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Mexico and Latin America in International Relations Theory

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Abstract

International Relations (IR) theory has traditionally been dominated by Anglo-American scholarship, raising questions about the extent to which other regions have contributed to the development of the discipline. This essay examines the place of Mexico and Latin America in IR theory and assesses the significance of their theoretical contributions. It argues that, despite the strong influence of the Anglo-American mainstream and the relative scarcity of internationally recognized regional theories, IR scholarship in Mexico and Latin America cannot be reduced to an imitation of dominant approaches. The essay identifies several distinctive areas of regional contribution, including the development of dependency theory and peripheral structuralism, reflections on the autonomy of the discipline, alternative approaches to the teaching and conceptualization of IR, and a legalist conception of international society grounded in sovereignty and non-intervention. It also distinguishes between theories, which seek to explain international phenomena, and foreign policy doctrines, which primarily guide political action. The analysis suggests that some Latin American contributions, particularly dependency theory and decolonial approaches, offer distinct perspectives on international relations and constitute relevant foundations for further theoretical development beyond the dominant Anglo-American tradition.

Keywords: International Relations, Theory, Mexico, Latin America, models, assumptions, original contributions

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Resumen

La teoría de las Relaciones Internacionales (RI) ha estado tradicionalmente dominada por la producción académica angloamericana, lo que plantea interrogantes sobre el alcance de las contribuciones de otras regiones al desarrollo de la disciplina. Este ensayo examina el lugar de México y América Latina en la teoría de las RI y evalúa la relevancia de sus aportaciones teóricas. Se sostiene que, a pesar de la fuerte influencia de la corriente dominante angloamericana y de la relativa escasez de teorías regionales reconocidas internacionalmente, la producción latinoamericana de RI no puede reducirse a una simple imitación de los enfoques dominantes. El ensayo identifica diversas áreas de contribución regional, entre ellas el desarrollo de la teoría de la dependencia y del estructuralismo periférico, la reflexión sobre la autonomía de la disciplina, enfoques alternativos para la enseñanza y conceptualización de las RI, y una concepción jurídica de la sociedad internacional basada en la soberanía y la no intervención. Asimismo, distingue entre las teorías, orientadas a explicar los fenómenos internacionales, y las doctrinas de política exterior, dirigidas principalmente a orientar la acción política. El análisis sugiere que algunas contribuciones latinoamericanas, particularmente la teoría de la dependencia y los enfoques decoloniales, ofrecen perspectivas diferenciadas sobre las relaciones internacionales y constituyen bases relevantes para continuar desarrollando la teoría más allá de la tradición dominante angloamericana.

Palabras clave: Relaciones Internacionales, teoría, México, América Latina, modelos, supuestos, contribuciones originales

Introduction

The development of International Relations (IR) as an academic field has been strongly influenced by the Anglo-American intellectual tradition. This influence has shaped not only the theoretical approaches that have achieved greater international recognition, but also the ways in which the discipline has defined its object of study, constructed its conceptual vocabulary, and established standards for theoretical knowledge. Yet the predominance of this tradition does not imply that the development of IR theory has followed a single intellectual path. Different academic communities have interpreted and constructed the international from distinct historical, political, and social contexts.

This question is particularly relevant in the case of Mexico and Latin America. Although theoretical production from the region has generally received less international recognition than work produced in the Anglo-American academy, Latin American scholars have developed distinctive approaches to international affairs and have adapted broader theoretical debates to the particular circumstances of the region. The question, therefore, is not simply whether Mexico and Latin America have produced theories comparable to those traditionally regarded as constitutive of the discipline, but rather how their intellectual contributions should be understood and assessed.

A significant contribution to IR theory may be understood as a set of assumptions and concepts, organized through meaningful analytical models, that provides a better

understanding of events and processes in the international sphere. The value of theory, however, is not limited to explanation. Theoretical reflection can also inform the analysis of foreign policy and contribute to the development of a professional identity for those who study international affairs. In this sense, theory is closely connected to praxis, while remaining analytically distinct from foreign policy doctrines. The former seeks to provide explanations that can be revised in light of evidence, whereas the latter primarily establishes principles or guidelines for political action.

This distinction is important when examining the Latin American experience. Much of the region's intellectual production has been closely connected to practical concerns, particularly development, autonomy, sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomacy, and international law. Some of these contributions were formulated primarily as foreign policy doctrines rather than as formal theories of international relations. Others, however, developed broader analytical and theoretical propositions capable of offering distinctive interpretations of the international system. The boundary between these two forms of intellectual production is therefore central to assessing the region's contribution to IR.

The discussion also requires distinguishing between international relations as a field of study and International Relations as an academic discipline. The international encompasses a broad range of social processes and interactions that can be examined from the perspective of different disciplines. International Relations, by contrast, may be understood as a more specific intellectual endeavor concerned with the systematic study of the international as a distinctive object of analysis (Sarquís, 2011, 2014, 2021). Whether IR should be regarded as an autonomous discipline or as an interdisciplinary field remains contested. Nevertheless, the distinction is relevant to understanding how IR developed institutionally and theoretically in different regions.

Against this background, this essay examines the development of IR theory in Mexico and Latin America and identifies several areas in which scholars from the region have made distinctive contributions. Rather than presenting these contributions as a fully developed regional school or as a homogeneous alternative to the Anglo-American mainstream, the essay focuses on five interconnected dimensions: the autonomy of IR as a discipline; philosophical and theoretical reflection on the construction of the discipline; conceptual precision in the study of international affairs; alternative approaches to the teaching of IR theory; and a legalist conception of international society grounded in sovereignty and non-intervention. These dimensions provide a basis for assessing the extent to which Latin American scholarship has developed original perspectives while also recognizing the continuing influence of dominant approaches.

The argument advanced here is that Mexican and Latin American IR cannot be adequately characterized as a mere reproduction of theories developed elsewhere.

