



# BACK TO THE BACKYARD? RECENT INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SCHOLARSHIP ON EXTRA-HEMISPHERIC ACTORS' INVOLVEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

## ¿REGRESO AL PATIO TRASERO? INVESTIGACIONES RECIENTES EN LAS RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES SOBRE EL INVOLUCRAMIENTO DE ACTORES EXTRAHEMISFÉRICOS EN AMÉRICA LATINA

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In the early 2010's, optimism regarding Latin American countries' striving for autonomy from traditional asymmetric relations with Northern powers were at an all-time high. Some countries, such as Brazil, were fashioning their development strategies as alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and formed multi-letter groupings with other countries of the Global South. Others, led by Hugo Chávez' Venezuela, took to an at least symbolical-ly more radical approach, celebrating revolutionary nostalgia with their Cuban and Nicaraguan allies. While concrete successes of those foreign policy ventures might have been scarce even back then, few observers would have doubted that Latin American countries had acquired a significant measure of independence. According to two authors prominent in the field, the former were "actively articulating and pursuing their interests and cultivating relationships to advance them", and most were "no longer peripheral to world affairs."<sup>1</sup>

Such interpretations may have been somewhat hyperbolic, with observers impressed by economic growth that was in reality largely driven by Chinese commodity demand, and discussing the impact of regional organizations that were mostly declaratory in nature.<sup>2</sup> However, contemporary debates on the situation of Latin American international politics seem to have moved very far, and perhaps excessively so, in the opposite direction. Observers once saw considerable autonomy, integrative processes and innovative, self-designed policies at work. Nowadays, the region is sometimes described as a mere passive stage for the machinations of great powers that have returned to Cold War-style competition, and even war in the case

<sup>1</sup> Lowenthal, Abraham E., and Hannah M. Baron. 2015. "A Transformed Latin America in a Rapidly Changing World." In: *Routledge Handbook of Latin America in the World*, edited by Jorge I. Domínguez and Ana Covarrubias. New York: Routledge, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kleinschmidt, Jochen, and Pablo Gallego Pérez. 2017. "Differentiation Theory and the Ontologies of Regionalism in Latin America." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 60 (1): 1-21.

of Russia, and accordingly trampling weaker countries underfoot. On the occasion of the expulsion of two Russian spies from Bogotá, a former Colombian foreign minister, now academic, even described the political atmosphere of South America as similar to that of the neutral zone of Tangier during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

Such dramatic changes in attitudes and atmospheres are, to a certain degree, typical of a world region that has seen numerous quasi-cyclic breaks in its economic and political development.<sup>4</sup> They are also, sometimes systematically, exaggerated by publications mainly aimed at policy relevance, which enhance their impact by painting contemporary Latin America as subject to grave extra-hemispheric security threats, which are ultimately for the U.S. to deal with. Thus, “Russia and China – and Iran to a lesser extent” are packed into a single category of “extra-regional actors”, who “fill the vacuum left by diminished U.S. engagement in the region.”<sup>5</sup> The metaphor makes it clear that in such analyses, Latin American countries are not considered to have significant agency, they constitute geopolitical non-entities. Specifically, Chinese engagement in Latin America is often described as executing a monolithic master plan of global dominance, without regard to the specificities of the region and the difficulties and obstacles for such engagement – and without even thinking of scenarios in which Latin Americans themselves might actively influence the course of events. Such diagnoses may also activate paternalistic tropes about the necessity of demonstrating the benefits of “democratic institutions” to the region’s residents.<sup>6</sup>

Expert opinion, and specifically think tank expert opinion in the U.S., on Latin America’s interactions with extra-hemispheric powers thus seems to have moved from a slightly overoptimistic narrative of successful autonomy to a bleak and drastically exaggerated account of strategic passivity in a very short period of time. In other words, the region has been relegated ‘back to the backyard’ of the Cold War years. In this context, it is perhaps fortunate that academics further removed from the necessity of immediate political or media impact seem to have discovered the activities of non-American states in Latin America as a topic worthy of thorough empirical research as well as of theoretical and conceptual reflection. At least, this hope may be associated with four edited volumes that have appeared in the time of a single year. While these four books are very dissimilar in terms of their precise objects of study and the epistemic approaches used, each has assembled a wide variety of highly diverse authors, including many from Latin America, who are generally located within, or

<sup>3</sup> Londoño Paredes, Julio. 2020. “Colombia, ¿‘Tánger de Suramérica?’” *Semana*, 28 December, online at: <https://www.semana.com/opinion/articulo/colombia-tanger-de-suramerica/202035/>.

<sup>4</sup> Alcántara Sáez, Manuel. 2022. “Political Cycles during the Last Four Decades in Latin America.” In: *Problems and Alternatives in the Modern Americas*, edited by Pablo A. Baisotti. New York: Routledge, pp. 64-82.

