visited Asuncion, its capital, for the local workshop. The government, at the time managed by a center-right party, prepared and eventually launched its first issue of bonds into the market. Before that, all government debt had been with international organizations or foreign governments. The fiercest opposition to the executive branch were the congresspersons from the left parties, worried that the possibility of issuing bonds would induce a spiral of overspending, as it had happened in too many of the countries in the region.

The histories told in these chapters, while reinforcing our hypothesis that lack of fiscal discipline has been responsible for much of poor economic performance in Latin America, also provide interesting examples of other ways that economic policies can lead to poor economic outcomes. In particular, some crises occur even without large government deficits. Lack of fiscal discipline is sufficient for generating crises, but not necessary. These exceptions allow us to draw some useful lessons.

In the next section, we use the budget accounting framework developed by Kehoe, Nicolini, and Sargent (2019) to provide a narrative about the policy mistakes in Mexico that led to its great depression in the 1980s. The Mexican crisis that erupted in 1982 was a perfect storm of lack of fiscal discipline combined with the external shocks of falling oil prices and rising international interest rates and a series of devaluations that sharply increased the value of dollar-denominated public and private debt. The crisis simultaneously involved a default on sovereign debt and a domestic banking crisis, which resulted in the Mexican government taking control of banking system and paying for some of the banks' losses by reducing the value of dollar denominated deposits with a system of multiple exchange rates. We study the Mexico's 1982 crisis because these elements were repeated over time and across countries in Latin America. In section 3, we discuss the role of banking crises in the poor economic performance of the region. In section 4, we discuss how denominating sovereign debt in dollars left Latin American vulnerable to debt

crises. In section 5, we argue that debt crises, banking crises, increased inflation, and multiple exchange rates gave agents incentives to engage in rent seeking that resulted in large transfers from some private agents to others, mostly transfers from the middle class to the elites.

2. Budget accounting for Mexico in the 1980s

In August 1982, Mexico defaulted on payments on its dollar-denominated foreign debt. This led to Mexico being excluded from international financial markets until it was able to renegotiate this debt under the Brady Plan in 1989. Kehoe and Prescott (2007) classify the period 1982–1995 in Mexico as being a great depression.

We use our budget accounting to develop a narrative for the role of monetary and fiscal policy in Mexico during its 1982 debt crisis. The budget accounting provides guidance for our narrative and suggests that factors besides lack of fiscal discipline played important roles in causing the crisis and in delaying the subsequent recovery.

Kehoe, Nicolini, and Sargent (2019) develop the budget accounting framework used in the chapters in this book starting with the government budget constraint

$$B_t + B_t^* E_t + M_t = P_t(D_t + X_t) + B_{t-1}(1 + r_{t-1}) + B_{t-1}^*(1 + r_{t-1}^*)E_t + M_{t-1}.$$

On the left-hand side of this equation, B_t is the stock of peso-denominated domestic debt; B_t^* is the stock of dollar-denominated foreign debt; E_t is the pesos-per-dollar nominal exchange rate; and M_t is the stock of high-powered money. On the right-hand side, $D_t + X_t$ is the total primary deficit of the government, where D_t is the deficit as is recorded in the national budget, X_t is a residual term that makes the budget constraint hold, and P_t is the domestic price level in the form of the GDP deflator; $B_{t-1}(1 + r_{t-1})$ is the value of domestic debt and debt service requirements inherited from the previous year; and $B_{t-1}^*(1 + r_{t-1}^*)E_t$ is the corresponding term for foreign debt. A series of simple algebraic steps transforms the budget constraint into our budget accounting equation. We start by dividing each term through by the value of nominal GDP in year t, $P_t Y_t$:

$$\frac{B_t}{P_tY_t}+\left(\frac{E_tP_t^*}{P_t}\right)\frac{B_t^*/P_t^*}{Y_t}+\frac{M_t}{P_tY_t}$$
$$=\frac{P_t(D_t+X_t)}{P_tY_t}+\left(\frac{P_{t-1}Y_{t-1}}{P_tY_t}\right)\frac{B_{t-1}(1+r_{t-1})}{P_{t-1}Y_{t-1}}+\left(\frac{E_tP_t^*}{P_t}\right)\left(\frac{P_{t-1}^*Y_{t-1}}{P_t^*Y_t}\right)\frac{B_{t-1}^*(1+r_{t-1}^*)/P_{t-1}^*}{Y_{t-1}}+\frac{P_{t-1}Y_{t-1}}{P_tY_t}\frac{M_{t-1}}{P_{t-1}Y_{t-1}}$$

where P_t^* is the US price level. We redefine terms as fractions of GDP:

$$\theta_t=\frac{B_t}{P_tY_t},\ \theta_t^*=\frac{B_t^*/P_t^*}{Y_t},\ m_t=\frac{M_t}{P_tY_t},\ d_t=\frac{D_t}{P_tY_t}\ x_t=\frac{X_t}{P_tY_t}.$$

We let

$$\xi_t=\left(\frac{E_tP_t^*}{P_t}\right),\ g_t=\frac{Y_t}{Y_{t-1}},\ \pi_t=\frac{P_t}{P_{t-1}},\ \pi_t^*=\frac{P_t^*}{P_{t-1}^*}$$

be the peso-dollar real exchange rate, the domestic growth factor, the domestic inflation factor, and the US inflation factor, respectively. Notice that θ_t^* is defined so that

$$\xi_t\theta_t^*=\left(\frac{E_tP_t^*}{P_t}\right)\left(\frac{B_t^*/P_t^*}{Y_t}\right)=\frac{E_tB_t^*}{P_tY_t}$$

is the value of foreign debt as a fraction of GDP. Subtracting some terms from both side of the budget constraint, we obtain our budget accounting equation:

$$(\theta_t-\theta_{t-1})+\xi_t(\theta_t^*-\theta_{t-1}^*)+(m_t-m_{t-1})+\left(1-\frac{1}{g_t\pi_t}\right)m_{t-1}$$
$$=d_t+\left(\frac{(1+r_{t-1})}{g_t\pi_t}-1\right)\theta_{t-1}+\xi_t\left(\frac{(1+r_{t-1}^*)}{g_t\pi_t^*}-1\right)\theta_{t-1}^*+x_t.$$

In our discussion of the terms of this budget accounting equation, we will focus much attention on the term x_t, which we have identified as a residual. We will often refer to it as a transfer because it includes losses of public enterprises and government-operated development banks that are ignored, or poorly accounted for, in the budget, or implicit transfers to private agents who benefit from increases in inflation or from systems of multiple exchange rates.

Table 1 presents this accounting for 1982 in Mexico as well as the three years before the crisis and the three years after. The numbers are flows, or changes in stocks, as a percent of GDP, which we refer to as percentage points (pp).