Although the region has produced relatively few formal theories with broad international recognition, its scholars have repeatedly adapted, challenged, and transformed existing approaches in response to regional historical and geopolitical circumstances. Dependency theory, peripheral structuralism, autonomy-based approaches, and more recent decolonial perspectives illustrate this process. The resulting contributions may not constitute a single coherent regional theory, but they provide distinctive perspectives that can enrich the theoretical study of international relations.²

The autonomy of the discipline

The disciplinary status of IR has been a matter of debate for over half a century now. The basic reason for this lies in the complex nature of the object of study. Gurien posed the question almost eight decades ago:

We have assumed as self-evident that there can be a study of international relations as a particular subject. But is such an assumption actually self-evident? The question may be raised: Are general courses in international relations not a kind of mixture, concocted from various subjects, and determined in their composition by practical considerations and by the particular interest of the teacher? (Gurien, 1946: 275).

That question is still in the air. Gurien adds: a general course in international relations seems manifestly an unsystematic putting together and presentation of material which the student can properly study only by taking separate courses in the component fields (1946: 277). In the absence of a better answer to the question of the proper object of study for IR, the author points to the need for a multidisciplinary effort for the understanding of international affairs.

The author focuses on the different processes occurring at the international level because of the varied forms of interactions among states, without contemplating a system, as do most critics of the idea of an autonomous discipline of IR. The argument persists today, especially among those who perceive the international scenario as a fragmented set of international agents acting randomly in pursuit of their own national interests, rather than as members of an integrated whole.

Here again, from my own perspective, it is true that international processes are all social in nature, political, economic, cultural, legal, and so on, reason for which social studies in general must be inherently multi and interdisciplinary, because they are intrinsically interconnected; however, it's the environment or realm where international phenomena occur that gives them a differentiated meaning, which deserves a new treatment, different

2 Some of the ideas developed in this essay were originally presented by the author in the opening address at the ISA-AMEI meeting held at Universidad del Mar, Huatulco, Oaxaca, in June 2025. This essay has extended and developed those ideas.

from all other social disciplines.³

That is why the system, as an interconnected ensemble, becomes a proper object of study for internationalists, different from the separate analysis of the parts in isolation. I find this view to be the best argument to defend the autonomy of IR as a discipline.⁴ In this sense, international relations are total social facts, of the kind suggested by Mauss⁵ (1923-24), occurring not within, but among human societies. Aron takes the same stand when discussing the specificity of international relations (1967: 851).⁶

Part of the problem lies in the lack of a generalized consensus regarding the definition of ‘discipline’, which is the first step several academics undertake to start the debate. I propose, as an operational category, that a discipline in academia can be considered as an intellectual effort aimed at a specific object of study.⁷ Without a clearly defined subject matter, it is difficult to speak of discipline in any meaningful way.

In other words, disciplines become academic matters when:

- a. Their area of particular interest is delimited and thus, differentiated from other fields of analysis;
- b. A group of scholars accepts this area of interest as their proper object of study and explores it to make it meaningfully intelligible from a new perspective;
- c. These epistemic communities present forms of representation of their object of study for peer review;
- d. Efforts are made by private and public institutions to create the proper infrastructure

3 In this sense, the classic differentiation between the internal and external domains of political power, shaped by different cultural systems and regulated by separate legal frameworks, is still valid, despite claims of a globalized world where borders are disappearing.

4 Not to be confused with autonomy as a theoretical proposal for political action, both internal and external, as suggested, for example, by Juan Carlos Puig and Helio Jaguaribe (Míguez, 2021).

5 Social reality is multidisciplinary, as Marcel Mauss suggested with his concept of the total social fact, according to Levi-Strauss (1987), which implies the holistic nature of society and the interconnectedness of all social events, none of which can be truly understood in isolation. Disciplines are intellectual tools to deal with the complexity of reality. They are useful in that they can identify a proper object of study to dismember, but they only become meaningful when they join their efforts to integrate a holistic representation of reality. An all-embracing discipline should have a clearly defined object of study to reflect on, from a distinctive perspective no other discipline contemplates; such object of study is, from my point of view, the international system as an integrated whole. There will always be overlap when considering the processes occurring within the system, of course. However, the international perspective should focus on the system rather than its constituent parts separately. Such a view takes us to contemplate humanity from a holistic perspective and provides internationalists with a distinctive professional identity.

6 The defense of IR’s disciplinary autonomy is, from my point of view, an important contribution for the development of IR theory, not as a theory in itself, of course, but as an opportunity to focus on formulating specific theories for our own object of study.

7 The idea might be controversial if one considers that each discipline should have exclusive access (property rights) over its object of study. It is not the case. Nature, for example, is an enormous object of study, and it has given rise to a host of ‘natural sciences’ advocating specific (and interrelated) processes. It is the same with society. Thus, we can safely conclude, 1) all sciences are interrelated; therefore, science is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor, and 2) a discipline becomes such as a function of the specificity of the analytical perspective it undertakes regarding the processes it studies.

for the development of an academic activity, where disciples are formed and contribute to the creation of theoretical proposals, which help consolidate schools of thought. These, in turn, help consolidate not only the identity of practitioners but also the character of the discipline.

In other words, the object of study must not only be identified and delimited but also accepted as such by other analysts. The main problem for internationalists has been the dispute with other social analysts (political scientists, sociologists, economists, lawyers, historians and some others) who claim they had been working on international affairs long before a discipline of IR was created.

This claim is basically true, but it needs to be put in context. Awareness of the existence of other people beyond a local community and the inevitability of their influence has a long history dating back to prehistoric times. This led to an analysis of specific forms of interaction, political, legal, economic, cultural, etc., separately. The idea that this interconnectedness created a new social system, beyond and above its components, is fairly new; it is a systemic understanding of international relations that paves the way for a new discipline.

The road to disciplinary status in IR

According to Dunn (2001: Sec. 3), the underlying assumption of the first years of academic IR was that of state-centricity, shared by both Reformers and political Realists, although each from a different perspective. That set of assumptions is important because it defines what the academic discipline is 'about', what analysts discuss, and what is passed down through successive generations of students and teachers.

Such a view persisted until the 1960s under the aegis of political science. Until then, the proper object of study for IR was thought to be international politics; thus, the disciplinary matrix was political science. Dunn claims that "by the 1960s, International Relations began to change. The emphasis on 'Relations' was, for many, more encompassing than 'Politics', stressing a wider grasp than political relationships per se" (2001: 10).