<sup>5</sup> Farah, Douglas, and Kathryn Babineau. 2019. “Extra-Regional Actors in Latin America: The United States is not the Only Game in Town.” *Prism* 8 (1): 97.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, R. Evan. 2018. *The Future of Latin America and the Caribbean in the Context of the Rise of China*. Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 33.

close to, the discipline of International Relations (IR). Each also promises a specific contribution for going beyond the simplistic autonomy-versus-passivity binary that has dominated so much previous work.

I begin the review with *A New Struggle for Independence in Modern Latin America*, edited by Pablo A. Baisotti, which already in the cover text makes the welcome announcement that extra-hemispheric relations “cannot be reduced to a simplistic vision of the dominant and subordinate”. This diagnosis is developed in contributions that generally emphasize the *longue durée*, and the conceptual character of the volume is underlined by the fact that almost all authors have crossed the disciplinary lines between history and IR at some point in their careers. It is fascinating how these different perspectives consistently generate a very different outlook from the aforementioned mood swings typical of a more short-term outlook. An extensive historical introduction emphasizes the constant interaction of transnational economic and intellectual flows with global power structures, and highlights the frequent ability of Latin American leaders to direct external powers’ attention to issues of their own preference. For example, the Mexican post-revolutionary government was able to generate favorable circumstances for their nationalization policies through demonstrative anticommunism. It closes with a critical description of regionalist projects.

Carlos Escudé, otherwise known for his work on peripheral realism, contributes a chapter on Argentina’s development in the context of successive British and U.S. hegemonies. He highlights the importance of Argentine economic development in dependency on the British-directed world system of the pre-WW2 era, a link that was destroyed by postwar pressure from the U.S. due to Argentine neutrality in the war. This initiated a long period of economic malaise. However, with the economic rise of China, financial recovery was possible to a degree, and Escudé strongly cautions against mobilizing anti-Chinese sentiment against this process, which will likely be maintained by Argentine governments of any ideological persuasion.

Victor Jefets and Lazar Jefets, in their interesting chapter on Soviet diplomacy in the interwar period, dispel a number of historiographical myths, for instance, the idea of the subordination of Soviet foreign policy to world revolution, and decipher the complex relations between the Comintern, the Soviet state and party, the Mexican government, which was being accused of communist sympathies by the U.S. at this time, and the actual Mexican communists, up until the rupture because of Comintern support for anti-government activities, which occurred despite some authentic sympathy for the Soviet cause on the Mexican government’s side. Similar subversive activities produced crises in relations with other Latin American countries, which ended only with the dissolution of the Comintern.

The entanglement of foreign and domestic policies and actors also plays a role in Günther Richter Mros’ chapter on “Brazil and Argentina in the Context of the Two World Wars”. The relevant factors for the positioning of both countries were mainly domestic or regional in nature, the author emphasizes the role of European immigrant communities as well as the rivalry between Brazil and Argentina. Also, the Second

World War, in both cases, “reinforced the national identities that had been built in the previous century” (p. 137). Roberto Durán’s account of Latin American countries’ roles in the Bretton Woods institutions’ founding process, on the other hand, concludes that these mainly developed in an intra-regionalist negotiation process with the U.S. government, but did contribute massively to the beginning professionalization of diplomatic services in the region. The chapter by Fabio Sánchez and Camilo González on “Dilemmas of UNASUR” describes the emergence of UNASUR as driven far more by regional crisis management than by desires to emulate integration processes in other world regions.

Other contributions in the book discuss U.S. Cold War strategy, Russian diplomatic relations, relations with Spain from 1945 to 2018, the history of Cuba-U.S. relations, the effects of *chavismo* in Venezuela, UNASUR border politics, and the impact of the Trump administration. The latter of these are therefore not entirely within the purview of this essay. But all chapters are of interest, and familiarize the reader new to the region with the idea that Latin American elites’ views of international politics are very often based on more long-term assessments, and also less focused on specific policy areas than those of their Northern counterparts. The overall contrast both to the unbridled optimism of the UNASUR era as well as to the ultra-pessimistic threat analyses regarding external actors in the current era of great power competition is stunning. The only dissonance created by *A New Struggle for Independence in Modern Latin America* is the title itself, which, for this reviewer at least, is too strong and sensationalistic for the detailed and nuanced historical narrative offered within. It will serve especially those readers who are interested in understanding Latin American viewpoints on extra-regional relations, and in exploring the history of some of those relations in detail.

