

## Latin America and the West: Constructions and Deconstructions of the Concept

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**Abstract:** The construction of the concept of Latin America has been through different processes regarding its structure and acceptance, from the colonial period to the automatic realignment to the United States, with rare exceptions, and a reorganization with the emergence of multilateralism and the multipolar world. The abstraction, hitherto almost an axiom in the subcontinent, that it is a western region, leads us to the elaboration of this article, which seeks to present Latin America's post-western and de-westernized character in an environment of restructuring of its political economy, its actors, scenarios and, finally, theories. Thus, we present here a review of the state of the art political economy of Latin America and its perspectives in this shifting world, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Latin America, Western, Post-Western, De-Westernization, Political Economy

**CLC:** G0    **Document Code:** A    **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2022)02-0056-18

**Doi:** 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202202006

### 1. Introduction

Latin America and the West are two concepts that, throughout their formation, and by virtue of various theoretical debates on the subject, have acquired different nuances and interpretations, and have raised heated discussions amongst supporters and critics, both in academia and in politics. Conceiving Latin America as a part of the West, as did Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, is an equally academic and political exercise, the challenge of which, for Political Science and International Relations, is to seek, not only answers, but also alternatives, especially in the theoretical framework.

The construction of the concept of Latin America dates back to the colonial period with the arrival of the first Portuguese and Spanish explorers on the continent which would be named after Amerigo Vespucci in homage to the Italian explorer. This nomination came to pass even though

the continent was already inhabited by civilizations, such as the native peoples and first nations of Brazil, and the Inca, Maya, and Aztec empires, that had been naming the land with various appellations for centuries. In this way, the name America is already a colonial derivation, which would be reinforced and maintained by the two Iberian crowns and the former colonies that became sovereign and independent states in the first half of the 19th century.

The term “Latin” (*Latina* in Spanish and Portuguese) refers to a semantic and political issue rather than a geographic or linguistic division, as debated by Feres Júnior. The Latin quality or character of Iberian colonizers will have been different from what it means to be Latin (or Latino) today, especially in North America. For example, although the province of Québec, Canada, is a former French colony—a Latin-language country—we would never see the Québécois, or French-Canadians, referred to as Latinos.

The politicization of the term Latin America derives, therefore, from a long process of construction of regional identities that, in their amalgamation, formed a set of nations, more or less homogeneous in terms of the historical period and intensity of colonization. These nations identify themselves—or are identified—by similar, but not equal, social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics. Throughout the 20th century this group of nations sought to come together through regional organizations and political and commercial blocs on several occasions, as in the cases of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Latin American Integration Association (LAIA/ALADI), the Union of South American Nations (USAN/UNASUR), and the contested Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America—Peoples’ Trade Treaty (ALBA).

Even the United Nations, the highest body of multilateralism, created a specific agency for monitoring economic and social policies in the Latin American environment, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which has as its goals the promotion of economic cooperation between Latin American and Caribbean states. In other words, the institutionalization of the concept of Latin America is consolidated in a top-down manner, which is the subject matter of this article.

The notion of the West, composed of different nuances and scales, if we refer to Paul Claval’s scales of power in *Espace et pouvoir*, is much more heterogeneous and controversial than that of Latin America, since its advocates place a whole part of the globe under the same hegemonic aegis, *i.e.*, under the zone of influence of the United States of America and, to a lesser extent, of Western European countries. Geographically Eastern European nations, such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Albania, and even Russia (in part), find it difficult to be understood as European, which can lead to further discussion.

Thus, although Latin American countries have been exploited and colonized exclusively by Western European powers, such as Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and with peoples forcibly transported and settled through slavery, the populations of these Latin American countries differ profoundly in cultural, religious, political and linguistic practices from what has been agreed as standard in the West.

However, with the advent of the Monroe Doctrine in the United States, followed by McCarthyism and the bipolar division of the Cold War, Latin American countries were forced to adopt a pro-Washington stance. This would induce them to incorporate elements of the Western

and Anglo-European agenda, abandon ethnic-national political positions and adopt alternative worldviews. There are the rare exceptions, such as Cuba—which until today suffers from the retaliatory economic and commercial embargo by the United States—Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela, Evo Morales’s Bolivia and Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua, all of which, with their national political projects, have dared challenge the Westernizing agendas.

Based on these issues, therefore, this article analyzes the constructions and deconstructions of the concept of westernized Latin America, and seeks to present a discussion about the Latin American political economy, from its ideas and theories in section two, and from its scenarios and actors in section three. In section four we present a post-western (or de-westernized) outlook according to Stuenkel in *Post-western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* and Cunha (43-75) about the International Relations of Latin America.

The authors’ methodology is based on research of theoretical and historical references, through a bibliographic and documental investigation, supported by qualitative aspects, according to Antonio Carlos Gil in *Métodos e Técnicas de Pesquisa Social*. The results will allow an updated understanding of the conceptual and practical debate in Latin America in a world in transition from westernism to post-westernism, in which its actors and leaders must seek new strategic, economic and political support through foreign partnerships, such as Russia and China, two actors who contribute to the review and questioning of the concepts discussed here.