It became increasingly acknowledged that international relations was a field of study larger than international politics (Aron, 2017 [1966]: 1), but for many still, only a field of study, not properly speaking a discipline. Wright specifically said:

The term international relations will therefore be used as the subject of study, dividing it into such special studies as international politics, international law, international organization, international economics, international education, international ethics, and the psychology and sociology of international relations. The term will, however, also be used to include such studies as world history, political geography, political demography, and technology, which have a world rather than an international orientation (1955: 7).

Wight (1966) and Kaplan (1966), both well-known pioneers of IR, wrote articles specifically addressing the disciplinary status of IR, and each denied that it should be considered a discipline. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, however, an effort was made to justify the idea of an autonomous discipline (not separate nor independent, but autonomous) within the context of the social sciences, thus acknowledging the holistic nature and the complexity of internationality.⁸

Naturally, not everyone accepted the idea. However, some of the scholars mentioned in the footnote recognized students' complaints regarding the varied nature and orientation of the courses received in programs of international relations, because they felt uncertain of the connection between them and found it difficult to understand what the objective of their formation was.

Also, many of those courses seemed to start from antagonistic assumptions and thus arrived at seemingly contradictory conclusions, generating increasing confusion among the student population. This is where systems thinking becomes a useful method to visualize a complex, nonlinear totality, which is different from the mechanical sum of its parts.

It has been a major concern in Mexico and several other Latin American countries (although not exclusive to this area) to argue in favor of an autonomous discipline of IR⁹ and to search for a justification in the existence of a proper object of study. In its origin, even before the end of the First World War, the study of international relations was limited to analyzing interstate relations and foreign policy; thus, international politics seemed to be the proper academic tool and object of study within the area (Grant, Greenwood, Hughes, Kerr, and Urquhart, 1916).

Since political science took care of that, an independent discipline of IR was deemed superfluous in many countries. For this reason, even today, many consider IR as a subdiscipline of political science. My own position is that IR is an autonomous discipline with its own object of study: the international system.

The main challenge in this regard is to identify and delimit a segment of social reality not covered by other disciplines, that is, the international dimension of this reality, an area that only takes shape when human politics interact with each other. Our region has been

8 There is a long list of professors who advocated this idea in their courses, even though few wrote specifically about it. In México, the list would include: Héctor Cuadra, Emilio Cárdenas, Graciela Arrollo, Alfredo Romero, Roberto Peña, Ileana Cid, Araceli González, Teresa Pérez, Alberto Lozano, Ricardo Villanueva, among many others. In Latin America, the list includes: Luciano Tomassini, Celso Lafer, Gustavo Lagos, Arlene B. Tickner, Hélio Jaguaribe, Gelson Fonseca Jr., Juan Carlos Puig, Roberto Russell, Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, among the best known.

9 Major supporters of this idea in the Anglo-American academy include C. A. W. Manning, Quincy Wright, Stanley Hoffmann, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz, although, in general, the notion of a sub-discipline of political science has prevailed in their countries. The work of Turton (2015) is a major contribution to the defence of our disciplinary autonomy outside the Latin American region.

one of the pioneering areas of the world holding this position.

While most of the world considers international relations a material object of study, few accept the idea of an autonomous discipline to address it and instead place its study within another disciplinary framework, preferably Political Science in the Anglo-Saxon world or Sociology among the French and the Spaniards. This mainstream approach contributes to creating an identity crisis among internationalists, who, even after completing their undergraduate studies, still have doubts about the true meaning and scope of their professional training.

The field of international activity in Mexico and Latin America can be traced back to the days of the birth of the region to independence, during the early part of the 19th century. There may not have been much academic reflection as such on it, but the roots of an international perspective are clearly anchored in the need of a foreign policy for the newly born Latin American states and can be found in the early fathers of these new actors on the international scene.

Simón Bolívar, José Ma. Morelos, Andrés Bello, and Benito Juárez are among the most prominent examples of early awareness of internationality in the region and the early development of international thought.

They may not have formulated an academic theory of international relations, because the discipline did not exist as such for this realm of study, but there is a clear awareness of the need to interact with others in their socio-political thoughts. It is in this sense that their ideas regarding the international can be considered as important precedents for the development of theoretical thinking in IR in the region.

Despite those who reject the idea of IR as an autonomous discipline, those in favor normally argue that IR emerged as a distinctive discipline during the interwar period of the 20th century.

Revisionists who question this traditional narrative do not ignore the relevance of WWI and all the changes it brought in international thought, as many authors claim: “due to the enormous impact of the First World War, the discipline of International Relations emerged formally, independently, and with its own identity, starting in 1919” (Velázquez, 2024: 11). The author claims revisionists have not considered, with the necessary depth, the effect that this conflict had on establishing that date as the official appearance of this discipline.

Revisionists are determined to prove: a) 1919 is only a conventional date which accommodates the interest of the world powers to justify their role in reshaping international order without affecting their own interests; b) there is plenty of evidence of academic reflection on international affairs long before WWI; and c) there is scant

evidence to speak meaningfully of a formally independent discipline with its own identity, starting in 1919. Here again, though, it is important to bear in mind the difference between international relations as a material object and IR as an academic discipline.

In the end, international relations can be fruitfully studied both from the perspective of an autonomous discipline or a subdiscipline of some other major disciplinary endeavor. The difference, though, lies in the focus each perspective offers: a subdiscipline is defined by the main interest of the major discipline where it is placed; that is, it will focus mainly on politics, law, the economy, culture, or any other process considered as an object of analysis, and it will privilege the national interest of the country where the observer studied. In this sense, the view from a sub-discipline in international relations tends to be tribal (not in a pejorative sense but limited by the interests of a particular group of people, placing the interests of others in second place).

An autonomous discipline will focus on the general condition of the international system at large: how it is formed, how it operates, changes, and eventually disappears, transformed into something new. The internationalist perspective is inherently cosmopolitan and is focused on the effects of the interconnectedness that shapes and conditions the structure, the functions, the behavior, and the evolution of the international system.