On this point, *External Powers in Latin America: Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation*, edited by Gian Luca Gardini, hits a different note, as it is more concerned with the explanation and interpretation of the current wave of “renewed activism” by several external powers (p. 1), many of them not traditionally present in the region. Additionally, this volume also asks whether classical IR theories are useful for this task, or whether more novel concepts, such as neo-extractivism or South-South cooperation, posited as opposing alternatives, are preferable. The book assembles a highly diverse pool of authors from all world regions, including Latin America, and is introduced by a systematic presentation of research questions as well as conceptual and methodological issues. It is thus on the rigorous, political science side of International Relations – yet, as a side effect, the structured approach makes it easy (and rewarding) for the reader to draw comparisons between different chapters and the processes discussed therein. And, like the previously reviewed work, it explicitly commits to recognizing both regional and external actors’ agency, and the relevance of domestic structures and preferences.

The book starts off with a chapter by Tom Long, who critiques various common understandings of the U.S. role in the Americas. Among them are the understanding of Latin America as a homogenous space, which should be displaced by recognizing

different circles of influence – Mexico on the ‘inside’, Central America and the Caribbean in a second, Northern South America in a third, and the Southern Cone in a fourth tier. Within this spatial structure, the U.S. exercises asymmetric influence, but isn’t and hasn’t been controlling domestic events, as an actual empire would – with rare exceptions, of course. Today, the outer tiers are, in general, more open to outside engagement, especially to Chinese commercial links. The inner tiers also show stronger transnational links to the U.S., for example, through migration. Long concludes that at least among Latin American elites, soft power ties to the U.S. are almost universally still much stronger than any similar ties to China – even though this finding, on the surface, seems to violate his previous rule on not homogenizing the region.

Gian Luca Gardini begins his chapter on the EU in Latin America with the observation that the role of Europe has not been elevated in the “surge” of external actors in Latin America, yet it “has been a reference for Latin America’s own dream of regional unity, and an aspiration in terms of institutional setting, social cohesion, economic success, the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights” (p. 29). European interest in the region, on the other hand, was driven mainly by the accession of Portugal and Spain to the EU, and has expressed itself in trade deals and other forms of economic diplomacy, as well as in diplomatic engagement vis-à-vis Cuba and Venezuela, for example. Ironically, despite its colonial history, it is not perceived as neo-colonial, in contrast to the U.S. or China. This might be the result of its sophisticated, decentralized approach to interregional relations as well as of the beneficial trade and development relations – however, since much of this approach is built on the specific character of the EU, it is not yet clear what Latin America’s specific role as a region could be.

After this relatively upbeat assessment, Carol Wise delivers a historically grounded analysis of the Chinese role in Latin America. The “commodity lottery” (p. 48), that is to say, the explosion of Chinese demand of raw materials in the 2000s, caught the region by surprise. Chinese attempts to generate political frameworks for the booming commercial ties have fallen short, basically consisting of somewhat effective public diplomacy aimed especially at resource-rich states. At the same time, there is no mechanism for coordinating Latin American responses to Chinese initiatives. Economically, the relation with Venezuela is noteworthy – contrary to the established narrative of the Chinese “debt trap”, which would make countries of the Global South beholden to Chinese interests in case of defaulting on their loans, it is actually Venezuela that “has ensnared Beijing in a creditor trap”, and “Ecuador is not far behind” (p. 51). States with functioning regulatory and rule of law environments have fared better. And despite those problems, overall, the Chinese approach is still rated more favorably than the austerity pushed by international financial institutions in previous decades. This sober and detailed assessment is as far removed as possible from the sometimes panicky tone of policy papers written on the topic.

The same is the case in Richard Miles’ fact-rich chapter on “Russia in Latin America”, whose presence is qualified at the beginning as “real, but not serious” (p. 59).

This means that Russian activities are not aimed at actual, tangible results, but rather at convincing the Russian domestic audience that their country is powerful and respected, and is actively causing trouble for U.S. interests in their metaphorical backyard. The hopes (or fears) surrounding the BRICS grouping have disappeared, Russian arms sales have dropped back to low levels due to Venezuela's economic decay, and the spectacular deals announced during frequent visits have, with few exceptions, not come to fruition. Cuba, Nicaragua, and especially Venezuela are valued as anti-liberal stalwarts for symbolic ties, and for votes at the United Nations, but attempts at more materially significant engagements have failed. Conversely, the Russian information warfare strategies observed in Western countries may have been attempted, but not at the same level, and not with quantifiable effects. The only exception is the propaganda outlet RT, which has achieved some influence – however, “these stories are not to further any serious goals, they have become the goal itself” (p. 70). Yet, Latin American perceptions of Russia remain overwhelmingly negative – and this year's brutal, neo-imperialist aggression against Ukraine will probably contribute to this.