## 2. A Theory for Latin America

The development of the Latin American nations is associated with the dynamics of international capitalism. In a long historical process of more than five centuries, Latin America transits between the colonial heritage—a region that extracts precious metals and produces agricultural and exotic genres commodities—to a group of nations that started a debate in the 1930s to pave a long and tortuous path aimed at surmounting underdevelopment. In the wake of the State and Development debate, in May 1949, in Havana, Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch presented a document known as the “Investigación Económica de América *Latina*” or, as it is also called, “the Prebisch-ECLAC doctrine.” In this document, a guideline for the institution was pointed out. As Barbosa observes:

The document received the support of the Latin American governments and was received with coldness by the low-profile delegation of the US government. Mainstream scholars at the time, like Professor Jacob Viner of Princeton, trembled. The document contained, in his view, “wild fantasies, distorted historical conjectures and simplistic hypotheses”. This was not for nothing: the text collides head on with the orthodoxy of comparative advantages. Even worse for his detractors, he was neither a communist nor a protectionist. He defended trade, investments in industrialization, without disregarding agriculture, and advocated a reformer and intelligent action by the State (222; our translation).

Since its creation and throughout its seventy years of history, ECLAC has been made up of economists, social scientists, and political scientists from several countries in the region. In its

constitution, the Commission has benefited from the excellence of the Brazilian Celso Furtado, Cuban Regino Boti, Mexican Juan Noyola, and Chilean Jorge Ahumada. “The latter, from Harvard, headed the Training Division, while Furtado stayed with the Development Division, called the “red division” (222; our translation).

In the first phase (1948-1960), a theoretical framework was constructed for Latin American economic thought, the orientation of which was to encourage industrialization as a way of mitigating poverty and underdevelopment. At that time, the first studies on industrialization and import substitution were outlined and, above all, the defense of the importance of the State in the industrial development of Latin America was presented. Celso Furtado and Prebisch performed an X-ray of Latin America and proposed some paths for development.

The so-called second phase of ECLAC thinking (1960-1970) constitutes the period in which the weaknesses of the industrialization model became visible: the crisis of national developmentalism was exposed. From that moment on, the primary theme of ECLAC studies was the State Reforms. In this debate, Agrarian Reform gained prominence, as this was seen as a driver for industrialization. Also in that period, industrialization by import substitution showed its limits. Although the import substitution model was accepted by Latin American countries, this was not an experience marked by homogeneity. Evidently, each country of the region has its own peculiarities and dynamics, which led to the simple fact that there has never been an effective homogeneity in domestic political and economic processes in Latin America.

It was in this context that Pinto came up with the concept of “structural heterogeneity” (78), in which he observes that industrialization in the periphery was fragile and concentrated in terms of income. In this work, Pinto notes that in the countries of the periphery, the same inequality that marks the differences between center and periphery in world capitalism is reproduced. In other words, to the detriment of the development of various productive poles of society, some technological and modernized segments of productivity—industry, agriculture, and services—are articulated with the State around a rentier scheme.

Regarding the failure of the development model projected in the first phase of ECLAC, the issue of dependence became eminent in ECLAC’s thinking during the second cycle. As Robert Gilpin notes in *A economia política das Relações Internacionais (The Political Economy of International Relations)*:

Dependency theory emerged in the mid-1960s, partly as a reaction to the apparent failure of structuralist analysis and proposals. Dependency theorists argue that the industrialization strategy based on import substitution has ceased to produce sustained growth in the least developed countries due to the permanence of their traditional economic and social conditions (311; our translation).

However, even though in the first instance the criticisms of the national development model were shared by development theorists, the divergences proved to be more robust. As a non-consensual topic among Latin American thinkers, Dependency Theory can be divided into two major views: one Weberian, with emphasis on the thesis of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo

Faletto and the other, Marxist, with an emphasis on the works of Theotônio dos Santos and Ruy Mauro Marini.

For Cardoso and Faletto, dependency can be considered a paradigm in the development of Latin American countries. In the work *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, published in 1969, the authors point out the weaknesses of nationalist and socialist interpretations in Latin American thought. In both lines of analysis, foreign capital is interpreted as an obstacle to development, in particular to industrialization, seeking in the national bourgeoisie and its association with the State, or the proletariat, the sources of overcoming underdevelopment.

According to Carlos Martins in *O Pensamento Social Latino-Americano e os Desafios do Século XXI (The Latin-American Social Thought and the Challenges of 21st Century)*, for Cardoso and Faletto, it was:

[...] necessary to differentiate the old imperialist domination, analyzed by Lenin, from the new dependency, established by foreign capital in the post-war period. The latter focused on the internationalization of the domestic market and differentiated the political forms of domination from the economic ones, allowing those to formalize sovereignty and greater capacity for international negotiation. In the economic sphere, foreign capital was in solidarity with the expansion of the domestic market. [...] It is a dynamic capitalism, even though it implies a greater degree of concentration of wealth and inequality. In the political sphere, it tends to unfold in bourgeois democracy. Nationalism and socialism, on the other hand, although they can generate greater equality, lead to stagnation, statism, and authoritarianism, and should be discarded as an alternative to dependency (Martins 15-17; our translation).

In the Marxist view of dependency, with an emphasis on the ideas of Paul Baran and André Frank, a dilemma was found in the fact that foreign monopoly capital exercises a decapitalization of peripheral countries and acts singularly in the complex articulation between foreign capital, the local bourgeoisie, and export-oriented landowners. According to the authors, it would be exceedingly difficult for this social segment to break away from imperialism. Therefore, only with socialism would there be the possibility of this break.