The philosophical nature of theoretical reflection

It is true that, in general, the development of the philosophy of science in Latin America has been influenced by the predominance of theories coming from other regions; thus, their scope and reach, as well as the knowledge they produce, must be seen from the peripheral conditions of our societies.

Awareness of this influence, however, has allowed Latin American researchers in different fields to contextualize the production of knowledge and adjust it to our historical experience; thus, even if external influence is a fact, the vision of the local is real and valid too.

Most Latin American contributions to the development of IR theory should be seen in this light. Original concepts may come from other places, but when adopted, they are also adapted, not only to explain our own socio-political and economic realities, but to transcend them.

Recognition of the basic philosophical nature of theoretical reflection in our field has made it possible to rethink the analysis of the various theoretical proposals in the field of International Relations, beyond the classical narrative of the 'debates' as the theoretical foundation of IR.

Debates entail ideas, it is true, and they are important because they become the

foundation for agency, but not all ideas in debates constitute theories, nor real innovations in theoretical thinking. It is not frequent that true innovation appears in IR theory, as Wight denounced in 1966. The basic concepts to interpret international phenomena have been borrowed from other disciplines, and many of these interpretations seem like variations of the same tune.

The study of theory as a philosophical endeavor, revising its basic assumptions and the logic of its arguments, paves the way for the development of an autonomous discipline of IR, which must be based on its own ontological and epistemological assumptions, without forgetting the intrinsic nature of the interconnectedness of all social sciences as well as the importance of contextuality.

It is not only a matter of explaining the functioning of the international system (or the behavior of international actors individually), but of recognizing in this effort a philosophical dimension that most classical theoretical texts simply took for granted, without delving into the nature of this problem.

Mainstream theory seems to believe that all the people of the world perceive the same reality and interpret it in the same way. The relation of power and subordination would be the same anywhere in the world; the struggle for power would be the same everywhere. The advent of anthropological studies since the end of the 19th century has made it evident that culture matters and that views of the world (*weltanschauung*) are an important variable in analyzing the interaction with others (Sarquís, 1998, 2002, 2024). This is a crucial aspect in the development of IR theory.

Like many other intellectuals in this region, Seara was also skeptical about the role of theory; not that he did not believe in the need and the importance of theory; his main concern was that theoreticians tend to get too tangled up in the theory of theory rather than in the search for practical solutions to real problems.

Like John Burton (1965), Seara felt theoreticians should avoid eternal debates about metaphysics and endless, relativist discussions over competing truth claims and essentialist concepts and favor the search for pragmatic solutions to actual problems. David Lake has expressed a view that clearly captures the spirit of this approach to theory. Referring to mid-range theories, he says: “theories are preferred which can link the incentives and actions of real individuals or possibly groups of relatively homogeneous individuals to policy outcomes in a consistent way” (2013: 573).

Tickner, analyzing the case of Latin America, also seems to agree with this view when she writes: “In fact, those regional scholars who do attempt to distance themselves from events on the ground are normally scorned for being “too academic.” The primacy of practical knowledge susceptible to being translated into policy formulae, and the scarcity

of theoretically inclined scholarship in IR are derived from this condition” (Tickner, 2008: 745).

These topics have been relevant to the development of IR in this region. Some analysts explore theoretical contributions, especially those beyond the mainstream currents, to justify the disciplinary condition of IR, while others focus on the intense academic and diplomatic activities deployed by Mexican and Latin American internationalists to emphasize the field of study. Theory and practice should keep an unbreakable bond, always in a dialectical relation to one another (that is, a relation of mutual influence in a nonlinear model of interaction).

Theoretical proposals should aim beyond explanation to problem-solving constructions. It is, however, necessary to bear in mind the need for metatheoretical reflection. Such effort allows us to contemplate the process of theory construction, from identifying a problem to hypothesizing, modelling, and proposing explanations and possible solutions.

However, it is important to recognize what is characteristic of a theory. Aron writes:

In fact, the distinction is rarely made explicitly between related but distinct concepts such as model, ideal type, conceptualization, or even empirically observed regularities. What authors call theory falls more or less under one or another of these categories or perhaps contains, in varying proportions, elements borrowed from one or the other (Aron, 1967: 837).

Following this line of thought, it seems to me that at least some of the considered major theoretical contributions for the development of IR theory in the Latin American region correspond more to the notion of doctrines of foreign policy than proper theories. We must not forget, however, that doctrines also depart from basic assumptions, like theories. Theories, though, should normally be based upon a considerable body of accumulated evidence, while doctrines, on the other hand, are a set of subjective ideas for which no verifiable evidence is readily available, but which serve the purpose of guiding agency in praxis (Sotirovic, 2025).

That is, rather than explaining the nature and functioning of the object of study, they are aimed at suggesting how Latin American countries should behave in the international arena to improve their condition. Often, from this point of view, they would seem like old wine in new bottles, especially seen from a distinctive ahistorical perspective.

Actual contributions

Especially during the sixties and seventies of the past century, many IR theory courses in the region fed on historical materialism. Following this tradition, Latin American

specialists in IR (and in other social sciences) delved deeply into metatheoretical aspects of theory building. Anglo-American experts normally considered these to be ideological premises rather than serious IR theories.¹⁰

It is, however, precisely during this period that theoretical analysis seems to have been more productive with the development of different variants of dependency theory, peripheral structuralism, and anti-imperialist explanations of the prevailing situation in the region.¹¹ These had a tremendous social cost for a full generation of young men and women, who lost their lives in the pursuit of their ideals during the so-called epoch of the “dirty wars”, all the way from northern Mexico and the Caribbean to southern Argentina and Chile.

The cost of revolutionary theories of international relations was immense for the whole region and could help explain the lack of further development of IR theory in the region, since many of their proposals were discarded along with the young revolutionaries who died during the period of the dirty wars.

According to Santa Cruz (2022: Abstract section), “Mexican IR is akin to a platypus, the peculiar creature not only in that it stands apart from the contributions of both culturally similar countries, such as those of Latin America, and structurally similar positioned states, such as Canada, as well as from those originating in the United States, but also for its paucity”.