Barbara Stallings and Kotaro Horisaka continue with an account of the oft-ignored Japanese engagement in the region. The rescuing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership by Japan, Mexico, Chile and Peru has received some attention. Heightened Japanese engagement is to a large part motivated by rivalry with China, and has emphasized the comparatively higher quality of its offers in infrastructure and trade – and indeed, Latin American exports to Japan contain more value added than those to China. Accordingly, Japan has focused on more democratic and institutionally stable states, even though the results of this strategy remain to be seen. The book continues with a chapter on Canadian crisis management in Venezuela, which was driven more by interest in multilateral engagement than by any possibility at achieving change in the troubled country. The chapter on the dynamics of Indian presence in Latin America describes it as based on economics factors, but also mentions a heightened interest in engagement with Brazil due to the two countries' shared membership in Global South fora such as BRICS and IBSA. More concrete results have been achieved through foreign direct investment, but also through Indian space launches of Latin American countries' satellites. Yet, despite obvious compatibilities, a highly positive reception and the lack of any geopolitical obstacles, neither side figures importantly in the foreign policy considerations of the other.

The chapter on Turkey describes its relations with Latin America as driven by a series of South-South engagements, but also, on the Turkish side, by a soft power strategy “reinforced by a unifying ideological project led by the AKP” (p. 130), and some successful attempts to sell military hardware. In general, one very useful element of this volume are the numerous chapters on states whose Latin American connections are normally not considered in the established literature. A single deviation from this pattern is the chapter on Iran, which has the latter “inserting its tendrils into Latin America” (p. 139) in order to seek support for its nuclear program, and also takes seriously claims of Iran supporting a purported “Venezuelan nuclear program” (p. 140). Existing Iranian



and Hezbollah contacts to the Latin American underworld are then described in order to produce an alarmist picture in which “ALBA is the vehicle through which Iran has been able to infiltrate the Americas” (p. 143). These ideas mostly rely on an associative connection of actually reported events or statements (the supposed Venezuelan nuclear program was rhetorically invented by Chávez in 2009), and are phrased so obviously hyperbolically that existing and very legitimate concerns about Iranian activities might be tarnished by association. This style remains, however, an exception.

The excellent chapter on Israel, by Arie M. Kacowicz, Exequiel Lacovsky and Daniel F. Wajner, highlights the early engagement of Israel with several Latin American partners, and describes their oscillation between welcome Israeli technical cooperation, especially on agricultural matters, and Third World solidarity with Palestinian causes. The latter tendency was strengthened, mostly on the political left, by Israeli weapons sales to military dictatorships and support for U.S. proxies in the Central American wars of the 1980s. The bloody Hezbollah terrorist attacks in 1990s’ Argentina have not generated a corresponding backlash. Nowadays, despite occasional symbolic spats, Israel is welcomed by most countries in the region as an independent provider of technology, not least in the security sector. However, it is possible that ideological polarization (and the belief of some in antisemitic conspiracy theories) on one side, and concern about Iranian activities on the other, will again politicize Israel-Latin America relations.

The volume continues with chapters on South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, which focus mostly on economics and development cooperation. Jörn Dosch provides a skeptical assessment of inter-regionalism between ASEAN and the various Latin American groupings. Gladys Lechini and Agustina Marchetti describe the oscillation of South African engagement with Latin America as oscillating between South-South solidarity, South Atlantic regionalism, and BRICS, all of which face an uncertain future. Sean Burges’ chapter on Australia decries the country’s almost systematic lack of interest in otherwise promising relations with Latin America, despite promising opportunities, especially in designing responses to environmental problems, such as desertification. All of these analyses have in common that intermediate powers base their engagement (or non-engagement) with Latin America on previously existing foreign policy narratives, and not on any specific expertise on the region. Apparently, the latter is not necessarily fundamentally lacking, but does have problems to make itself heard vis-à-vis regional expertise on regions with a presence of more wealth or hard power as driving forces of foreign policy.

The book closes with a conclusion by its editor. Among the findings are that emerging powers from different world regions saw Latin American countries as ideal partners both for opening new markets as well as for enhancing their own legitimacy in world politics. Yet, for most of the parties involved, the surge in activity was not motivated by systemic pressures, but rather guided by domestic interests and norms. Extra-hemispheric powers’ interests were also geographically concentrated, with the U.S. being most relevant in the northern areas of Latin America, and the EU

concentrating on Brazil and Mexico. At the same time, Latin American countries were generally the more passive part in extra-hemispheric relations, and this passivity might account for the fundamentally unchanged trade imbalances that keep Latin America in its position as a commodity exporter.

Regarding the conceptual thrust of the volume, “sub-imperialism”, “neo-extractivism” and “South-South cooperation” (p. 271) are evaluated as useful descriptors, but also as limited in scope and explanatory power. Specifically, the hopes often associated with South-South approaches have not been fulfilled in the Latin American case. *External Powers in Latin America* is unrivalled in its empirical scope, and will likely be successful – also as a textbook, since many lecturers will value the parallel structure of its chapters, which also happen to be full of ‘teachable facts’. In some individual chapters, excessive emphasis is placed on policy minutiae, sometimes at the cost of conceptualization and interpretation. In any case, the reader will almost certainly acquire a richer and more nuanced understanding of Latin America’s external relations, which means that the book delivers on its ambitious central promise.