Table 1.

Budget accounting for Mexico, 1979–1985

	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Sources							
Domestic debt issuance	0.52	-5.13	2.51	7.11	1.10	-1.59	-1.24
Foreign debt issuance	-1.21	-0.60	6.38	6.05	-5.82	2.95	7.79
Money issuance	0.42	0.18	0.89	2.94	-2.33	-1.01	-4.26
Seigniorage	3.48	4.25	4.12	6.10	8.47	6.58	6.03
Total	3.21	-1.29	13.90	22.20	1.42	6.94	8.32
Obligations							
Primary deficit	7.10	2.86	7.61	3.37	-4.62	-5.21	-3.49
Domestic debt service	-3.14	-1.88	0.23	3.85	-0.33	0.47	0.87
Foreign debt service	-3.03	-1.40	-0.29	1.39	4.15	1.20	1.09
Transfer	2.28	-0.87	6.35	13.59	2.23	10.47	9.85
Total	3.21	-1.29	13.90	22.20	1.42	6.94	8.32

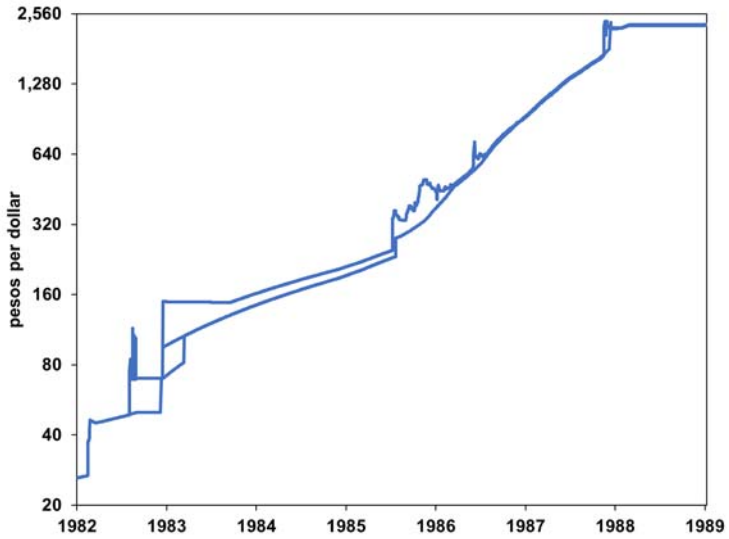
We see in table 1 that the Mexican government ran large primary deficits up until 1982 and subsequently ran primary surpluses. Notice that in 1981, the primary deficit was 7.61 pp. One narrative that we could tell is that the 1982 debt crisis was the result of lack of fiscal discipline. Although there would be some validity to this narrative, it would leave out other factors that could have caused the crisis even if there had been fiscal discipline. As we have explained, the crisis in 1982 in Mexico was a perfect storm of lack of fiscal discipline combined with external shocks and a series of devaluations that sharply increased the value of dollar-denominated public and private debt. The increase in the value of private debt led to a banking crisis, and the Mexican government nationalized the banks and assumed their debts. The Mexican government resorted to increasing inflation and imposing multiple exchange rates, which led to large transfers to some economic agents at the expense of others and distorted incentives, thereby prolonging the crisis. We see evidence to support this perfect storm narrative in table 1 in the large values of transfers starting in 1981, in the foreign debt service terms that become positive starting in 1982, and in

the increasing importance of seigniorage starting in 1982. We discuss each of these patterns in the data in table 1 in turn, although they are all related.

Although the Mexican government's primary budget deficits were large in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is worth putting these numbers in some perspective. Between 2009 and 2014, the Spanish government ran primary deficits that averaged 8.8 percent of GDP per year and Spain's government debt went from 39.5 percent of GDP in 2008 to 100.4 percent in 2014. The period 2011–2013 was one of crisis for Spain, but nowhere near as severe as that Mexico's crisis of the early 1980s

Notice that the transfers during 1981–1985 were much larger on average than were the primary deficits during 1979–1982. Transfers not included in the government's budget of expenditures and receipts increased the government's need to borrow more than did the primary deficits. Parts of these transfers are easy to identify. Some of the 13.59 pp transfer in 1982 was the cost of nationalizing the failing banks. Other parts of the transfers are harder to identify, but we can hypothesize about them.

Figure 1. Mexico: MXP-USD nominal exchange rates



Some of the transfers were the result of multiple exchange rates imposed by the Mexican government starting in August 1982 and continuing through November 1991. Figure 1 presents data on the exchange rates. In figure 1, we notice that there were three exchange rates during

some of August 1982 and from December 1982 through March 1983. The system of three exchange rates officially continued through August 1985, but the two lower rates, the special rate and the controlled rate were virtually identical after March 1983 and were lower than the free rate. During most of December 1982, the free rate was more than 100 percent higher than the special rate (Banco de México (2009)). The Mexican government forced exporters in the maquiladora sector (in-bond manufacturers who purchased intermediate inputs for processing and re-export) to do all transactions on imports and subsequent re-exports at the controlled rate, rather than the higher free rate official rate; this was an implicit tax on their net exports (Gómez-Palacio 1984). The government also allowed some importers to buy dollars at the controlled rate; this was an implicit subsidy on their imports. We do not have data on these taxes and subsidies, so they end up in the transfer. If we redo the budget accounting using the controlled exchange rate rather than the free exchange rate, we find the transfer declines from 13.59 pp to 12.06 pp in 1982, giving us a very rough estimate of 1.53 pp as the transfer generated by the multiple exchange rate system. Since the Banco de México intervened in all three exchange rate markets simultaneously, the transfer could be even higher.

Another transfer related to the multiple exchange rate system was the liquidation of Mex-dollar accounts in the banking system. The Mexican government had encouraged banks to set up dollar-denominated accounts to allow middle-class Mexicans to keep their savings in domestic banks in spite of their fears of devaluation. In August 1982, the Mexican government authorized the banks to convert these accounts into peso-denominated accounts at a special Mex-dollar rate of 69.5 MXP per USD rather than the fluctuating rate of more than 100 MXP per USD prevailing in the free market. This meant that Mexican depositors lost more than 30 percent of the value of their savings and paid much of the costs of the nationalization of the banks that took place immediately after the liquidation of the Mex-dollar accounts (Serrano 2015). It is worth noting that the Argentinean government resorted to a similar mechanism, called pesification, in 2002 to pay for most of the cost of a bailout of the banking system.

Our examples show that some transfers were positive and others were negative, but, as the data in table 1 show, they tended to be positive during the early 1980s. It is worth noting that transfers averaged 5.58 pp per year during the 1980s, while afterwards they averaged 0.62 pp. In

particular, the large transfers that the residual in our budget accounting identifies is much large in periods of crisis than it is in normal periods.