Given this account, it would seem difficult to speak meaningfully about original Latin American contributions to the theoretical study of IR theory. Despite intense academic and practical activity in international relations in the region, Santa Cruz bases his judgment on the scant production of original theoretical work penned by Mexican authors and the large amount of literature following mainstream perspectives.

Domínguez shares a similar view. A decade and a half ago, she posed the question: What kind of training do students of IR receive in Mexico? She focused her analysis on her own *alma mater*, El Colegio de México (Colmex). First, she noticed the program (focused on regional studies) had not changed significantly in over 20 years; after close scrutiny of the courses’ syllabus, she interviewed the coordinator and several professors. As a result, she found they were mainly based on classical IR theories, especially realism, with special emphasis on security studies. Additionally, over 90% of the reading list is in English with well-known names like Huntington, Mearsheimer, Rosenau, Morgenthau, Waltz, etc. (2010: 92).

10 Notable exceptions are worth mentioning. Among the most famous are the names of Paul Baran, Paul M. Sweezy, Noam Chomsky, Michael Parenti, Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, Edward S. Herman and Richard D. Wolff.

11 The names of Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado, Aníbal Pinto, Oswaldo Sunkel, Pedro Paz, Juan Noyola, Aldo Ferrer, Maria da Conceição Tavares are among the most prominent (Porcile, 2021).

She also analyses the case of the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE), somewhat like Colmex in its pragmatic perspective, although more focused on international political economy than regional studies, still noticeably dependent on mainstream theoretical approaches.

Understandably, Santa Cruz (2022) adds that, looking at asymmetries in the patterns of scholarly communications, the predominant use of English, the process of editorial selection, the sheer size of American literature in IR, and the predominant self-understanding of the discipline, it is difficult to make a dignifying comparison with theoretical work produced in Mexico (more conditioned by its geopolitical situation).

The situation in Latin America is not identical, but there are important similarities with Mexico regarding the dominating influence of the Anglo-American mainstream in IR thought. Still, if we look beyond the written word as exclusive evidence, some contributions from Mexico and Latin America are worth mentioning, especially those related to dependency, development theory, autonomy,¹² and postmodern studies in decolonial thinking, feminism, and environmental issues with a distinct regional flavor.

Historical materialism had a profound philosophical basis, which played a significant role in the development of theoretical proposals for the analysis of international relations, especially during the first phases of the Cold War. In this regard, it represented perhaps the most serious challenge to mainstream IR. Theoretical analysis was influenced in the region by a close look from the perspective of the philosophy of science inspired by Marxist schools of thought.

Sosa Fuentes provides an interesting summary of Graciela Arrollo Pichardo's legacy, highlighting her interest in the philosophy of science as an instrument for promoting theoretical development in IR. In his own words:

The legacy of the ideas and critical reflections in his work has as its essential objective the need to propose new theoretical paradigms and critical approaches in the study, research and current teaching of International Relations for a new understanding and interpretation of the current and complex post-international reality and the new dynamics, paradoxes, and antinomies of transformation and uncertainty that occur in the world system of the 21st century raise and require (Sosa, 2017: 165).

The sway of this philosophical vein has influenced the development of IR in Mexico and Latin America by providing elements to distance specialists from the traditional

¹² Autonomy here is different from the topic of discussion regarding the disciplinary status of IR. It refers more to the analytical framework suggesting that less developed nations can improve their lot and strengthen their own decision-making capabilities through their own self-confident strategies and wise use of resources despite the hegemonic dominion of the major powers in the international system. Moura de Oliveira and Modonesi (2024) reexamine the work of classical contributions of Puig and Jaguaribe along five lines of theorization: autonomy understood as negation, as independence, as counter-power (and as popular power), as emancipation and as community. Even if it can be seen as a variation of realist thought, this is clearly a solid contribution to IR theory with a distinct local flavor.

models imported from Anglo-American academia. There is a growing tendency to use post-structural and post-modern epistemologies, decolonial thought, feminist perspectives and critical theory to deconstruct the classical approaches and generate context-specific, ‘tropicalized’ knowledge in the region.

There is not enough space to go into the detail of the best known authors contributing to distance Latin American IR from mainstream IR thinking, but it is worth mentioning the most outstanding: Aníbal Quijano (2007), Walter Dignolo (2011), Enrique Dussel (2008), Hélio Jaguaribe (1972) Juan Carlos Puig (1980) Ramón Grosfoguel (2013), Santiago Castro-Gómez (2005), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) among the better known. Closer analysis of their specific contributions would require much more space than is available for this essay.

The need for conceptual precision

Due to the polysemic nature of most concepts, even in common language, among the pioneers of the study of IR in Mexico and Latin America, there was a clear awareness of the importance of the proper and precise handling of its concepts for the development of a discipline. This was a clear legacy of local concerns with the philosophy of science. As Peña has suggested:

In the Social Sciences, it is common to encounter different interpretations of the same concept, depending on the philosophical substratum, that is, the epistemological principles and ontological foundations that, as a whole, establish the worldview that underpins each theory of knowledge, which, in turn, determines the specificities, scope and depth of the conceptual frameworks (Peña, 2000: 141).

Vandekan and Nomor (2025), on their part, also recognize that:

Social sciences research relies heavily on the accurate conceptualisation and measurement of variables. Variables are the building blocks of research, and their proper measurement is essential for drawing meaningful conclusions (Simkus & Frothingham, 2022, p. 12). However, social sciences research often involves complex and abstract phenomena, making it challenging to conceptualise and measure variables accurately.

The concern for conceptual precision in the discipline clearly dates back to the early 1970s, when the issue of the discipline’s name itself was already widely discussed, and arguments arose regarding the ambiguity of “international relations” versus, for example, interstate relations, foreign affairs, or international studies.

The work of Leandro Rubio (1973) was debated in depth in regional classrooms, where, ultimately, the force of habit imposed the term International Relations for the discipline, but always accompanied by a precise operational definition to avoid confusion between the discipline and the field of study.

Furthermore, and in this same vein, the *Encyclopedia of International Politics* by Dr. Edmundo Hernández-Vela, started as a modest dictionary with less than 200 entries originally edited by UNAM, now converted into the *Encyclopedia of International Relations*, edited by Porrúa, already in its eighth edition with nearly 2,000 entries, is, in this sense, a tremendous achievement that should not be overlooked.

