

1

The Theoretical Context of U.S.–Latin American Relations

The United States–Latin America relationship has never been easy. A combination of wars, invasions, occupations, mutual suspicion (and occasionally open dislike and insults), dictatorships, and/or differences in ideology represents a consistent obstacle to strong national friendships. However, relations have not always been negative. Periodically, Latin American political leaders have worked closely with the U.S. government in a spirit of partnership, and the United States has also periodically offered new initiatives and shown a willingness to establish a positive and friendly relationship.

Yet, all too often, U.S. policy makers and the general public do not understand why Latin Americans routinely demonstrate indifferent or even hostile reactions to U.S. actions, and Latin Americans themselves often see ulterior motives in U.S. actions.

The relationship has had it all. Militarily, just in the past several decades the United States has been deeply involved in Central American civil wars, as well as invasions (most notably Panama and Haiti) and support for coups (in Venezuela and Honduras, plus questionable removals of power in Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay). Economically, successive U.S. governments have sought to use economic pressure to oust the Cuban and more recently also the Venezuelan governments, while engaging in negotiations over economic agreements with a host of other countries. U.S. military and economic behavior has been accompanied by a tremendous movement of people, looking for opportunity and self-improvement. All the while, left-leaning political leaders endeavored to forge new political and economic links in Latin America to create a sense of unity and to find ways around U.S. influence. The pervasive political violence that characterized the Cold War period is now gone, but new types of violence – especially centered on narcotics and gangs – emerged. How, then, can we make sense of it all? This book has three intertwined purposes, focusing on theory, political history, and research.

The first is to articulate theoretical frameworks, guides to understand why governments behave in certain ways. These start with power. A prominent

2 1 Theoretical Context of U.S.–Latin American Relations

example is the realist school of international relations, which focuses on the state as a central actor in international relations and on the use of military and economic power to achieve security in an anarchic system (i.e. there is no world government). In an anarchic world, states must either sink or swim because no other state or organization will necessarily step in with assistance. Every state must depend entirely on itself to advance its interests, and all states are doing so all the time. In his classic study of realism, Kenneth Waltz argues that an actor is powerful to the extent that they affect others more than they affect them.¹

Power, therefore, can easily be observed and is constantly present in the minds of policy makers. The history of U.S.–Latin American relations has always been characterized and shaped by significant differences in military and economic capabilities and the absence of effective international institutions to constrain the actions of the United States.

Realism, however, is a United States-centric theory, both literally (U.S. scholars developed it) and conceptually (because it focuses so much on U.S. power). Latin American scholars take a different perspective, that of autonomy. Juan Carlos Puig, an Argentine academic, lawyer, and eventually Minister of Foreign Relations, was the first scholarly voice on the topic.² For Puig, autonomy is about the ability to make policy decisions without outside interference. Puig accepted the notion of international anarchy, which is core to realist theory, and the dominance of certain great powers (most notably the United States) from dependency theory. But he considered autonomy to fall outside those theoretical perspectives, in that there is still space for weaker states to make their own autonomous decisions to defend their interests. For Puig, autonomy was about the rational calculation of what independent policies were possible.

In the study of autonomy, power is central. A central question is how much Latin American countries should pursue policies independent of the United States. For Puig and many others, autonomy was a goal, something to aspire to. But there were dissenting voices. Carlos Escudé, for example, coined the term “peripheral realism” to argue that countries should be cautious about pushing too far and incurring U.S. wrath.³ This book does not take a position on that, but keeps the pursuit of Latin American autonomy (and therefore its agency) in mind.

Further, it will address the nature of Latin America’s economic dependency and consider the merits of dependency theory, which is another

¹ Waltz 1979, 192.

² Puig 1980.

³ Escudé 2014.

prominent approach in the literature on U.S.–Latin American relations. Dependency theory posits that Latin American underdevelopment is a result of domination by more advanced economies, primarily the United States. The result is that Latin America suffers from constraints and barriers that prevent it from achieving its economic potential.

In this view, the global economy fostered structural patterns that cannot be ignored. For example, U.S. companies extracted natural resources – such as fruit, oil, or copper – in Latin America, then sold those products abroad, reaping tremendous profit but leaving little gain locally. Meanwhile, a small group of elites (both foreign and domestic) garnered the lion’s share of national wealth and created a massive divide between rich and poor.