A major element of our perfect storm narrative for Mexico's debt crises was the series of devaluations that occurred in February and August 1982 and then continued during the rest of 1982. This increased not only the foreign debt of Mexican banks, but also that of Mexico's government. We have seen that most of the increase in debt to GDP in Mexico between 1981 and 1982 was due to devaluation, not to more borrowing. To see how this fits into our budget accounting, let us decompose the foreign debt issuance term,

$$\xi_t(\theta^*_t - \theta^*_{t-1}) = (\xi_t\theta^*_t - \xi_{t-1}\theta^*_{t-1}) - \theta^*_{t-1}(\xi_t - \xi_{t-1}).$$

The first term in this decomposition tells us how much the value of foreign debt as a fraction of GDP changed from year t−1 to year t. The second term tells us how much of this change in value was due to the change in the real exchange rate. In 1982, the value of the ratio of external debt to GDP, $(\xi_t\theta^*_t - \xi_{t-1}\theta^*_{t-1})$ increased by 17.19 pp, but 11.14 pp was due to the real devaluation that occurred between 1981 and 1982, $\theta^*_{t-1}(\xi_t - \xi_{t-1})$, leaving 6.05 pp as the value of the increase in foreign debt deflated by inflation in the United States and real GDP growth in Mexico. It is noteworthy that foreign debt increased in Mexico in 1982, 1984, and 1985, even though Mexico was excluded from private international debt markets because it received loans from the US Treasury and the International Monetary Fund, most of which were intended to help it continue to pay debt service on its debt to US banks.

During the 1980s, the inflation rate in Mexico increased from an average of 24 percent per year during 1979–1981 to an average of 66 percent per year during 1982–1985. (It was even higher in 1986 and 1987, before starting to fall rapidly in 1988.) The increase in inflation allowed some agents to reduce their real tax payments by paying as late as possible, and it made it possible for the government to reduce real expenditures also by paying as late as possible. The primary deficit data mix early expenditures with late expenditures and early revenues with late revenues. In principle, it is possible to do a careful accounting of the deficit considering the dates of

expenditures and revenues, but, using the data that we have, we can just say that the difference between the ideally measured deficit and that in the data shows up in the residual.

3. Banking crises

A common and sometimes recurrent phenomenon in the histories of these countries is the eruption of banking crises like that in Mexico in 1982. These crises are typically characterized by a run on bank deposits that caused a sizeable fraction of the banks to fail or to be forced to merge. Examples of this abound in the chapters of this volume. The typical outcome of this sort of crises involves some form of public bailout of the banks' liabilities and some form of confiscation of deposits. Also typical is some sort of debt reduction to those who had bank loans.

In a nutshell, the crises follow the same general pattern. Starting from a heavily regulated financial sector a—typically new— government administration would decide to reform the capital markets. This happened in most countries since these were heavily regulated markets in the early 1960s. The reforms often involved liberalizations of the financial sector and the opening of the current account. The outcome was typically a large inflow of private borrowing, channeled through a vibrant and growing banking sector. Following several years of boom, the fraction of non-performing loans would build up to the point at which a run on bank deposits would lead to a full blown banking crisis. The resolution of the crisis typically included nationalization of private debts. This happened frequently all over the region. Even countries with conservative fiscal policy relative to the region, like Paraguay and Colombia, faced that problem. Most experiences of liberalization of the financial sector and opening of the current account ended in a banking crisis and a bailout of private debt.

In some cases, the crisis can be associated with banks having high exposure to government debt. This would typically be the result of government policy: unable to raise enough to finance expenditures, the government would pass regulation forcing the banks to buy its bonds. The likelihood of a default of the government on its own bonds would raise doubts about the solvency of the banks and increase the probability of a run. The experience of Argentina in 2001 features these characteristics.

In several of the cases, such as in Chile in 1982, however, the crisis appears not to be the result of proliferate public spending. Rather, they appear to be the result of proliferate private spending. After the crisis, the government assumed the private debt. The occurrence and recurrence of these crises in Latin America led to the notion of "excessive borrowing" as one of the causes of the region's economic problems. An interesting question raised by these experiences is why would the private sector borrow beyond its means, risking its own bankruptcy. The resolution of the crises points to a hypothesis: it is the probability of a future bailout that gives the private sector the incentive to borrow. To the point that agents can anticipate that, in the event of a crisis, the government would bail out the financial sector if the problem was large enough, a coordination problem arises. If enough agents are borrowing enough funds, the problem of non-performing loans becomes a social problem rather than a private problem. It may be individually rational to borrow more than what the private return suggests. Bailouts have been too frequent on the region to assume that agents would not take that possibility into account in making their economic decisions. (see Nicolini 2018.)

As mentioned above, the reforms of the financial sectors would typically be joined by the deregulation of the capital account. The access to foreign borrowing would exacerbate the excessive borrowing, making the crisis of a substantially larger magnitude.

4. Denomination and maturity of sovereign debt

In all the countries analyzed in this volume, the government issued debt instruments denominated in foreign currency. The degree and the persistence of this phenomenon has varied substantially across countries and over time for each country. For example, Brazil has mostly issued domestic currency denominated debt, with some form of indexation during the high inflation years. While Brazilian dollar denominated debt was zero for most of the period, it did reach 30 percent of total federal government debt in some years. In contrast, Argentina's dollar denominated debt has always been over 60 percent of the total, reaching values higher than 95 percent. The comparison between these two countries is particularly interesting, since they had very similar inflation histories. Both countries had very long periods with high chronic inflation

with recurrent bursts of hyperinflation, and both countries eventually conquered high inflation during the 1990s.

It has long been recognized that a major source of volatility has been the sensitivity of debt to output ratios to variations in the real exchange rate. The series of studies in this book provide a quantitative measure of this, by comparing the measured debt to output ratio to a simulation in which the real exchange rate is maintained constant at a specific value. The data in table 2 show the ratio of the standard deviation of the debt-to-output ratio as observed in the data to the standard deviation of the simulated series maintaining the real exchange rate fixed.