This monumental work has become an indispensable tool for IR students, especially those arriving at the moment when they must present a written thesis to graduate and obtain their B.A. in IR.

When formulating their research questions and their hypothesis, students must use well-delimited and properly defined concepts for reflection. These concepts do not have to be entirely new, just operationally adequate; for example, if they are working on a project regarding democracy, are they inspired by the classical concept of Ancient Greek democracy, modern liberal representative democracy or direct people's democracy?

Are they following a specific school of thought or some classical author, like Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville? Perhaps a more modern view in authors like Robert Dahl, Joseph Schumpeter, David Held, Robert Putnam, or Adam Przeworski? If this is clear enough from the start, then one can say meaningful things about the topic; otherwise, communication with other specialists in the field might be difficult.¹³ As Mueller indicated:

Describing social phenomena and testing hypotheses require that concept(s) be operationalized. Operationalization moves the researcher from the abstract level to the empirical level, where variables rather than concepts are the focus. It refers to the operations or procedures needed to measure the concept(s). Measurement is the process by which numerals (or some other labels) are attached to levels or characteristics of the variables. The actual research then involves empirically studying the variables to make statements (descriptive, relational, or causal) about the concepts (2004: 162).

A typological proposal for the teaching of theory

The history of the efforts to understand international dynamics is organized in most universities as a set of debates that primarily reflect the hegemonic dominance of Anglo-Saxon thought.

Although this approach has been widely criticized, it continues to be used as an introductory topic to IR theory. Even though classification efforts are beginning to proliferate, they still largely reflect the influence of this history of traditional theoretical debates, which contribute to reproducing the focus and interests of the United States in theoretical discourse.

¹³ There is a very interesting book edited by Arnold, R. and Danélien I. (2020) called *The concept of Democracy as developed by Constitutional Justice* with a collection of papers presented at the XXII International Congress on European and Comparative Constitutional Law, Vilnius, 4–5 October 2019.

The traditional story tells of four successive debates in the development of IR theory. “These disputes throughout IR’s short history have come to be known as ‘The Great Debates’, and though disputed, it is generally felt there have been four, namely ‘Realism/Liberalism’, ‘Traditionalism/Behaviouralism’, ‘Neorealism/Neoliberalism’ and the most recent ‘Rationalism/Reflectivism’ (Benneyworth, 2011).

Ashworth flatly denies there was such a thing as a First Great debate (Ashworth, 2002: 35). In a later work (2014, para. 1), he adds, “The idea of three successive ‘great debates’ that framed the field of IR was largely a product of an attempt to understand the theoretical contours of what seemed in the 1980s to be an increasingly divided discipline”. In the end, it is no coincidence that political realism predominates in the attention of scholars in this area. Clearly, throughout the ‘debates’, the struggle for power is a persistent idea, although not a monolithic one.

Critical thinkers in Latin America have been looking for a different way to approach the teaching of theory, primarily as a philosophical endeavor. How can the diversity of ideas in the IR theory menu be classified and differentiated in order to make better sense of them and convert them into useful tools for international analysis?

During the second half of the sixties, the idea of ‘paradigms’ was suggested by Kuhn. From his point of view:

Close historical investigation of a given specialty at a given time discloses a set of recurrent and quasistandard illustrations of various theories in their conceptual, observational, and instrumental applications. These are the community’s paradigms, revealed in its textbooks, lectures, and laboratory exercises. By studying them and by practicing with them, the members of the corresponding community learn their trade (1962: 43).

Following this idea IR specialists began trying to organize their menu in paradigms. Not everyone followed the lead. The subject actually revived the old dispute over the possibility of applying scientific discourse to explain social phenomena. The English School had been working on Wight’s suggestion of three traditions: Realists, Rationalists, and Revolutionists. In Latin America, the notion of paradigm became increasingly popular, although not universally accepted.

Considered as a shared set of achievements, beliefs, values, and habits that guide a scientific community, the idea of a paradigm can bear fruitful results. It not only tells scientists what to observe, how to run experiments or solve problems, but it also helps recognize common denominators regarding basic assumptions of theoretical propositions.

From this perspective, the idea of a state-centered paradigm (contemplating the State as the main agent on the international scenario and political factors as the main influence on their behavior), a historical materialist paradigm (based on Marxist premises,

highlighting economic processes and social classes for international analysis), and a systemic paradigm (focused on the systemic nature of social phenomena), each with a host of schools of thought sharing the basic principles of each paradigm, makes perfect sense (Sarquís, 2011).

Studying paradigms rather than debates helps identify the main assumptions of each theoretical proposal from a philosophical perspective. Paradigms can be applied to classify all the classical approaches to IR, but the idea does not sit well with postmodern approaches, which are essentially anti-paradigmatic, anti-essentialist, and anti-theoretical.

This has become a major challenge (still unresolved) in the contemporary study of IR everywhere, because proponents reject all forms of grand theory, abstract foundations for analysis, focusing on practical problem-solving as originally suggested by Cox. From their point of view, universal rules do not apply in social analysis, and they reject the idea of objective knowledge.

A conception of international society based on the establishment of a solid legal framework

The situation of International Law as a discipline on which the theory of IR is based is paradoxical. Among lawyers, it is seen as a kind of unprotected “younger brother.” It is not sufficiently taken into consideration because “it is not a real form of law,” since it lacks the legal formality that legal institutions should have, supported by the work of a Legislative Branch that creates the rules, an Executive Branch that implements them, and a Judicial Branch that judges and punishes offenders. International law lacks coercive power, its critics claim; therefore, it is not a real and effective form of law.

Long and Schultz “argue that [during the 19th century] Latin American contributions to international order emerged from a tradition of ‘republican internationalism’ through which Latin American elites responded to their liminality in the hierarchies and civilizational discourses of Eurocentric international society” (2021: 2). This view reflects with clarity the weaker position of the newly born Latin American countries vis-à-vis the European colonial powers, and the legalistic formalism inherited from the Spanish and Portuguese traditions.