*Venezuela’s Authoritarian Allies: The Ties That Bind?*, edited by Cynthia J. Arnson, is dedicated to authoritarian great powers’ cooperation with Venezuela, which might be the ‘easy case’ for the external threat narrative so often offered by some think tanks and policy experts. The editor’s introduction describes Venezuela’s catastrophic trajectory over the last years, but does not fall into superficial threat narratives. It commits to a sober analysis of the Maduro regime’s external supporters’ interests, perceptions, and strategies. This challenge is taken up by Vladimir Rouvinski’s description of Venezuela as “Russia’s Gordian Knot in Latin America”, who argues that the engagement should be interpreted as “a political spectacle portraying Russia’s return as a global power” for the benefit of domestic audiences (p. 23). Recent developments in Ukraine, as well as some earlier analyses of Russian conflict behavior, might underline the interpretation that Russian power has generally been overestimated, and is often put at the service of showmanship more than of strategic interests.<sup>7</sup>

However, he does not exclude the possibility that some Russian decision-makers see Venezuela’s situation as caused by U.S. influence, and may sincerely believe in more profitable engagement in an undefined future. They might even face significant risks if their commercial engagement turns problematic. The Venezuelan side values this support, and repays it with symbolically significant acts such as the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which allow Russia to represent such acts as reciprocal for Western encroachment on its own ‘near abroad’, and as a return to the glory days of the Soviet Union: “Venezuela was given almost twice as much attention by Channel One, for example, as Belorussia” (p. 41). In many cases, Venezuela is rhetorically connected to Syria as examples of Russian resistance against U.S.-led regime change. However, this has not enhanced the fortunes of Russian enterprises working under the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kleinschmidt, Jochen. 2019. “Offensive Realism, Differentiation Theory, and the War in Ukraine.” *International Politics* 56 (4): 427-443.



unpredictable circumstances of contemporary Venezuela – exemplified by the never-ending story of the planned Kalashnikov factory, which has apparently fallen victim to the repeated theft of funds by both Russian and Venezuelan middlemen, or by the apparent flight of Russian oil companies after the imposition of U.S. sanctions.

While Russian engagement seems to be motivated by, if not geopolitics, then certainly geopolitical showmanship, the Chinese presence is presented in a very different light by Stephen B. Kaplan and Michael Penfold – namely, and again counter to alarmist narratives, it is interpreted mainly as a continuation of the typical emphasis on commercial engagement and infrastructure investment. Hoping to gain a foothold in the Latin American energy sector, Chinese investors committed to a risky strategy of accepting future crude oil production as collateral for loans, calculating that PdVSA's production capacities would be guaranteed at all costs by the Venezuelan leadership, given the oil dependency of their country. This calculation has now been proven wrong by events – actually, the repayment of Chinese loans itself may have led to the underinvestment in capacity – and as a result, Chinese financial engagement has in fact been reduced since 2014, except for some face-saving debt relief grants. Contrary to an offensive-realist interpretation of events, China actually is in a defensive position vis-à-vis the extreme skepticism with which neighboring countries have reacted to its misadventure with a pariah government not even recognized by some of those neighbors.

The deeper causes of these failures are ultimately the highly idiosyncratic strategies of risk management practiced by Chinese banks, which are being replaced by more conventional sovereign risk calculations. From the Venezuelan side, Chinese loans were originally seen as a sign of autonomy from the U.S. and international financial institutions and their conditionalities, but the investments they enabled were either fictitious or commercially unviable. The loans did, however, enable a massive expansion of the state role in the economy. Now, after the collapse of the oil sector, they have tied both China and Venezuela into an increasingly unsustainable relation. In order to manage this, Chinese leaders have even met with opposition candidates in order to ensure some semblance of stability in case of a change in government, and, during the increasingly conflictive development of the situation in 2019, went out of their way to appear non-partisan – a strong contrast to Russian political solidarity with Maduro. The authors provide a well-researched explanation of this mishap, which is a far cry from the alarmist assumptions often underlying narratives of Chinese-Venezuelan relations.

The next two chapters deal with Cuba, which is not an extra-hemispheric actor, and therefore not precisely within the purview of this review, but it is worth noting that they describe the relation with Venezuela as a mostly transactional one, instead of the ideological bloc often written about by both skeptical and sympathetic authors. Yet, the U.S. sanctions have generated a high degree of mutual dependence for both sides. The final three chapters discuss Venezuela's relations with extra-hemispheric actors which are, in contrast to China or Russia, not likely interested in the country for ideological or power-political reasons. Hari Seshasayee's chapter on India demonstrates

how the recent drastic increase in the latter's imports of Venezuelan oil were caused by the combination of sanctions on Iran, the previous main supplier of oil to India, by the presence of heavy crude refineries there, which could process the Orinoco Sour brand of oil, and by India's diversification strategy. Despite some cultural exchange activities, the relation is thus "largely apolitical" (p. 160), driven by incidental factors and situational pressures. Of course, the current collapse of Venezuelan oil extraction as well as U.S. sanctions against the country, with which India has complied, have massively decreased the amount shipped to India.