Table 2

VEN	MEX	CHL	ARG	PER	ECU	BRA	URU	PAR	BOL	COL
2.8	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.1

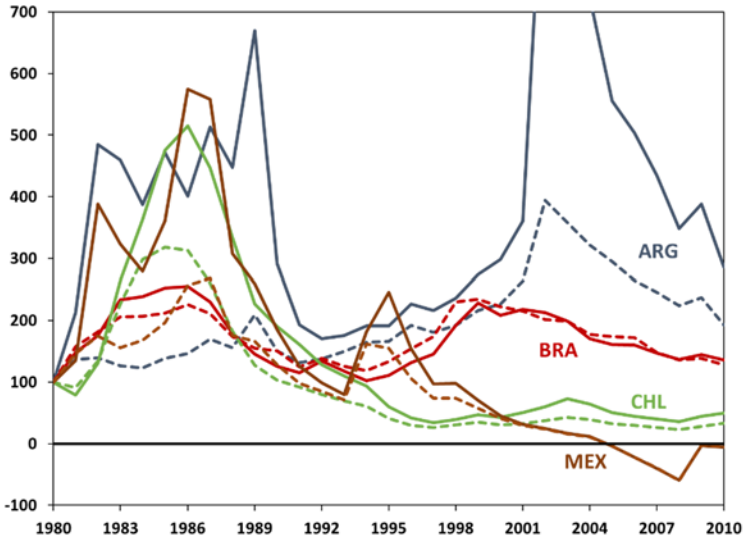
The relevance of the numbers in table 2 lies in the role that the debt to output ratio plays in the conceptual framework that guides the explorations performed in this book. The total obligations for a government in a particular period are given by the primary deficit and by the interest payments on the existing debt. Those interest payments are high when the debt to output ratios are high. It is the sum of these two concepts that the government must finance by printing money or by issuing new debt.

At the same time, in many models of sovereign debt, the ability of the government to borrow is lower—or the interest rate it must pay on newly issued debt is higher—when the debt to output ratio is higher. Thus, variations in the real exchange rate can have a substantial impact on the amount the government needs to finance, at the precise moment in which floating bonds becomes particularly expensive.

The quantitative implications of this discussion become evident once we notice that the volatility of the real exchange rate is very high in general, and particularly so for these countries. In figure 2, we plot the evolution of the debt to output ratios for serval countries, normalizing then to be equal to one in 1980.

All the countries in the figure defaulted in the early 1980s. And all the countries had substantial depreciations of their currencies. For each country, we show the evolution of the debt to output ratio as in the data, and also as simulated assuming that the real exchange rate remains constant at its value of 1980.

Figure 2. Evolution of the debt-to-GDP ratio observed and with fixed RER, 1980=100



Note: The values for Argentina in 2002, 2003, and 2004 are 1,013, 823, and 722, respectively.

The effect of exchange rate volatility combined with a high degree of debt dollarization can have dramatic effects. For example, the debt to output ratio went from 0.15 in 1980 to 0.68 in 1983 in Argentina, mostly due to the effect of the exchange rate depreciation. To achieve the same effect through primary deficits, it would require a yearly deficit of more than 17 percent of GDP for those three years. There has never been a period of three consecutive primary deficits of that magnitude for any of the eleven countries covered in this volume during the almost 70 year period consider.

Following the international financial crisis of 2008, the United States and many European countries ran very large deficits for several years. Spain's debt, for example, went from 36 percent of GDP in 2007 to 88 percent in 2012; Portugal's debt went from 68 percent to 126 percent; and Greece's debt went from 103 percent to 126 percent.

For the countries whose data is depicted in figure 2, the exchange rate movements achieved the same effect just in a couple of quarters, without any fiscal expansion.

In Mexico in December 1994 and January 1995, a devaluation coupled with the short maturity of its dollar-indexed debt, tesobonos, caused a balance of payments crisis and would have caused a default if not for the bailout put together by US President Bill Clinton and offered to Mexico in January 1995. Mexico had a primary surplus in 1994, making it difficult to ascribe the 1994–1995 debt crisis to lack of fiscal discipline. The problem was that the Mexican government had allowed most of its debt that was not in Brady Bonds to become dollar-indexed tesobonos with very short maturities during 1994. In fact, the average maturity of the debt that was not in Brady Bonds was 9 months by the end of 1994 (Cole and Kehoe 2000). The short maturity of the debt meant that, although the tesobono debt was relatively small, much of it become due every week. This made Mexico vulnerable to a self-fulfilling crisis as modeled by Cole and Kehoe (1996, 2000): investors believed that if they did not buy new tesobonos at the weekly auctions held by the Banco de México, the government would not be able to pay off the old tesobonos becoming due. The beliefs of these investors seemed to be realized until President Clinton intervened with a USD 50 billion loan package with funds put together from the US Treasury, the International Monetary Fund, and other official lenders. The loan had a high, penalty, interest rate and relied on the receipts from Mexico's oil exports as collateral. Mexico borrowed only USD 22 billion of the loan offered and had no problem paying off the loan early.

5. The transfer

From the budget constraint accounting exercises, three cross-country patterns emerge. First, with the exception of Ecuador and Peru, the sign of the transfer term is, on average, positive. Second, the transfer is much larger in times of economic distress. For example, the average of the transfer term in Argentina and Mexico is 1.9 and 0.5 percent of GDP, respectively, but it was 35 percent for Argentina in 2002 and 22 percent for Mexico in 1982. Third, the accumulation of the transfer term over time explains a substantial portion of the debt-to-GDP ratios in 2017. For example, Argentina's debt-to-GDP ratio would have been half of what it was in 2017 had the transfer term been zero, however, there are cases like Ecuador where persistently negative transfer terms imply that debt would have been twice as large had these transfers been zero.

The positive sign of the transfer term means that governments find ways to increase spending and keep it outside the reach of their national congresses, who typically approve the budget. In the previous chapters, we identified some of the sources of these hidden expenses. One of the most important is the bailout of the banking sector, a recurrent pattern in most countries. In some cases they were the natural result of previously announced government sponsored deposit insurance. In others, the bailouts were decided ex-post. More generally, due to the recurrence of crises, these governments are exposed to contingent liabilities that are absent from studies of debt sustainability, and, in some cases, are hard to measure.[1]

There are other cases in which positive and large residuals are present. Sometimes it was through relatively large deficits in government owned enterprises, as in the cases of Bolivia and Argentina in the 1970s and the 1980s. The most common mechanism, however, was the losses incurred by government owned development banks.[2]

The main channel through which spending could be increased bypassing congress was through direct transfers from the central bank to the development banks. In some cases, the banks would have an account at the central banks, with instantaneous credit. For instance, the authors of the Brazil chapter discovered that the Bank of Brazil, which managed most of the government's operations for subsidized credit, had the ability to make automatic withdrawals from its account at the Central Bank, without any authority from either the executive or the legislative power to authorize those transactions. Even though the balance of this account was meant to average zero, in practice this mechanism gave the Bank of Brazil control over money issuance since it could withdraw funds that automatically would be matched with an expansion of the monetary base.

Another source of transfers represents recognition of debts incurred in periods of fiscal hardship and therefore high inflation. When inflation is high, just delaying payments is a way to reduce

[1] This is not exclusive to developing countries. Government finances in the United States, for example, do not explicitly account for the contingent liabilities implied by the current social security system.