But, as Long and Schultz have demonstrated, the general views of Latin Americans during this early stage of their independent life are basically inspired by Republican ideals both at home and abroad:

If at the domestic level, republicans prioritize their notion of the common good, abroad, republican internationalists pursue an inclusive international society suspicious of unchecked concentrations of power. Republican principles of separation of powers, association, and the rule of law had important corollaries in Latin American diplomacy:

namely, sovereign equality, regional confederation, and international law and arbitration (2021: 3).

Everything written in terms of the international during the 19th century in this part of the world bears the mark of these republican ideals but does not represent a theory of IR as such; it rather demonstrates the geopolitical limitations of the region in world politics, dominated by the European powers, and the growing presence of the United States (Álvarez, G., M. Deciancio, G. Molano Cruz, 2021: 20).

The traditional narrative expounds the debatable claim that IR emerged as an autonomous academic discipline towards the end (and because of) the First World War. They do not deny that international events occurred long before and recognize that different authors reflected on matters of war, peace, and diplomacy since antiquity; however, these traditionalists emphasize that international phenomena before WWI were analyzed by reference to history, law, or philosophy. Gurian rightly wonders:

Such questions as what department should supervise the study of international relations, the department of history, political science or a special committee, either completely independent of the departments or coordinating their work, are of secondary importance. I think, too, that it is necessary to clarify the nature of the study of international relations before the special requirements for graduate study can be stated" (1946: 276).

The Great War was so devastating, the traditional argument goes, that it impelled academic treatment of the nature of interstate relations, and so, the first chair of international politics was created in 1919 at Aberystwyth University in Wales, thus creating one of the most persistent foundational myths in IR. Grant et al. wrote a very interesting *Introduction to the Study of International Relations* in 1916, meant as a textbook for students of international affairs, an ongoing subject in academia even before the end of the previous century.

Among internationalists, in general, international law also lacks a solid reputation, not only because its application depends primarily on the good faith of the parties and their willingness to fulfill the commitments made, but above all, because the realist approach prevails among them as a theoretical and methodological option, according to which it is more important to possess the capacity to impose our will on others than to develop the skill to negotiate with them and agree on joint courses of action.

Again, the historical circumstance of its condition as an international actor has made the resource of the law a major priority for Latin Americans. There are several doctrines to account for this assertion: Calvo, Drago, Carranza and Estrada are good examples (Sarquís, 2023).

From an external point of view, it is valid to ask when and how they become contributions to IR theory rather than contributions to international practice or foreign

policy. Are they evidence of a Latin American normative approach to international order? Are they a peripheral strategy for managing asymmetry? Are they part of a regional conception of sovereignty and non-intervention?

These doctrines may not have been developed as theoretical concepts, but they are a response to our regional experience, especially dealing with foreign powers. As such, they constitute the foundation of a legalist view of world order to confront the crude realism of the dominant countries of the world and yes, they do definitely constitute the philosophical basis for a regional conception of sovereignty and non-interventionism

They are not, of course, exclusive contributions by Mexican and Latin American authors, but they can certainly lay the groundwork for the development of a more egalitarian and just view of IR from the Latin American region.

Some closing remarks

As in most other countries, IR came into the academy in Latin America during the interwar period and most decisively during the second postwar period (Deciancio, M. 2025). International studies in the Latin-American region were originally aimed at preparing personnel for their respective foreign service; thus, the analysis of foreign policy became a priority for most countries (Ochoa, 2011).

The debate over the disciplinary condition of IR apparently only began during the fifties, and it seems to have been related to a specific concern of presenting it as a separate endeavor from political studies, to broaden the scope of analysis and distinguish the intrinsic (organized) political nature of the domestic realm from the anarchical condition of the outside (Morcillo, 2023).

Ever since Hoffmann (1977) declared that IR was an “American Social Science,” there has been a lively discussion about the extent to which the American academic community dominates the “global discipline” of IR, and about the real scope of the consequences that this dominance has had for the discipline.

Hoffmann was not entirely original in his observation; As Santa Cruz points out, “two decades before he asserted that IR was “an American social science,” Grossner since 1956 had already wondered whether IR was an American specialty. True, Hoffman clearly demonstrated in his 1977 work that in the early post-WWII era, deeply influenced the development of IR, “the growth of the discipline could not be separated from the American role in world affairs after 1945” (cited by Santa Cruz, 2022: 2).

Tickner (2002) also observed that “the teaching of IR in Latin America closely mirrors theoretical developments in the US IR mainstream” (p. 338); simultaneously, as Schultz (2021) noted, in the region “IR lacked a consolidated disciplinary identity” (p.

234). Santa Cruz adds that, in this sense, IR, at least in Latin America, seems to be an American discipline.

Given the conditions created by the superpower confrontation in the aftermath of WWII, it is hardly surprising that Americans showed a deep concern over the way IR programs developed in the Latin American region, and that they went a long way in supporting institutions and academics who followed mainstream thought in their work and suppressing those who rejected it.

But going beyond appearances, it would be entirely misleading to think that IR in Mexico and LA did not acquire a life of its own, despite the intensity and depth of the American influence. Unlike many IR programs worldwide, which are primarily focused on political science, IR in these parts has developed as an autonomous discipline, even if it has been nurtured by a host of other disciplines.

Latin American scholars have made significant contributions to IR theory, offering diverse perspectives that have not always received sufficient recognition. Especially during the late fifties, the sixties, up until the mid-seventies, Marxist approaches, for example, were very popular for students of the social sciences in general, and IR in particular in the subcontinent.¹⁴

On the practical side, Latin American governments since the interwar period were noticeably concerned with the proper training for their respective foreign services, and the first academic programs clearly pointed in that direction, favoring foreign policy doctrines over metatheoretical approaches. The latter tend to focus more on objective explanations, while the former are normally more subjective appreciations concerning the most adequate course of action for agents in international politics. Both, of course, are based on ideas about the nature of the international, but theories are usually more methodical and philosophically oriented.

Needless to add that during the Cold War, American Foreign policy (especially after the Cuban revolution of 1959) was seriously concerned with the training of these personnel with a favorable view of American interests.