Imdat Oner's chapter on Turkey's engagement with Venezuela also shines light on a seldomly explored bilateral relation. In this case, motives are more mixed. Initially considered as mere spectacle, and perhaps driven by personal affinity between the two strongmen Erdoğan and Maduro as well as by a shared dislike of the U.S., the relation has begun to economically revolve around Turkey's enabling of Venezuelan gold exports (mostly, apparently, monetizing the latter's gold reserves), often in bartering trades for food, evading international sanctions and generating an extra source of income for both countries. Subsequently, both sides also found common ground on issues such as the Israel-Palestinian conflict. James Bosworth's chapter on Iran-Venezuela relations closes the volume. This relation has often been described in menacing terms by U.S. foreign policy hawks. Yet, according to this sober analysis, it is essentially a case of the two countries serving as "black knights" (p. 202) for each other – that is to say, they support each other's sanction evasion. Iran also had much previous experience in dealing with comprehensive financial and trade sanctions, which it was happy to pass on to its South American ally. Of course, the two partners also "embrace the opaque nature of their cooperation and sometimes even play on the legitimate concerns and paranoia of those monitoring their relationship" (p. 216).

*Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies* is a valuable contribution, not only to the policy debate on Venezuela, but also to the wider literature on South-South relations and autocratic alliances. The only aspect perhaps missing from the book is a conclusion which would further the debate on autocratic South-South cooperation, a desideratum which all chapters already contribute to meaningfully. It sets the record straight on myths that have been perpetuated by alarmist policy analysts. The Venezuela displayed in the book is, despite its morally bankrupt regime with its displays of multiple forms of criminal behavior, not an outpost for expansionist authoritarian great powers. It is very much a quagmire to which other more or less beleaguered outsiders of the U.S.-centric world order were attracted for various reasons, generally derived from their specific needs and problems at the specific moment, and who are now left with a multidimensional crisis on their hands.

The last book reviewed here is *Latin America in Global International Relations*, edited by Amitav Acharya, Melisa Deciancio and Diana Tussie – and thus by three recognized voices in the discussion on theoretical IR from the Global South, two of them from Latin America. The title is derived from the 'Global IR' debate started by former International Studies Association president Amitav Acharya, who lamented the low participation

of scholars from the Global South in the generation of theoretical knowledge in the discipline. In contrast to the other reviewed contributions, this volume does not seek to analyze empirical cases, but rather presents the considerable theoretical contributions that Latin American scholars have made to a field in which theory (and not methodology or problem-solving explanatory studies) is at the apex of scholarly prestige. However, already in the editors' introduction, the problematique frequently mentioned above is also located the heart of their undertaking: Contrary to some pessimist narratives, Latin America *does* have political agency vis-à-vis the external world.

But if this is the case, should it not also participate in “scientific decentering” (p. 1), and challenge the theories generated in the traditional geographic centers of academic production? The authors answer in the affirmative, and their undertaking is particularly interesting in the context of Latin American and Caribbean IR thinking, which “is neither fully ‘Western’ nor ‘non-Western’” (p. 2), and has recently benefitted from heightened interest in indigenous intellectual traditions. In the second chapter, Arie M. Kacowicz and Daniel F. Wajner discuss alternative world order models developed in the context of Latin American IR, in a regional context that has often been ‘overlooked’ in futures designed in Northern academia. The authors highlight Latin American intellectuals’ historical experience with informal external hegemony as well as their unique ability to function as norm entrepreneurs from a disadvantaged position, and thus contributing significantly to the formation of international legal norms of non-intervention and collective security. They then discuss the impact those traditions have had on approaches such as dependency theory or peripheral realism, arriving at the conclusion that the specific regional experiences of Latin American IR may make their contributions to world order scenarios relevant for making sense of developments far beyond the limits of Latin America itself.

Carsten-Andreas Schulz discusses the role of Latin American states as norm entrepreneurs, and uses this as a springboard to delve more thoroughly into the question of Southern agency in IR theory – a problem that has showed up multiple times in the empirical works discussed above, and thus seems to respond to a conceptual necessity. After a thorough consideration of the merits and problems of “non-hegemonic agency” and “autonomy” (p. 33) – “autonomy denotes the degree to which actors can pursue their own interests under external constraints, agency refers to the ability to act upon and transform these forces” (p. 41)– Schulz arrives at the conclusion that relational IR theories might be able to bridge the space left open between the two concepts, and account for the possibility that even marginalized actors could act upon a system’s structure through exploiting their positionality in pre-existing networks.