In its deterministic nature, however, this theory does not leave much room for discussion of Latin American resistance to U.S. hegemony. In one of the most important works on dependency, Andre Gunder Frank concludes by arguing that only by destroying capitalism, breaking away from world imperialism, and embracing socialism can countries successfully counteract dependency.⁴ Cardoso and Faletto offered a modified version (interestingly, Fernando Henrique Cardoso would later become a pro-market president of Brazil) that acknowledged the possibility of developing (at least to some degree) despite dependency, but did not see autonomy as a realistic goal.⁵ The bottom line of the theory is that true progress can never take place while contacts with the more powerful northern neighbor continue. In another seminal book on dependency, Evans posits that “dependent development” does take place, as foreign capital penetrates and creates diversified industrial sectors.⁶ So this is development but it is conditional. The end result, while admittedly industrial, remains seriously detrimental to the country as a whole because it continues to depend on foreign interests. Latin American leaders, particularly those on the left, invoke dependency’s basic message on a regular basis.

The dependency school has provided rich analyses of the challenges faced by less developed countries in Latin America but is less well equipped to explain autonomous actions initiated within the region vis-à-vis the United States. In other words, Latin American political leaders have often worked successfully and independently within the context of an obvious power imbalance.

The fourth major theoretical approach in international relations – liberal institutionalism – denies realism’s assumptions about how power leads

⁴ Gunder Frank 1967.

⁵ Cardoso and Faletto 1979.

⁶ Evans 1979.

4 1 Theoretical Context of U.S.–Latin American Relations

to conflict. Instead, its adherents focus on harmony of interests and how countries can successfully get along. Thus, according to Rosecrance, as nations interact with each other, they develop a stake in each other's success.⁷ International institutions can serve as vehicles for reducing the problems associated with an anarchic world, thereby mitigating some of the worst elements of power politics.

The theory envisions those institutions as taking on a life of their own. Even if they are created by powerful countries like the United States, they can become independently influential. Acceptance of their rules and norms spreads globally and disregarding them raises more protest. As a result, political leaders will be more likely to accept them, thus limiting their range of policy options. One offshoot of liberal institutionalism is constructivism, which says that the world is socially constructed, meaning that there is no set way of perceiving what happens in international relations. Instead, policy makers understand the world according to their own particular contexts. As beliefs change, so do relations between states.

BOX 1.1 Different Theoretical Perspectives: Operation Gideon

In 2020, two U.S. mercenaries and just under 60 Venezuelans attempted to invade Venezuela and overthrow the government of Nicolás Maduro. They had dubbed their mission "Operation Gideon," after a biblical military leader who won a battle despite having few soldiers. As it turned out, the government had informants and knew all about the plot, which was already poorly planned and amateurish. Eight of the Venezuelan invaders died, while 17 others and the two U.S. citizens were captured.

Maduro immediately blamed the Trump administration: "The United States is fully and completely involved in this defeated raid," he said on a national broadcast.⁸ Given that Trump repeatedly said that "all options are on the table" with Venezuela policy, Maduro could hardly be blamed for assuming Trump's hand in the invasion. It seems the U.S. participants believed they had government support, but at least as of now there is no hard evidence for it. Maduro also sent a letter to the United Nations, blaming the United States and Colombia, where the mercenaries had initially set up camp. Russia drafted a resolution of condemnation on the UN Security Council, which the

⁷ Rosecrance 1986.

⁸ Smith and Goodman 2020.

United States rejected, while China denounced the violation of Venezuelan sovereignty.

The so-called “Bay of Pigs” was a public relations victory for the Maduro government, vindicating its assertion that the United States and Colombia were plotting against it. It also damaged the Venezuelan opposition, which was accused of communicating with the incompetent mercenaries. Finally, it highlighted the role that nonstate actors often play in international relations. We may never know the full extent of U.S. government knowledge, but clearly many of the participants *believed* the United States was behind it.

Realist theory would view the issue in straightforward power terms. President Trump had expressed support for possible military action against the Venezuelan government. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said there was no “direct” U.S. involvement, which of course opened the door to speculation about indirect assistance. The United States viewed Venezuela as a threat and adversary.