[2] These banks were popular during the period of import substitution, a strategy that dominated economic policy making after the Great Depression. In many countries these banks started to be closed or privatized in the 1980s. Currently, although government owned banks still represent a large fraction of the banking system in some countries, these development banks no longer exist or are not important.

the real value of expenditure. Another is to delay increases in compensation of public servants or pensioners. In many circumstances, however, these practices ended up in the courts. Legal resolutions in these countries take several years. Thus, there may be issuances of bonds in a particular period that are unrelated to expenditures of that period. Rather they are the explicit recognition of implicit arrears. The issuance of several series of bonds in Argentina during the 1990s provides a clear example.

In many cases, however, the authors of the chapters have not been able to identify the recipients of these transfers. In many countries, these transfers account for a sizeable fraction of the increases in the debt to output ratios. An important implication of our analysis of transfers is the conclusion that running a responsible fiscal policy goes beyond the debate about the budget in congress. Effectively controlling spending requires a transparent relationship between government-owned banks and enterprises and the treasury and, most importantly, the central bank.

A large literature has stressed the importance of central bank independence in the conquest of inflation. This literature stresses the time inconsistency problem of a centralized government. The experience of some of these countries suggests that it may also be important as an effective tool to control spending by individual units in a multi-unit government, a feature that has not been addressed in the literature.[3]

These increases in net spending without any oversight by the congress also have important implications for redistribution and growth. Episodes of high spending typically end up in either hyperinflation or large devaluations, accompanied by severe measures like capital controls, dual exchange rates, and pesification of deposits. The fact that the transfer term is large in these distressed periods implies that these severe measures create large transfers of resources from the government to some private agents, resources that are being redistributed to these specific agents from the rest of the population as in a zero-sum game.

[3] An exception is the work of Zarazaga (1995), who uses a game-theory approach to model the behavior of different government entities competing to appropriate seigniorage. Positive probability of very high inflation periods acts as a self-enforcing mechanism to restrain this competition for seigniorage and support periods of relatively low inflation.

Our guess is that these zero-sum games played by private agents in times of economic distress imply that talent is not allocated to lower production costs—which increases productivity, making it a positive sum game—but rather to rent seeking activities to capture large government transfers that are not closely scrutinized. The way to become rich is not through the creation of wealth, but by being the winner of a zero-sum game by outsmarting the typical working-class family that is saving in simple instruments. This, in turn, implies there is no wealth creation and explains the severity and length of crises in Latin America, especially the one that occurred during the 1980s.

A silver lining from this analysis of the transfer term is that it became significantly lower for some countries after 1989. The most drastic changes have been for Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay, where the average transfer term went down from 3.4, 5.6 and 4.7 percent of GDP on average during the 1980s to 0.5, 0.6 and 1.3 percent, respectively, from 1990 onwards. Argentina, Chile and Paraguay are also in this group of countries where the transfer term has been low in recent years. Our interpretation is that these economies have somewhat successfully moved away from institutional environments that incentivize rent seeking activities, especially during periods of economic crisis.

6. International banks and US banking regulators

The eleven countries studied in this book are small open economies, which means they are exposed to international shocks that are beyond their control, but, to different extents, affect their economic performance.

During the 1970s there was a substantial increase of credit to emerging economies, including Latin America. The banking sector in the United States went through major structural changes that reduced profit margins in the domestic market. For example, the rapid growth of the commercial paper market implied banks losing big clients seeking other forms of financing.[4] At the same time, important financial liberalizations in Latin America opened the door to foreign financial flows, which allowed US banks to allocate credit there.

[4] This is discussed in detail in FDIC (1997).

The oil boom in the 1970s increased the liquidity of banks in the United States and, thus, the size of the credit flows to Latin America and other emerging economies. Additionally, near-zero real interest rates on short term loans allowed US banks to provide credit to foreign countries at very low costs. Even though there was concern among economists and some authorities, most of the warnings were frequently disregarded as exaggerated and the general opinion of US regulators was that the likelihood of a banking crisis was low.[5]

By the end of the 1970s concerns about high inflation in the United States rose and in 1982 the then Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker decided to raise the federal funds rate. This increased the funding costs of commercial banks which restricted the amount of credit that could flow to Latin America. This reduction in credit availability put significant stress on public finances in most countries in the region.

Almeida, Esquivel, Kehoe and Nicolini (2019) show how high risk-free interest rates induce countries to default on their debt because they expect favorable renegotiation terms in the future. When the reference rates are high, the opportunity cost of banks holding up renegotiation on defaulted loans is higher, inducing them to accept higher haircuts when renegotiating defaulted debt. In August of 1982 Mexico defaulted on most of its loans from US commercial banks, followed by Argentina and Venezuela, and, later in the same decade, Brazil.

Reference interest rates in the United States, however, remained high only for a short period of time, going back to pre-1982 levels by the end of 1983. Through the lens of the mechanism in the paper mentioned before, this implied less favorable renegotiation perspectives for the Latin American governments in default. Additionally, as documented by the Federal Reserve History, US banking regulators allowed lenders to delay recognizing the full extent of the losses on defaulted loans.[6] They were worried that, had the losses been fully recognized, the banks would have been deemed insolvent, which would have led to potential bank runs and a financial crisis in the United States. This relaxed regulation delayed the renegotiation of Latin American debt

[5] In 1977 Arthur Burns, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, criticized commercial banks for assuming excessive risks in a speech at Columbia University. Also, a 1977 published staff report from the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Relations noted their concern about the exposure of US commercial banks to loans in emerging economies.
[6] See Sims and Romero (2013).

until the Brady Plan started in 1989. In effect, the loans from the US Treasury and the International Monetary Fund to countries like Mexico were a stopgap that gave vulnerable US banks to build their capital up before they had to renegotiate their debt with Latin American countries but left these Latin American countries frozen out of international capital markets until the Brady Plan.

Throughout the chapters in this book there are multiple examples of how bad economic policies by Latin American governments generated crises in the region. Nevertheless, from this section we conclude that US economic policies set the table, triggered, and amplified the Latin American debt crisis, of the 1980s, often referred to as "the lost decade" due to its length and severity.

7. The real effects of inflation stabilization

The eleven countries studied in this volume provide the most varied experience in inflation episodes, both across countries and over time for any single country. Consequently, the eleven stories combined contain a very rich set of experiences on inflation stabilization. The list of successful stabilization plans to stop inflation is almost as large as the list of stabilization plans that failed. The experience of these countries makes clear the need for fiscal adjustment as a means of stopping inflation permanently, while other policies like fixing the exchange rate can be very effective in stopping very high inflation temporarily. These two policy measures, fiscal restraint and a fixed exchange rate proved to be a powerful combination: they are behind many (though fixing the exchange rate was not always used) of the successful stabilization plans.