With Theotônio dos Santos and Ruy Marini, the view of dependency grew, advancing in relation to the influence of Baran and Frank, especially regarding the idea of the decapitalization of dependent countries due to the strength of foreign capital. As Martins observes, dependent capitalism, in the Marxist perspective of Santos and Marini, is:

[...] capable of offering a dynamic view of the internal and external power relations that constitute it. [...] this was derived from monopoly competition: monopolies compete with each other and only succeed and expand the mass of added value that they appropriate if they present technological dynamism. Dependent countries, when they are the object of this competition, join the international division in a productive specialization that makes them inferior. Theotônio dos Santos and Marini highlight the specificities of the accumulation process in dependent capitalism. Its foundation is the search for super profits that propels

the peripheral bourgeoisie to compromise with international monopolies. By associating themselves with their technological, financial, commercial, and institutional bases, they surpass the endogenous limits of their accumulation capacity and assume a monopoly condition within the scope of their productive segments and their national states. (18; our translation)

From another perspective, economist Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira divides Dependency theorists into three groups: those that deal with the idea of capitalist overexploitation, such as Frank, Marini, and Santos; a group of associated dependency, represented by Cardoso, and a third group, that of national developmentalism, with Furtado and Bresser-Pereira himself (17-48).

In the 1970s, after the topic of dependency as the focus of the ECLAC debates, the main concern was the style of development. As Martins points out, the idea of State neutrality came to be criticized and the emphasis became “democracy and its deepening as a basic instrument for the construction of a socially homogeneous development style, capable of diversifying exports and increasing its added value” (16; our translation). In this debate, the participation of Maria da Conceição Tavares, José Serra, Jorge Graciarena, and Oswaldo Sunkel was fundamental.

In the 1980s, known in the Western world as the “lost decade,” Latin America experienced a deep economic and financial crisis and the central theme for ECLAC thinking was external debt and inflationary control. This ordeal challenged intellectuals and Latin American governments. The questions were how to renegotiate foreign debts and how to find the path to growth. The industrialization based on import substitution was the target of criticism, because: “neglecting the creation of an endogenous financing pattern, for the construction of a spurious competitiveness based on low wages and exchange devaluation, generates frivolous protectionism” (17; our translation).

In the 1990s, ECLAC, singularly distant from the ideas that mobilized, above all, its first three decades of existence, adhered to the precepts suggested by the Washington Consensus. Under the administration of Gert Rosenthal, ECLAC supported the commercial and financial opening of Latin America, which resulted in a devastating scenario for the region. In the 2000s, economist Joseph Stiglitz, who participated in the Clinton administration and in the American financial decisions of that time, pointed out in *The Roaring Nineties: A New History of the World’s Most Prosperous Decade*, how dire and harmful the consequences of the measures proposed by the Washington Consensus were for countries that adopted such a prescription.

The themes that guided ECLAC’s reflections, highlighted in this brief historical recall, however, never ceased to be connected to another complex issue. In fact, for over more than seventy years of Latin American political and economic thought, there is a point that has mobilized—and continues to mobilize—debates and reflections on the region’s development or lack of, and that is: the State. In other words, the key question is: what should the role of the State be in this process? ECLAC has been concerned over these decades with the Latin American “developmental debate,” but as José Fiori observes in “Estado e Desenvolvimento na América Latina” (“State and Development in Latin America”), the reflections between different schools and currents would not have existed “had it not been for the State and the discussion about the effectiveness or not of the state intervention to accelerate economic growth over ‘market laws’” (4; our translation).

Returning to Fiori's words, both in Latin America and in Asia:

[...] developmental governments have always used orthodox macroeconomic policies, depending on the occasion and circumstances. The inverse can also be said of many conservative or ultraliberal European or North American governments which often use Keynesian-cut policies. In fact, the pivot of the whole discussion and the big bone of contention has always been the State and the definition of its role in the process of economic development. (4; our translation)

According to the author's conclusions, after almost half a century of reflection, the "theoretical balance is disappointing," because both liberals and development theorists used, in general, a concept of State "equally imprecise, timeless and ahistorical, as if the State were a kind of logical and functional 'being' created intellectually to solve the problems of growth or economic regulation, as can be seen through a quick rereading of the two great 'agendas' and the main theoretical matrixes that participated in the 'controversial' Latin America" (Fiori 4; our translation).

In Fiori's critical reading, developmentalists and liberals, despite huge divergences in the ideological and political field, have always converged on the same view of the State, "creator or destroyer of good economic order" and stubbornly seen "as if it were a *Deus ex machina*, acting from outside the economic activity." Thus, the two opposing currents find fundamental points of agreement: a) the criticism of monopolization processes and the idealization of competitive markets, as well as a suspicious look at any form of association between private capital and the State; b) a disassociation between the ideas of the process of economic development and the accumulation of capital with power (its struggles and its accumulation process), on a national or international scale and; c) the mistaken notion of Latin American states, supposedly equal, which disregards the fact that they are part of a unique regional and international system, but "unequal, hierarchical, competitive and in a permanent process of transformation" (8; our translation).

While Fiori highlights the notion of the State, Bresser-Pereira notes the evolution of these debates regarding the idea of nation. Beginning in the 1970s, Latin American left-wing intellectuals and politicians focused their attention on the problems of democracy and social justice, but at a high price: converted "from nationalism to cosmopolitanism," both groups would gradually lose focus on the concept of nation.

Since the generation that adopted these ideas in the 1970s came to political power in the 1990s, their countries have experienced low growth rates compared to either the national-developmental period of 1930-1980, or with the fast-growing Asian countries that have retained their idea of a nation despite neoliberal and globalist hegemony. It was not until the 2000s that this scenario began to change, beginning with the election of nationalist and leftist governments in Latin America, and the gradual definition of a new developmentalism, a national development strategy adapted to the new international context of globalization and to the new stage on which the most developed Latin American economies were.