Matias Spektor continues with a study of Latin American security regionalism during the Cold War, illustrating that even a liberal regional hegemon such as the U.S. may spread repressive practices and therefore contribute to the maintenance of autocratic regimes. Support for these practices, however, enabled Latin American authoritarian elites to also violate other aspects of hegemonic liberalism, such as free trade norms. Kristina Hinds then presents the underappreciated potential contribution

of Caribbean thought traditions, which have been shaped by a pronounced and long-term exposure to the activities of external colonial powers, to IR theory. These are exemplified by scholars such as “C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and Walter Rodney” (p. 68). Specifically, the chapter forcefully and convincingly makes the point that Caribbean IR’s advanced understanding of transnational social structures, racialized hierarchies, the local effects of globalized capitalism, as well as a subversive attitude towards disciplinary boundaries, constitute strong points that may contribute to current and future debates.

Amaya Querejazu and Arlene B. Tickner contribute a chapter on the disciplinary politics of IR in Latin America. According to their critique, the concept of Global IR suffers from the same paradoxes as “likeminded (liberal) gestures toward tolerance and inclusion, such as multi-culturalism or global governance” (p. 90), which implicitly assume the existence of a shared cognitive framework. They then describe approaches such as dependency theory or the autonomy school, typically considered as autochthonous Latin American, as mainstreamed by ontological assumptions, such as state-centricity, that are ultimately derived from colonial patterns of thought. In contrast, subversive intellectual traditions such as liberation theology, participative action research and liberation pedagogy, as well as relational indigenous and Afro-descendent thought, all hitherto ignored in IR, might contribute to an actually *unsettling* decolonization of IR theory.

Oliver Stuenkel then discusses implications of the rise of China for Latin America. After describing “the disjuncture between the Western template and standard narrative about the US-led liberal order and Latin America’s experience in that order” (p. 111), he argues that “Chinese diplomatic initiatives in the developing world have been long underestimated by Western observers” (p. 115), and foresees a future for Latin America in which U.S. hegemony is effectively challenged by China. This appears to be a potentially controversial argument, considering that many of the more detailed studies of Chinese engagement in Latin America, some of them reviewed above, do not perceive this as likely. Attributing disagreement with or resistance to Chinese activities in African or Asian countries to “Sinophobia” (p. 114) also seems somewhat schematic. On the other hand, highlighting the potential impact of Latin America’s ethnic Chinese community in this relation corrects a huge oversight of much contemporary literature.

Jorgelina Loza’s chapter on Latin American feminism describes its perspective as being marked by the particularly deep influence of colonial power relations, so that its critique is generally somewhat distant from universalist Northern feminisms, and insists instead on a multiplicity of regional gender regimes. Cintia Quiliconi and Renato Rivera Rhon then outline the development of a special brand of International Political Economy (IPE) in Latin America, describing it as both closer to practical policy reasoning as well as theoretically inspired by structuralism, dependency theory, and focused on regionalist institutions as a problem-solving mechanism. Regionalism as a theoretical concept is also discussed by Arturo Santa-Cruz, who

argues against common diagnoses that relegate Latin American regionalism to the realm of hopeful fiction. Rather, on the level of social identities, integration projects did have and do have significant impact on the normative order of the hemisphere.

Stefano Palestini reviews the contribution of dependency theorists to Global IR, providing a history and a typology of the diverse approaches within the dependency framework, and discussing criticisms such as those mentioned above in the same volume. He then sketches paths forward for future development of the theory, emphasizing the potential of causal mechanism and scalar approaches for a contemporary version of this classical theory. Fabrício H. Chagas-Bastos then presents the concept of “insertion” as a Latin American innovation in IR theory, based on a conceptual history approach, and emphasizing the close relation of concept development with the policy orientation of most regional IR scholars. Insertion should be understood as the “coordination of domestic policies towards the international” (p. 213) with the aim of acquiring “agentic spaces within the global hierarchies” (p. 214). This chapter again highlights the specific hierarchical understanding of world politics common in Latin American IR, and is a welcome and important clarification of a concept which is all too often used without further reflection in the literature.

María Cecilia Míguez also presents a conceptual discussion, in this case on the autonomy approach, which also arose as a critique of global hierarchies, and also has a strong policy connotation. It represents, essentially, a vision of peripheral state-driven development away from Northern hegemony. The author argues for resituating the concept in a relational theoretical context, and to redefine it in horizontal instead of hierarchical terms – as a situation that may be achieved in collaboration with peers, and could be transferred to spaces outside of Latin America, as a contribution to Global IR. At the end of the volume, the editors conclude that practical involvement in normative projects and an emphasis on the critique of capitalism from peripheral modernity are hallmarks of Latin American IR that may transfer well to the global community of scholars.