Besides being laboratories to evaluate policies to stop inflation, the histories of these countries can also be used to make a first evaluation of a notion that has become conventional wisdom in many policy and academic circles: the real costs associated to reducing inflation. This conventional wisdom was born out of the evidence relating reductions in the rate of inflation to increases in the rate of unemployment, the Phillips curve. The wisdom was the consolidated following the 1982 recession in the United States, associated to the inflation stabilization plan successfully undertaken by the Fed under the leadership of Paul Volcker, so much so that the 1982 recession is too frequently called the "Volker Recession".

An alternative interpretation was provided by Sargent (1986) in the same book that set the foundations of the conceptual framework we have used to analyze the eleven countries. Thus, the argument can be laid out using the government budget constraint and the money demand that are the two main foundations of the conceptual framework discussed in chapter 2. At the time the Federal Reserve announced that it was vigorously tightening its policy, the Treasury increased its deficit, as result of both a reduction in taxes (supply-side economics) and an expansion in the military spending (Star Wars). The natural consequence of the reduction of seigniorage on one hand and the increase in the deficit on the other, was a rapid increase in government debt. This rapid increase in debt, Sargent argued, would strain the relationship between the Fed and the Treasury, and would put pressure on one of them to switch its policy. A reasonable probability that the Fed would relax its tightening reduced the credibility of its plan to defeat inflation. It is this increase in macroeconomic policy may have been responsible for the recession of 1982.

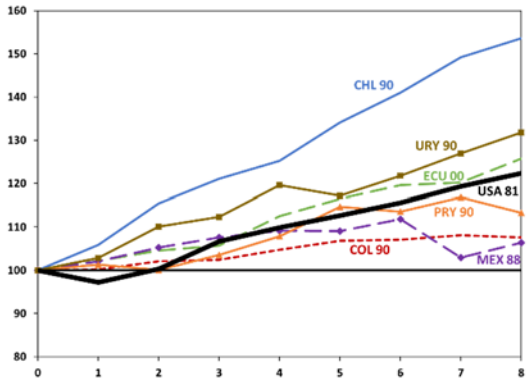
We certainly lack enough theory to provide a quantitative appraisal of that debate. But the region offers 5 successful stabilizations of extremely high inflation (from over 600 percent per year in Chile in 1973 to over 10,000 percent in Bolivia in 1985) and 6 successful stabilizations of more moderate inflations (from about 25 per year in Chile in 1990 to 130 percent in Uruguay, also in 1990). As a first approach to the debate, we take a first and simple look at the data.

Figure 3a plots the evolution of real GDP per capita after the stabilization of chronic inflation for six Latin-American countries, as well as for the United States. For each country, we set the year before the stabilization plan to be time zero. We then plot the evolution of per capita income for the next eight years. The number that accompanies the name of the country refers to the year the stabilization plan was launched. In all countries output expanded after stabilization. For the three countries that launched their plan with inflation close or above 100 per year (Mexico 1988, Uruguay 1990, and Ecuador 2000) growth was very fast the years following the plan. The three countries chose to control the nominal exchange rate as the policy instrument to lower inflation, but while Mexico and Uruguay chose a gradual plan that brought inflation to one digit in 6 and 8 years respectively, Ecuador did it by adopting the US dollar as its currency, so inflation was at one digit by year 2. In terms of the evolution of income per capita, Mexico and Ecuador behaved in a

similar fashion in the first few years following the stabilization, while Uruguay did better. Mexico had than a severe crisis in 1994 (year 7) but that was not related to the stabilization plan, but rather to the dollar indexation aand short maturity of its debt, as we have discussed. The three countries that launched their stabilization plans starting from much lower inflation rates chose a gradual program. To bring inflation down to one digit Chile took 5 years, Paraguay 6, and Colombia had still two digit inflation (around 15 percent) by the year 8. No evidence of real costs associated to reducing inflation can be detected.

Figure 3. Real GDP per capita, year of inflation stabilization=100

a) After stabilization of chronic inflation



b) After stabilization of extreme inflation

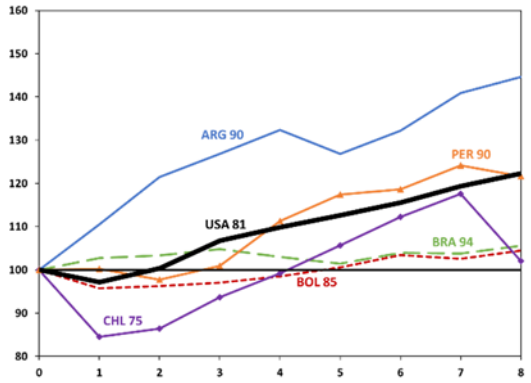


Figure 3b presets the evidence for the five extreme inflation episodes. Hyperinflation was conquered and its control immediately spurred in Argentina and Brazil. In both countries, the hyperinflations were ended successfully and quickly: in less than twelve months, monthly inflation went from 24 percent in Argentina and 42 percent in Brazil to 5 and 15, respectively. By the third year, inflation was one digit in both countries. In both cases, output grew as a result of the stabilization. The other three countries followed a more gradual policy. In Bolivia and Peru, inflation was still very high one year after the plan (around 280 percent for Bolivia and 410 percent for Peru). Only in the second year inflation was brought down to two digits, and it took them 8 and 7 years respectively to bring inflation down to one digit. It took Peru 3 years to start growing, and 5 years to Bolivia, though its growth rate was very low. In Bolivia, the hyperinflation was accompanied by a banking crisis that lasted long, and that was not necessarily associated with the stabilization plan. The case of Chile is the most dramatic one. It the country that chose the more gradual strategy: it took 4 years to bring inflation down to two digits—to about 40 per

year. The stabilization plan started while the country was undergoing a mayor recession, coming out of social high social unrest that led to the coup of 1973.

Overall, the experiences of these countries seem to suggest that a gradual reduction of moderate inflation or a sudden stabilization of high inflation do not seem to come associated with output costs.

8. The role of primary commodity prices

A common theme in the discussions we had with economist and policy makers of these countries was the role of primary commodity prices. All the eleven countries are net exporters of primary commodities. Invariably, the fate of these countries was associated to the behavior of the price of those commodities. They play no role in the framework used in this book, except on the direct impact they may have in the evolution of the fiscal deficit. Indeed, in many cases, the government is directly involved in the production of the commodity the country exports, like Mexico in oil, where it owns the only oil company, Pemex, or in Chile, where the state company, Codelco, has a large share of copper production. But primary commodity prices can also affect total revenues through their effect on royalties of direct taxation of these activities. We have explored if commodity exporting countries have a different behavior, especially during commodity booms. We have classified the eleven countries into three groups according to the importance of their commodity exports on GDP, table 3 summarizes this classification.