With regard specifically to the situation of Brazil within the Latin American environment, it is worth pointing out its reasonable degree of autonomy in the early 21st century, and its effective

presence, in the words of Fiori

[...] in the group of states and national economies that are part of the ‘kaleidoscope’ and development in central Latin America,” a scenario in which everyone competes with everyone else, and all forms of alliances are possible in pursuit of strategic objectives. By highlighting this “new political and economic importance” of the country, Fiori foresaw its growth in the following years “on a regular basis, in South America, the South Atlantic, and southern Africa,” even though Brazil would remain lacking in the “capacity for the global projection of its military power.” Even so, we would see an increasingly hierarchical Latin America, a South America particularly “more dependent on the choices and decisions taken by Brazil. (20-21; our translation)

Continuing a debate that began many decades earlier in the scope of ECLAC, Fiori lists possible paths: a) if Brazil took the “market path” it would tend to become a high-intensity exporting economy (oil, food, and commodities), evolving into a type of “luxury periphery” of the major purchasing powers in the world, a role that would be followed by the rest of South America, maintaining its status as the “primary-exporting” periphery of the world economy; b) if Brazil followed a new path, it would combine industries with high added value, food production and high productivity commodities, in a context of energy self-sufficiency. Such a choice, highlights Fiori, will never be merely technical or economic: its nature, eminently political and strategic, requires a prior decision about the objectives of the State and the international insertion of Brazil. At this moment, the author opens two more alternatives for the country.

Brazil can constitute a kind of “privileged partner of the United States in the administration of its continental hegemony”; or choose to increase the “capacity for autonomous strategic decision,” based on a policy that balances complementarity and competitiveness with the United States, in solidarity with South America and capable of assuming extremely specific alliances with the other powers of the world system (Fiori 21; our translation).

Given the prognosis, perhaps too optimistic for Fiori, about the outlooks for Brazil, it is important to remember that the present political moment, under the Bolsonaro government, is a turning point. In fact, there is a reduction, and even an abandonment, of a robust theoretical discussion that has marked the existence and performance of ECLAC. In practice, the political situation seems to follow the same logic. Unfortunately, none of the political options listed by Fiori appear to be viable in the current national political arena.

Brazil, paradoxically, has reduced its expression in the region; it does not position itself as an autonomous agent or even as a partner—or “privileged partner”—of the United States, it should demonstrate a greater prominence and a certain degree of autonomy in the region. Similarly, marked by a crisis in culture, universities and free political and ideological debate, the country does not lean over and appropriates a historical and theoretical framework built by Latin-American and Brazilian intellectuals, whose reflections and debates have continued to highlight the importance of ECLAC in Latin America’s political and economic history for decades.



### 3. Latin American Political Economy: Scenarios and Actors

The idea of a homogeneous Latin America in terms of its actors can be questioned by reading the political and economic scenarios of the subcontinent, from its national independence movements to the restructuring that the nations underwent through their respective re-democratization processes, especially after the 1980s.

It is possible to conceive three types of institutional actor which configure the Latin American political economy in a post-Western reading, namely: national governments, regional bodies, and the Latin American political regime. Christian Adel Mirza in his work *Movimientos sociales y sistemas políticos en América Latina: la construcción de nuevas democracias (Social Movements and Political Systems in Latin America: the Construction of New Democracies)*, identifies social movements as a fourth type. However, it is not possible to verify the political and economic coordination and cohesion of these movements in the Latin American scope, despite attempts in the recent past, such as the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, which served more as a space for debate among social movements rather than an interregional social organization.

The profile of Latin American national governments has multiple peculiarities and changes throughout the existence of the republics; all countries of the subcontinent today adopt this form of government, with the exception of the French overseas territories, British territorial dependencies and the Caribbean islands which are part of the British Commonwealth. Since the re-democratization processes in the 1980s, it is possible to observe a regularity of democratic and multi-party electoral processes, except in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela.

Between the early 2000s and the mid-2010s, the region saw the rise of progressive center-left and leftist governments, the most notable case was the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 in Brazil and Néstor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003. Progressive radicalism began a little earlier, with Hugo Chávez taking office in Venezuela in 1999, the event which would initiate his Bolivarian socialist agenda.

During the same period, the “left turn” was also observed in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. In other Latin American countries, a trend towards pragmatic and social centrism was verified, largely due to the economic and political dependent relations of other countries in the region, especially Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina.

The agenda of these national governments is due to a political and economic duality: social democracies linked to the needs and demands of the economic elites, especially the financial ones, combine to form a new type of government. In other words, to the same extent that social programs for income distribution and universal access to public services were created and implemented, concessions to the private sector, banks, and investors also increased, giving even more space to these groups in government’s decision making; a scenario that is explicit in the cases of Brazil and Peru.

This political architecture of the region continued until the mid-2010s, when a conservative wave, coming mainly from electoral processes in the European Union and the United States, reached Latin American democracies. The victory of conservative and center-right governments

in Chile and Colombia paved the way for greater turns to economic liberalism in countries like Argentina, Peru, Mexico, and Brazil. In addition to popular dissatisfaction and the deterioration of national macroeconomic scenarios—largely due to the international crisis that began in 2008 in the United States—the movements of political subversion and institutional rupture became more evident from 2015.