*Latin America in Global International Relations* has a unique ambition, at which it succeeds. Readers will be thoroughly convinced that Latin American IR has significant contributions to make to the inclusive study of world politics, and these contributions go far beyond the traditional association of Latin American scholarship with center-periphery and decolonial approaches. Whether it will actually do so will not exclusively depend on the content of Latin American IR, according to one of the final points that the editors make, but also on its language of choice: Many scholars in the region prefer publishing in Spanish or Portuguese, respectively, in order to participate in local debates – in accordance with the traditional preference for normative, political engagement. In a still generally monolingual anglophone global research community, this will undoubtedly lead to some degree of isolation.

After reading these four interesting, yet very different books, what could be learned from the experience? I believe that beyond innumerable more issue-specific lessons, three rather general points stand out – structural problems that were visible throughout

the four volumes. The first is the enormous gap between policy expert knowledge and academic studies on Latin America. This is interesting especially in the light of recent debates on policy relevance (or lack thereof) in IR.<sup>8</sup> Virtually all introductions, and many chapters, explicitly state how different their own results are from the common wisdom in many policy-oriented publications, which often contain alarmist statements, as outlined above. It appears that the regional expertise of academics specializing in Latin America is often not considered in their elaboration – rather, alarmist narratives seem to rely on making Latin America relevant for Northern audiences by pointing to the involvement of Chinese, Russian, Iranian, or other ‘hard power’ actors in the region. This may be a politically rewarding, but intellectually deficient strategy that should be counteracted, and the books reviewed here seem to consider themselves, at least to a certain degree, as parts of such counteraction.

The second problem is the lack of sufficient vocabulary for describing structural inequality within the large-scale social relations typical for IR. Unsurprisingly, almost all of the contributions reject the binarism between Latin America as an autonomous actor and the region as a passive chessboard of external powers. However, many of them – some theoretical contributions problematize this explicitly – seem at a loss for words as to how alternative diagnoses might be framed conceptually. Existing disciplinary vocabularies seem to point the scholar towards binary concepts of more or less power, agency, or hierarchical rank, which is unsatisfying. To a certain degree, this conceptual deficit has been a hallmark of theoretical engagement with the Global South,<sup>9</sup> though it may be most visible in Latin America, perhaps due to its liminal positionality as part of the subaltern South, but also of the hegemonic West.

At the same time, elaborating an answer to this problem of subaltern agency appears to this reviewer as a possible contribution that students of Latin American international relations could make to the overall discipline. In this endeavor, they might find eager allies among some Northern IR theorists who have highlighted the conceptual potential of “societal multiplicity” as a generalization of the earlier “uneven and combined development” paradigm,<sup>10</sup> which already hints at its close links to Latin American *dependencia* theories. At the core of the multiplicity approach lies the realization that the interaction of different social entities goes beyond the simplistic anarchy-hierarchy binarizations that pervade classical IR theory, and often takes more creative forms, such as the “dialectical change” of societal structures, or the “combination” of aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> Such concepts might also inform future research on

<sup>8</sup> Desch, Michael C. 2019. *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Kleinschmidt, Jochen. 2018. “Differentiation Theory and the Global South as a Metageography of International Relations.” *Alternatives* 43 (2): 59-80.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, Justin. 2016. “International Relations in the Prison of Political Science.” *International Relations* 30 (2): 129.

<sup>11</sup> Tallis, Benjamin. 2020. “An International Politics of Czech Architecture; Or, Reviving the International in International Political Sociology.” *Globalizations* 17 (3): 452-476.



Latin America's insertion in global politics, which is often not so relevant in terms of the state-to-state power calculus, but rather becomes important through direct societal interaction, be it through cultural adaptation, migration, or other processes of change.

Third, and finally, there appears to be a lack of mutual engagement between empirical researchers and area experts on Latin America, on the one hand, and IR theorists, on the other. This shows up clearly in the distribution of topics between the books: The first three are almost exclusively empirical, or feature theoretical or conceptual engagement only as a generalized framework for the discussion of events, or discuss some theoretical starting points and implications in the introduction and the conclusions, respectively. There seems to be a certain degree of hesitancy to 'cross the line' between empirical or historical research and theoretical engagement. In a discipline so focused on theoretical knowledge as the core of scholarly identities in the field, this is not a desirable situation. The works reviewed here should illustrate that there may be much to gain from such engagement, and provide several starting points to begin with.

## REVIEWED TITLES

- Acharya, Amitav, Melisa Deciancio and Diana Tussie (eds.). 2022. *Latin America in Global International Relations*. New York: Routledge. 280 pages.
- Arnson, Cynthia J. (ed.). 2021. *Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: The Ties That Bind?* Washington DC: Wilson Center. 228 pages.
- Baisotti, Pablo A. (ed.). 2022. *A New Struggle for Independence in Modern Latin America*. New York: Routledge. 382 pages.
- Gardini, Gian Luca (ed.). 2021. *External Powers in Latin America: Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation*. New York: Routledge. 310 pages.

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