Table 3

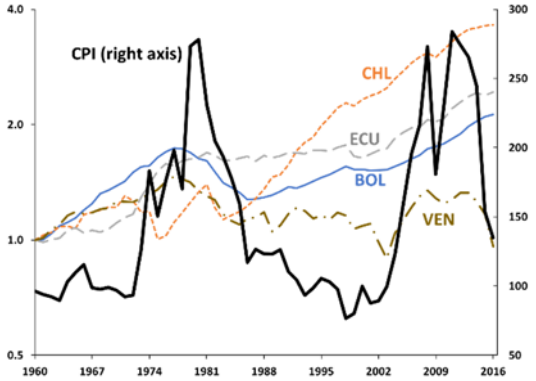
Group	Country	Commodity exports (percent of GDP)	
		2000	average 1989-2017
Top 4	Venezuela	23.6	20.8
	Ecuador	21.9	17.7
	Chile	14.8	17.3
	Bolivia	8.0	15.8
Medium 4	Colombia	7.7	11.3
	Peru	7.4	11.2
	Paraguay	6.5	7.7
	Uruguay	4.6	7.1
Bottom 3	Argentina	3.8	4.5
	Mexico	3.0	4.1
	Brazil	2.4	3.8

In figure 4 we plot the evolution of real GDP per capita for each of the three groups and an index of international prices for a basket of primary commodities.

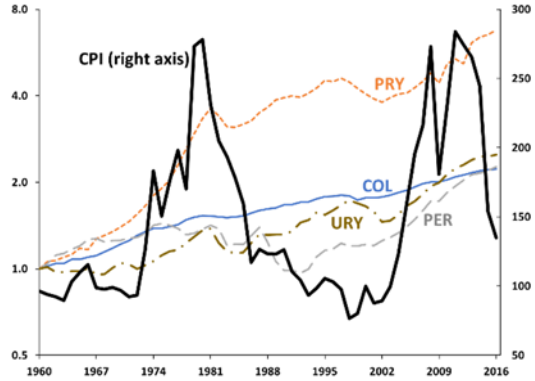
Figure 4.a shows the evolution of per capita GDP for the four highest commodity exporter countries. The most striking feature of the data in the figure is the behavior of output in Venezuela, exhibiting a very close relationship with the swings in the price of oil. There is an important exception though: the peak per capita income in Venezuela is in 1975, several years before the peak of the price of oil. In 1976, Venezuela nationalized the oil industry, and oil production steadily declined for many years after that. In comparison, the evolution of output in Chile is much less correlated to the prices, while Ecuador, the other big commodity exporter is somewhat in between. In Figures 4.a and 4.c, we show the data for the other countries. There seems to be some correlation between the long period of low prices in the 1980s and the poor output performance and the period of high prices in the first years of this century and good economic performance. With the exception of Venezuela, however, there is little evidence that the commodity prices swings are the most relevant determinant of these countries fates. For example, income per capita in Mexico (Fig 4.c) did decline with the drop in oil prices after 1981. The recovery started in the late 1980s, however, coincidental with the years in which Mexico started a successful plan to stabilize its macro economy, not years in which oil prices recovered. The 1995 crisis was unrelated to commodity prices, and the 2009 recession coincided with a drop in the price of oil, but also with a world recession. In any case, both were very transient events. It is also the case that the recoveries for Argentina in 1991 and in Brazil in 1994 (Fig 4.c) coincide with the periods in which they finally controlled inflation, and those were the years with the lowest prices for commodities in the period. Finally, note also that both Chile and Bolivia started growing in the mid and late 80s respectively, once they stabilized their economies, when commodity prices were at very low levels and declining.

Figure 4. Real GDP per capita, 1960=1, and primary commodity price index, 1960=100