In Brazil, the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff was a milestone in Latin American political economy, given that the then center-left president had abandoned, or tried to move away from, the traditional political forces—known in Brazil as “*Centrão*.” Rousseff had revised the macroeconomic policy of tax exemptions, benefits to industry and the private sector, and seclusion from the market, which was one of the strengths of her predecessor, Lula da Silva. Without the support of a good part of the Parliament and of the economic elites, and with the increase of dissatisfaction and social tension, former President Rousseff was officially removed from office in August 2016.

In Bolivia and Paraguay, disruptive movements took place around an emerging ultra-conservative political class with *coup* aspirations, who disregarded the electoral results and achieved, in Bolivia, the forced removal of political leaders, and in Paraguay, the blockade of the government. In 2015 in Argentina, with an anti-political and anti-Peronist speech, Mauricio Macri was elected and formed one of the worst governments in recent Argentine history, defeated in 2019 by the progressive bloc of Alberto Fernández and Cristina Kirchner.

Mexico and Venezuela are also two cases that deserve mention in this context of Latin American political economy, since they followed opposite paths, despite their governments being under the same political spectrum as the left, tending to far-left. After the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013, his vice-president, Nicolás Maduro, assumed power and won the contested elections of 2018. This debatable win gave rise to disruptive movements, mainly one led by Juan Guaidó, who declared himself interim president of Venezuela, recognized by the United States, the European Union, and the Lima Group, which we discuss below.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Guaidó’s first movements which indicated an institutional rupture in Venezuela, what was actually seen was an increase in domestic tension, not only with the expansion of Maduro’s authoritarian agenda, but also with a weakening of Guaidó’s, who did not garner support either from the military, or from the populace. Furthermore, this population has been going through a process of mass emigration since 2015, as described by Roberto Uebel in “*Migração venezuelana para o Brasil: considerações geopolíticas e fronteiriças sobre a atuação governamental brasileira*” (“Venezuelan Migration to Brazil: Geopolitical and Border Thoughts on Brazilian Government Action”; 69-80).

Mexico, on the other hand, is one of the most interesting cases for observing shifts of Latin American political economy during the last decades, since it spent a decade under the governments of the center-right *Partido Acción Nacional*, followed by the liberal and corporatist government of *Partido Revolucionário Institucional*, and, more recently, the leftist *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* government of Lopez Obrador.

Despite the political changes in the Mexican democratic structure in the last two decades, the country has maintained a prominent economic position as one of the nations with the greatest

economic growth in the region. Furthermore, the government of López Obrador has renewed the free trade agreement with the United States of Donald Trump and has endured the tension created by the former US president.

Another interesting case is that of Brazil, which has gone through perhaps the greatest political and economic turn of the last three decades in Latin America, having experienced liberal, social-democratic, progressive, technocratic and, more recently, ultra-conservative and far-right governments, represented in the figure of Jair Bolsonaro. It is already a consensus in the literature that the accumulated history of Brazilian political diplomacy has been lost due to Bolsonaro's confrontationalist and isolationist policies, as well as his total and unilateral realignment with the Donald Trump government, which ended in January 2021.

In the economic sphere, Brazil has shown signs of a loss of protagonism in the Latin American scenario, given the distrust of international investors and the lack of predictability and transparency on the part of the federal government. The government was considered a failure in the management of mitigation of impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Márcia Castro et al. in "Spatiotemporal pattern of COVID-19 spread in Brazil" (web). In this way, the regional integration projects that were once carried out by Brazil, such as UNASUR and the South America-Arab Countries (ASPA) and South America-Africa (ASA) Summits, either ceased to exist or were replaced by the protagonism of other regional actors, such as Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, and Chile.

Regional bodies are precisely the actors that most gained relevance in the Latin American political economy between the decades of 2000 and 2020. These bodies underwent a restructuring process in accordance with the political and party changes of their member states. The most notorious cases are those of CELAC and UNASUR; they reached their peak during progressive governments, and declined, or are now facing a stand-by process, from 2015, when the turns in Argentina and Brazil occurred.

With the *coup* in Bolivia in 2019, as well as political instability in Paraguay and Peru, the two regional organizations were restricted to a few members only, those being: Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, and Bolivia, the latter of which returned to UNASUR after the inauguration of Luis Arce. Cristina Kirchner in *Sinceramente* calls this process of emptying and harassing Latin American institutions and leaders as "lawfare." Even so, CELAC went through a similar process, with the lack of synchrony in the political agendas of the region, in addition to the increasing strategic insertion of external actors, such as China and Russia, which we discuss below.

However, since 2019 the bloc has failed to articulate a work agenda, as UNASUR had done, nor can it absorb the integration projects that were paralyzed under the tutelage of the South American Council on Infrastructure and Planning (COISPLAN) and the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA).

Other Latin American regional organizations have continued their timid work of coordinating political and economic agendas and programs, such as MERCOSUR, the Pacific Alliance and ALADI. Despite this, it is possible to affirm that, as of 2015, each country has begun to adopt a path of autonomy and diversification of extra-regional partnerships by approaching, mainly, the United States, China, and Russia, but also other actors, such as Iran and Turkey. These new

approaches reconfigure the Latin American political regime and directly impact its perception as a western subcontinent.

The political regime of Latin America, as already mentioned, presents in its constitution a tendency towards traditional republicanism, with more or less stable and perennial democracies, as well as a multi-party political system, with exceptions, as in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. In addition to a strengthening of regional integration agendas, for decades the region has been linked to US hegemony and cooperation with the European Union.