In the same light, Mexican and Latin American scholars played an important role in shaping IR, particularly through their commitment to International Law, Disarmament, Diplomacy, and Development. Yet, these efforts have often been underestimated or neglected.¹⁵

¹⁴ The theory of dependency was the first theoretical approach developed in the South which contested the Northern hegemony of the discipline.

¹⁵ It is, however, fair to say that some cases have won wide international recognition. Alfonso García Robles won a well-deserved Nobel prize for his efforts on disarmament and the creation of a nuclear weapons free zone in Latin America.

Institutions for the study of foreign policy and international affairs began to flourish at that time: the Brazilian Institute for International Relations was founded in 1954. The US helped finance the creation of a Center for International Studies in Mexico through the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. The Center was inaugurated in 1960 (six years before the Chilean counterpart) not only to promote international studies, but to do so specifically through the lens of the realist paradigm, to counter the growing appeal of the Marxist approach to international affairs among Latin American scholars; and approach that was then rendering abundant and fruitful insights into the analysis of international relations.

Although the Latin American proposals drew on a long intellectual tradition, they were highly distinctive. True, they were also created on the basis of analytical propositions first advanced somewhere else; thus, as Cardoso (1970) suggested, it is possible to talk about “the originality of the copy”. Arlene Tickner (2002: 331) has called the Latin American tradition of IR a “hybrid model”, meaning the development of IR theory in Latin America, even though strongly influenced by the US mainstream, was clearly ‘tropicalized’. Other authors share the same view:

The theoretical and conceptual development in the area was strongly associated with the context of the period and influenced by both ideological and political perspectives, as well as by other fields, particularly political economy. Thus, between 1950 and 1970, a distinct field was being configured within international relations in the region, characterized by increasing institutionalization and differentiation, which combined with political aspirations associated with Latin American development and autonomy in the global context (Álvarez, G., M. Deciancio, G. Molano Cruz, 2021: 24).

Towards the end of the 70s, the creation of the Program for Joint Studies on International Relations of Latin America (RIAL, 1977) opened a new window of opportunity for the improvement and systematization of IR studies as a collective effort among internationalists in the area, but in spite of the amount of work done by participants, actual innovations were limited, as problems regarding development and foreign policy design to foster it remained the main concern in research, with few methodological and theoretical contributions.

Researchers focused more on revisiting problems of conceptualization rather than revising their methods and their assumptions, which basically implied walking in circles around mainstream visions, taking them, however, from a critical standpoint and trying to adapt them to interpret Latin American reality. Revising methods and assumptions is an unavoidable step for real innovation, because, as Camus pointed out, methods involve metaphysics; they unconsciously betray the conclusions that they sometimes claim not to know yet (1942: 28).

Beyond the bipolar scene

The end of the Cold War brought new challenges for IR theory in general. The speed of globalization demanded not only a growing number of specialists in international affairs, but also new explanations regarding the way in which the international scenario had changed.

It should also be mentioned that, at least in Mexico, especially since the end of the Cold War, when IR programs flourished in our institutions, private universities tend to favor foreigners or Mexicans who have studied abroad when they are hiring teachers, and they do not regularly encourage research activities, as public universities do (although salaries in the latter tend to be less competitive than in the former).

Not surprisingly, those who prefer to study abroad and to publish in American or European journals, where topics of interest are influenced by mainstream perspectives and competition is tough. Even so, regional journals have traditionally made room for innovative work with local approaches.

It could thus be argued that Latin American IR has not just been an American social science in the conventional meaning of the word, as original contributions do exist (some contesting mainstream viewpoints). Still, Latin American perspectives in general have not been abundant and are often neglected outside the region.

Domínguez also considers that the geopolitical and historical context of the subcontinent contributed to privileging foreign policy analysis as a distinctive mark of IR studies (2010: 104). The paucity of the region's impact on IR has no doubt had to do with "the most dangerous illusion of mistaking the study of International Relations with the study of the foreign policy of each country," as Luciano Tomassini (1980, p. 547), considered by some as the founder of IR in Latin America, stated.

It is probably true that Latin America has made modest contributions to the development of IR theory as such, but they are not non-existent; besides Latin American structuralism and dependency theory, disarmament,¹⁶ more recently, we have postcolonial and decolonial studies, as well as gender, environmental and security studies, which, even if originally developed outside the region (except for decolonial studies), all acquired a clear and distinctive regional perspective, each of which deserves careful attention as original contributions for a better understanding of the region.

Our geopolitical status, as international actors, has been a determining factor in the perspective from which our academics view the international landscape and in how our foreign policy decision-makers develop their strategies. In neither case is there a uniformity

¹⁶ These become contributions to IR theory as soon as they enter the world of academia, where they are debated, contested or accepted as guiding posts for the study of international relations.

of vision, but there are recognizable elements for some of the basic generalizations I have presented in this essay.

Strictly speaking, from my own point of view, dependency theory and decolonization would have the elements to be considered actual theories of international relations and offer distinct angles of observation for the international scene. There is a larger number of foreign policy doctrines, where autonomy would be a core idea, plus doctrines of international law (Calvo, Drago, Tobar, Carranza, Estrada) mainly focused on defending state sovereignty, banning foreign military intervention, and maintaining regional borders.

These are regional concerns visible in IR academic programs, which may not necessarily constitute the grounds for any local or regional 'school' of international relations but which undoubtedly inspire internationalists in this area to strengthen the development of the discipline with a distinctive autonomous flavor.

After several decades of overwhelming American academic dominance in the evolutionary process of International Relations theory, the end of the Cold War and the resulting bipolar thaw have paved the way for reflection on the dynamics of the international scene from various perspectives around the globe.

It is clear, however, that the new voices coming from different latitudes are still 'in the world,' and that is an inescapable reality. Events in this world will inevitably affect each member of the international system, but obviously, in different ways. It is important to hear all these voices in the struggle to build a better world.

This change is welcome because it allows for a multitude of contributions regarding how we represent our object of study and the perceptions that different actors have about how international dynamics operate, but also about the place each of them occupies in the international system and in the history of IR theory, with suggestions aimed at improving international coexistence. The more voices expressed in this direction, the greater the possibility of a more comprehensive development of international thought. 🌱

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