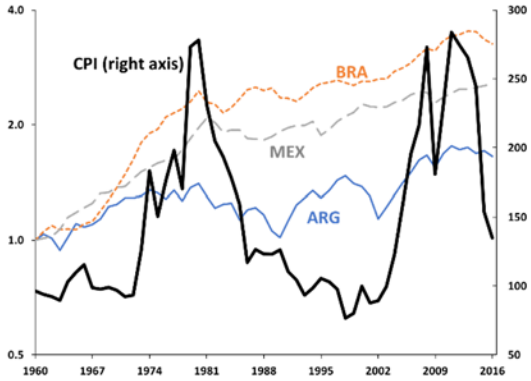
a) top four



b) mid four

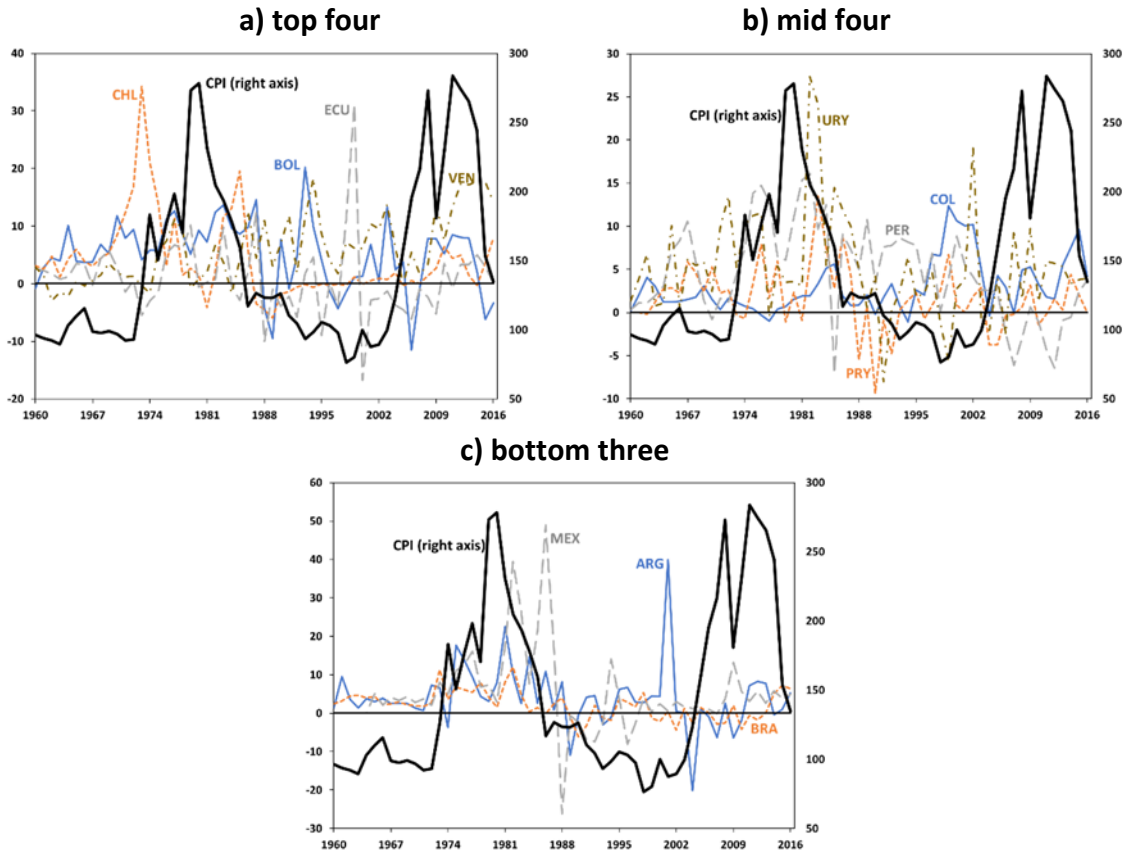


c) bottom three



To explore the role commodity prices may have through their impact on the government's revenues, in Figure 5 we show the relationship between the primary commodity prices movements and the sum of total fiscal deficits plus the transfer term from the budget accounting exercises, grouping countries in the same fashion as we did in Figure 4. These sums of total deficits and transfers are rather volatile, but a careful inspection of the three figures shows no evident worsening of fiscal policy during primary commodity price booms, with the clear and single exception of Venezuela.

Figure 5. Total deficit plus transfers, percent of GDP, and primary commodity price index, 1960=100



To a lesser extent, also Brazil and Argentina show a deterioration in their fiscal position that follows the boom of primary commodity prices. Those were precisely the countries in trouble by the end of 2018. For the other countries, there is no evidence of a worsening in their fiscal accounts during booms of primary commodity prices.

As we have pointed out, the policy mistakes that led to—or worsened—crises are common to all countries, regardless of how dependent they are on exploiting natural resources. The downward phase of commodity prices goes from 1980 to 2000. It is indeed the case that the 1980s was a lost decade. By 2000, however, almost all countries had recovered what they had lost in the 1980s. The link that we can clearly identify in each country is from macro stability to output growth. In fact, on average, commodity prices were higher in the 1980s than in the 1990s. But the first of the two decades was much worse for all the countries than was the second.

9. Summary

What have we learned by studying all these countries together? We isolated common economic forces behind the mayor macroeconomic events. In many cases, the causes were common like crawling pegs in the 1970s, exchange rate controls and stabilization attempts without touching the fiscal side in the 1980s, and banking crises in the 1990s. Experts in each country believe that their problems are unique and that their causes country specific. The first lesson we take away from this book is that this belief is misguided, most of the economic problems, and their causes, in Latin America in the last fifty-seven years had a lot of common factors.

When this project started we focused on the six largest countries in South America and Mexico. Later we expanded to include the ten largest South American countries and found many common factors in their economic crises and causes. It would be interesting for future research to expand this framework to the rest of Latin America and potentially to other regions, where the idea of problems being country specific may also be misguided. We started our analysis in 1960 so we could have ten years of data before things started to go wrong. We considered starting in 1950 but were limited by data availability for some of the countries.

Similar to the case of high inflation episodes, most balance of payments crises were the result of high sustained deficits. There are also some exceptions, like Mexico 1994–1995; however, the common pattern suggests that lack of fiscal discipline can also result in important external imbalances with the subsequent costly adjustments.

Another important lesson is related to the series of debt defaults that started with Mexico in 1982. Ex post, we suspect the defaults were not entirely justified, especially considering the huge costs that ensued. The role of US regulators and policymakers before, during, and after the crisis is key to understanding its buildup, as well as its long duration. Structural changes in the US financial sector, along with a worldwide oil boom and financial openness in Latin America, fueled the flow of lending into the region. Then, drastic policy changes to tame inflation in the United States triggered a series of defaults, whose costs and duration escalated due to relaxed regulation in the US banking sector. This indirectly prevented the Latin American governments from successfully renegotiating their debt until the Brady Plan starting in 1989

To conclude, based on the common elements that we identified as causes of poor economic performance, we identify four conditions that could avoid future crises that resemble those from the 1970s and 1980s:

- Solid fiscal policy,
- Prudent and heavy regulation of the banking sector,
- Low exposure of their debt to real exchange rate movements,
- Careful monitoring and control of the expenditure of independent government institutions.

Those countries that satisfy these policy guidelines will continue to have stable and good economic performance in the long run.

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Data appendix

This appendix describes the data for figures 1 through 5 and tables 1 through 3, along with their sources.

Table 1

The numbers in table 1 are taken from the budget accounting analysis in Meza (2018). The data for GDP, domestic debt from 1960 to 1977, and GDP deflator are from INEGI. The data for monetary base, nominal exchange rate, primary deficit and all debt from 1977 onward, and debt service are from Banco de México. The data for primary deficit from 1960 to 1977 and foreign debt from 1960 to 1977 are from the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, the Ministry of Finance in Mexico.

Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the time series of all the exchange rates that coexisted during different periods of time in Mexico. The source is the historical exchange rate time series with daily frequency from Banco de México.

Table 2 and figure 2

The data in table 2 show the ratio of the standard deviation of the debt-to-output ratio as observed in the data to the standard deviation of the simulated series maintaining the real exchange rate fixed.

The data in figure 2 show the evolution of the observed debt-to-output ratio and the counterfactual case assuming that the real exchange rate remains constant at its value of 1980.

The sources are the exercises of counterfactual debt with fixed real exchange rate in each of the eleven chapters of this book.

Figure 3

The data in figure 3 show the evolution of real GDP per capita after the stabilization of chronic and hyperinflation for some selected cases. The sources are figure 1 and figure 2 in each of the eleven chapters of this book.

Table 3

Table 3 classifies the eleven countries in three groups according to their exports of primary commodities as a share of GDP. The data of exports is from *United Nations Statistics Division. UN Comtrade. New York: United Nations, n.d.* The data of nominal GDP to calculate the shares is from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database. We classify primary commodities following Ayres, Hevia and Nicolini (2017).

Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the evolution of real GDP per capita from 1960 to 2017 and the evolution of a primary commodity price index. The sources of real GDP data are figure 1 in each of the eleven chapters of this book.

To construct the primary commodity price index we did a weighted average of the price indices of the ten most exported commodities in the region: crude oil, copper, fish, iron ore, coffee, soybeans, beef, aluminum, gold, and wood. We used the shares of exports of each commodity on total primary commodity exports in the region in 2000. The source of the primary commodity price indices is the World Bank's Commodity Price Data with monthly frequency. The data depicted in figure 4 corresponds to the yearly average of the constructed index, setting 1960=100.

Figure 5

Figure 5 shows the evolution of the sum of total deficit and transfers as a share of GDP from 1960 to 2017 and the evolution of the same primary commodity price index depicted in figure 4. The sources of the ratios of total deficit and transfers over GDP are the budget accounting exercises in each of the eleven chapters of this book.