However, from the diversification of partnerships, new extra-regional actors, such as China and Russia, have identified possibilities for investment and cooperation in strategic sectors, with each of the Latin American nations. With Venezuela and other Central American countries, this cooperation has reached levels that began to worry Washington. With the blockade imposed on Venezuela, Turkey and Iran have also identified possibilities for insertion in Latin America, with Caracas as their gateway.

The increase in securitization in the South Atlantic by the United Kingdom, France, and the United States has also allowed for a division of strategic insertions in the region, placing groups of countries that are more progressive on the one hand and others more conservative and liberal on the other. This has resulted in episodes such as the rise of Colombia and Brazil to the level of extra-regional partners of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

These extra-regional strategic advances cause at the same time the prospect of new investments for the countries that host them, but also a distancing from the agenda of regional integration, since they are actors with different political regimes and confronting expansionist projects, mainly USA, China, and Russia. In this direction, it is possible to see that the process of de-Westernization of Latin America has gained new forms and scales in the last decade, which we discuss in the next section with the post-Western panorama of the subcontinent and its international relations in perspective.

#### **4. International Relations of Latin America: A Post-Western Outlook**

The organization of bilateral and multilateral summits between Latin American countries began to decline after the 8th Summit of the Americas held in Lima, Peru in 2018. This summit was the first with the presence of Donald Trump, Michel Temer, and Mauricio Macri and it was already possible to perceive a distancing from the bloc's countries and the search for more autonomous agendas and new extra-regional partnerships.

Since then, regular meetings of CELAC, UNASUR, and even CARICOM, MERCOSUR, and the Andean Community have seen a lack of national leaders and restricted to a small group or its permanent members. The MERCOSUR summits, at which observer states previously participated, were restricted to their four founders since the suspension of Venezuela in August 2017.

As discussed in the previous section, much of this emptying scenario is due to changes in Brazilian Foreign Policy, which has experienced ruptures in its accumulated history since the second government of Dilma Rousseff (2015-2016), guided by the impeachment process of the former president, and aggravated in the administrations of Michel Temer (2016-2019) and Jair

Bolsonaro (2019-2022). The end of Brazil's leading role represented, therefore, the rupture of the history of regional integration in Latin America.

Considering the hiatus of regional hegemony left by Brasília since 2016, following a logic of occupation of this power gap as described by Francine Rossone de Paula in *The Emergence of Brazil to the Global Stage: Ascending and Falling in the International Order of Competition*, the other middle powers in Latin America began to reorganize their foreign policies. This was implemented either due to the power gap, or due to internal changes within the newly instituted governments, to envisage a greater role in the subcontinent. This fact has been verified with greater emphasis in López Obrador's Mexico since 2018, in Argentina at the end of the Macri government, and more clearly in the Fernández administration (since 2019), and observed on a smaller scale in Colombia and Chile.

Furthermore, Venezuela's seclusion and isolation since the controversial reelection of Nicolás Maduro in May 2018, whose position as president has since been contested by the self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó, has caused a division in international recognition of Venezuelan governments and brought geopolitical instability to the region. This instability is mainly due to the direct involvement of the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran in this agenda of Venezuelan domestic policy.

Thus, it is possible to identify a clear political divide in Latin America, with two major axes, with Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, some Caribbean islands, and Argentina on one side, and the other South and Central American countries on the other. However, this division cannot be conceived as fixed and immutable, for example, all other countries in the region have moved away from Brazil in international positions and criticized the postures of the Brazilian president as discussed by Carlos Eduardo Vidigal and Raúl Bernal-Meza in "Bolsonaro versus Rio Branco: transição hegemônica, América do Sul e política externa" (11-26).

It is at this point that we must draw attention to the outlook for Latin American regional integration in the post-pandemic, especially when analyzing the subcontinent's trade with the four countries (Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Chile), which have diversified their partnerships and become distanced from Brazil.

Since December 1, 2018, Mexico has undergone a restructuring of its domestic and foreign policies under the leftist government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has adopted a stance of strategic partnerships with the other Latin American states and Donald Trump's government in the United States. Separated, to a certain extent, from South American and Caribbean political agendas in recent decades (Peruyero web), Mexico looked into the possibility of deepening its economic and political relations with the governments of the region, especially with Alberto Fernández's Argentina.

A year after López Obrador took office in Mexico, in Argentina, Fernández was sworn in as the new president to replace the government of Mauricio Macri which had ended with low popularity, high unemployment, inflation, and economic stagnation indicators in the second largest South American economy.

Both López Obrador and Fernández identified a gap of protagonism exercised by Brazil until the second government of Dilma Rousseff, and adopted for themselves the discourse of regional

Latin American reintegration, captaining this process without giving up its historical accumulations. Hence López Obrador and Fernández have avoided disputes with the Lima Group, PROSUR, and conflicting state actors, such as Bolivia and Venezuela, as well as, especially, Colombia and Chile, who are increasingly seeking extracontinental partnerships and moving away from CELAC's integration agendas and ALADI.

Sebastián Piñera in Chile, in office since March 2018, is increasingly turning to strategic partnerships in the Pacific and East Asia—the country is a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Colombia, on the other hand, since August 2018, under the government of Iván Duque, has been moving closer to the North Atlantic through its accession to NATO and OECD member states and its priority relations with the European Union and the United States.

In this context, the other countries in Latin America have followed one of these four actors in their search for insertion in the contemporary International System or have linked themselves exclusively to foreign actors, such as in the cases of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua with Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran. Alternatively, the Caribbean islands have approached their former colonizers, such as France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

The event of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an aggravation of these new positions, since cooperation in the health sector, from the provision of masks, hospital supplies, and medicines, to the priority obtaining of approved vaccines, has presented itself as a topic of foreign policy, from Santiago to Mexico City.

While Brazil opted for total realignment with the United States, an option that suffered a setback with the new government of Democrat Joe Biden, the other Latin American nations chose to chart their own paths and protagonisms. However, the regional integration agenda has not been completely abandoned. ALADI, in 2020, the year in which it completes forty years of existence, presents itself as a key institution for maintaining integration in the subcontinent and bringing its members together.

As an example of this, during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, ALADI was the only regional bloc or organization that developed, in the Global South context, reports to guide the processes of commercial and economic exchange among its members. In addition to this, ALADI has organized, since the decline of CELAC, seminars and summits, even though virtual, to discuss regional integration projects in Latin America. According to the document that celebrates four decades of the association, the agenda in the region today: [...] is committed to promoting initiatives that will contribute to expanding and deepening the integration of the region, with a view to achieving the long-standing objective of constituting a “common Latin American market,” as the TM80 signatories have provided for four decades. Thus, by means of the description of business acquaintances and economic complementation among the members, the promotion and facilitation of intraregional trade, the development of competitiveness, cooperation and training, the production of reports and regional statistics and practical tools for operators, economic, among other actions, ALADI works to reach the foundational objectives. As the search for a plural and inclusive integration is entreated, it requires a careful consideration of the needs and potential of each of its members and of those considered to be of lesser relative economic development. In the same way, and using the new technologies of information and communication, ALADI has fostered

a greater link and interaction with different sectors of society (public, private, academic, small and medium sized businesses, women's associations, small farms, etc.), those who should be the main beneficiaries of integration, without considering their geographical location. We are facing complex and challenging times and circumstances, not only for our region, but also for the world. ALADI, for more than 40 years, continues its work of promoting Latin American integration and achieving the objectives brought about by its member countries, in the light of the economic and commercial development of the region, and for the well-being of the people. Only regional integration and solidarity can give us the strength of unity to seek the welfare of other societies in the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic and social sequels.<sup>2</sup>

The trade outlook, according to the data in Table 1 below, expresses the need for a reduction in exchanges between the countries of ALADI and the other American blocs. The only bloc that demonstrated an increase in the destination of exports until 2018 was the New North American Free Trade Agreement, formed by Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The data for 2021 are incomplete.

Table 1 Total exports from ALADI member countries to the blocs on the American continent between 2015 and 2021 (values in thousands of US dollars)

Destination	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
ALADI	112,273,132	102,518,352	116,423,688	104,331,438	77,722,494	60,060,052	421,494
CARICOM	3,663,774	2,533,511	3,940,669	3,615,494	2,421,288	1,693,741	1,481
CAN	25,576,836	24,250,780	26,677,138	26,253,977	19,803,543	13,977,044	8,885
NAFTA	395,773,384	387,819,319	421,750,034	440,756,768	81,218,155	62,130,998	12,914
CELAC	125,393,249	114,729,291	130,635,700	118,109,617	84,448,817	64,901,162	423,965
MERCOSUR	60,787,022	53,416,251	60,048,937	47,863,211	32,494,245	27,404,841	329,736
TOTAL	512,245,398	493,582,267	542,339,693	549,482,986	156,896,159	120,494,592	436,475

Source: ALADI, Foreign Trade Information System, [consultawebsv2.aladi.org/sicoexV2/jsfComercio/totales\\_comercio\\_exterior\\_areas\\_resultado.seam?retorno=inicio&cid=1055889](http://consultawebsv2.aladi.org/sicoexV2/jsfComercio/totales_comercio_exterior_areas_resultado.seam?retorno=inicio&cid=1055889).

The data presented above support the idea that, as of 2015, intra-bloc economic and commercial transactions in Latin America have decreased, precisely because of the scenarios that have been discussed. However, the drop in international trade among ALADI members was not as much as the drop in exports to UNASUR, CELAC, and MERCOSUR.

For the post-pandemic context, just as the economic recovery is expected to be slow in Latin America, so the political and commercial rapprochement should occur among the members of ALADI, given the encouragement which that bloc has given to resume the regional integration projects, some even recovered from the UNASUR and CELAC guidelines.

As the post-pandemic scenario should call for a review of global priorities, since the reopening and resumption of sustained economic growth in foreign investments will take place at different stages in each country, including in Latin America, with its latent peculiarities, new attempts at integration projects on the subcontinent are ruled out, especially in the sectors of transport infrastructure and the processing of agricultural commodities and services.

Trade as a priority agenda for regional integration in the post-pandemic was finally evident in the virtual meeting of the presidents of the MERCOSUR member states, held on July 2, 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic: The presidents also reaffirmed their commitment to work together in the fight to prevent and combat COVID-19 and other health emergencies that affect the region. In this context, they reaffirmed their commitment to coordinate efforts for the economic reactivation of the region. Furthermore, they underlined the need to build a fair and inclusive trading system that guarantees full, effective, and equal participation of women in all their diversity, regarding access to decent work and equal opportunities, conditions and income for women and men. They agreed that the pandemic has increased the relevance of electronic commerce as a useful and quick response tool and as a commercial platform, vital for economic recovery, especially for the development and international insertion of MIPYMES. In this sense, we highlight the advances achieved in the construction of a MERCOSUR framework that facilitates e-commerce and has pledged to redouble efforts to achieve a high-level protocol in the field.<sup>3</sup>

The concern and prioritization of international trade is supported by the study of the impacts of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean, conducted by CELAC and ECLAC, which points to a significant drop in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of all countries in the region, which can be seen in Figure 1:

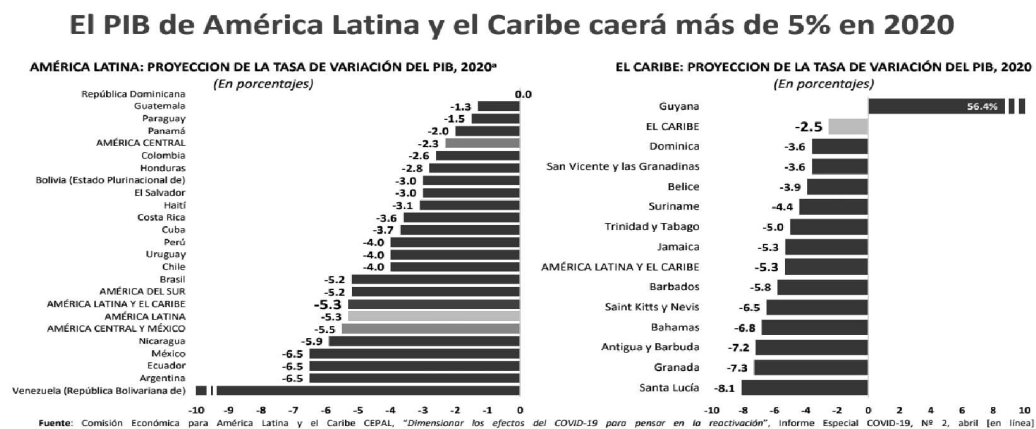


Figure 1 Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the GDP of Latin American and Caribbean countries  
(Source: ECLAC/CELAC. [www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/presentation/files/final\\_finalcelac-28\\_mayo2020.pdf](http://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/presentation/files/final_finalcelac-28_mayo2020.pdf).)

The CELAC proposed framework to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in Latin America follows the same guideline presented by ALADI and MERCOSUR, reinforcing the central concept of the resumption of regional integration as the guiding machine of this post-pandemic restructuring and reconstruction process.

That said, all the outlooks for regional integration in Latin America and its political economy point to a direction in which trade will increasingly be the mechanism for linking these processes, thus allowing for other agendas such as joint projects, investments in infrastructure and, perhaps, a resumption of political dialogue, to resume, despite the evident ideological and programmatic



differences that exist in the region today.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to present an overview of Latin America's political economy and its post-Western perceptions, that is, in a world where de-Westernization and the effects of deglobalization, added to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to the reconfiguration of International Relations and partnership and cooperation initiatives.

The construction of the Latin America concept, as we have discussed, went through a long process of colonial exploitation which was replaced by an automatic alignment with the US power—with rare exceptions—when the two World Wars broke out in the 20th century, followed by the period of the Cold War.

The national re-democratization projects from the 1980s onward led to the configuration of a Latin American political regime combined with unstable democracies and economies, above all, connected to the then incipient globalization and the new multilateralism and multipolar agenda.

This article has also discussed how the actors, scenarios and theories about Latin America and its political economy have developed and opened a space for new interpretations of the subcontinent to emerge. Furthermore, we have pointed out the new possibilities of cooperation and regional integration, which had a decade of expansion and institutionalization, such as the case of CELAC and UNASUR, and their integration projects in the field of regional political and economic infrastructure.

To summarize, it is possible to affirm that the concept of Latin America was built on perennial deep colonial and imperialist roots which were strategically introduced in the region. The deconstruction of these roots, according to our understanding, involves the questioning of the Westernized character relegated to the region and its peoples and nations, as well as a new political economy that is developing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, Latin America today is much more post-Western than it was a century ago, a fact that will generate new agendas, possibilities, and hegemonic conflicts.

## Notes

1. Bolivia (who is expected to leave the group, as promised by new president Luís Arce), Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Saint Lucia.
2. Available at: [www2.aladi.org/nsfaladi/sitioaladi.nsf/prensaDatosv2.xsp?databaseName=NSFALADI/presanueva.nsf&documentId=DFFD3A222A80E85032585C20073C73F&OpenDocument](http://www2.aladi.org/nsfaladi/sitioaladi.nsf/prensaDatosv2.xsp?databaseName=NSFALADI/presanueva.nsf&documentId=DFFD3A222A80E85032585C20073C73F&OpenDocument).
3. Available at: [www.mercosur.int/documento/comunicado-conjunto-de-los-presidentes-de-los-estados-partes-del-mercosur-27/?ind=1593708609088&filename=Comunicado+Conjunto+Estados+Partes+del+MERCOSUR+PPTP+2020\\_ES\\_VF.pdf&wpdmdl=12420&refresh=5f5414bbe0bde1599345851](http://www.mercosur.int/documento/comunicado-conjunto-de-los-presidentes-de-los-estados-partes-del-mercosur-27/?ind=1593708609088&filename=Comunicado+Conjunto+Estados+Partes+del+MERCOSUR+PPTP+2020_ES_VF.pdf&wpdmdl=12420&refresh=5f5414bbe0bde1599345851).

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