Scholars of autonomy would highlight the impact of Venezuela pursuing entirely autonomous policies vis-à-vis the United States. Escudé used the term “rebel state” to describe situations where a government had antagonized the United States to the point that it risked backlash that could harm its own population.

Liberal institutional theory would acknowledge the importance of power, but point to the ways in which international law is invoked. In this particular case, however, the response was weak because of U.S. veto power on the UN Security Council.

Dependency theory would consider the hegemonic position of the United States, especially in terms of Venezuela’s dependence on oil exports for virtually all of its revenue. Maduro and his supporters routinely repeated the argument that the United States wanted to oust the government to gain more control over oil. Venezuela had shifted its exports away from the United States toward new partners, like Iran and India, but because of its natural resources remained a target.

For U.S. policy makers, Latin America has often represented both economic opportunity and a potential threat to U.S. national security. Latin Americans, whether politicians, rebels, or business elites, have a keen appreciation for the power imbalance, and at times they have either accepted it, attempting to use it to their advantage (many dictators retained power in this manner), or they have worked to counteract it and/or condemn it. The dynamics of power politics and the reactions to those dynamics constitute this book’s framework.

6 1 Theoretical Context of U.S.–Latin American Relations

A consistent theme in the book is the nature of “security.” A subjective term, it revolves around policy makers’ belief that their state must be free from harm. That goal of complete safety cannot ever be realized and so those policy makers can only seek to be as safe as possible. Realism, dependency theory, and the concept of autonomy agree that states seek to protect their interests, but the manner in which they do so depends on how policy makers define threats to national security. There are countless variations, but all come back to power and self-interest. Governments in the United States and Latin America often have differing perspectives on security, which in turn affects the dynamics of the United States–Latin America relationship, especially when those definitions are at odds.

Critics of realist theory point to how it treats the state as a unitary actor, that is, regardless of the leadership, a state will do what is necessary to protect its vital interests. This is often true of the other approaches as well. The state itself is acting. This takes the role of individuals out of the equation and assumes there would not be much difference whoever was in charge of policy making. Realism “provides no framework for understanding the specific content of state policies and the ways in which these change over time.”⁹ There has been considerable debate over this point; as Keohane and Martin argue, international relations theory must “explain variations in state preferences” by developing “theories that begin with individuals and groups.”¹⁰

This book joins the critics in asserting that the state should not be considered a unitary entity, but rather simply a sovereign one, where changing leadership affects how the key goals of political security and economic development are understood and articulated. People do matter, and have an independent impact on what policies ultimately are implemented. The analysis of state preferences and power, which are based on the perceptions of relevant policy makers, should be entirely consistent with realist theory.

Hegemony – meaning dominance of one country over others – and the application of U.S. interests should not be construed as so overwhelming that Latin America becomes only a passive actor obeying U.S. demands. There have been many instances when the policies of Latin American governments had their origins in domestic concerns and therefore were not strictly reactions to U.S. policy. Efforts at state building, internal security, economic growth, and political stability, just to name a few, have often originated within Latin American countries themselves. At the same time,

⁹ Hurrell 1996, 164–65.

¹⁰ Keohane and Martin 2003, 96.

the United States has clearly been impossible to ignore. In this book, it will become clear that leaders of Latin American countries, and groups within countries, developed a wide range of reactions to U.S. policy. As theorists of autonomy also note, they have carefully crafted regional or even global policy goals independent of the United States. Being a hegemonic power does not mean having total control. Latin Americans often struggle against U.S. dominance, and at times successfully. These efforts have taken many forms, including interpretations of international law, the founding of regional organizations, the formation and fomenting of rebellions and revolutions, the creation of nationalist policies, and even the production of a rich collection of literary works.

International factors also affect U.S. politics. This interplay has been labeled as “intermestic” in the international relations literature. Intermestic policy arises when domestic concerns strongly influence (or even determine) foreign policy decisions. The domestic audience, which itself is a complex web of voters, political parties, economic interests, lobbyists, and other actors, has been powerful in the formulation of U.S. policy toward Latin America. It is critical to understand not only why certain policies were followed but also who makes the decisions. Not only have there been heated battles between the U.S. executive and legislative branches for control over foreign policy but also at times other political actors have wielded tremendous influence.

This is also true in Latin America, where different political, economic, and social actors have viewed relations with the United States in very different ways. For example, democratically elected presidents and legislatures, military governments, guerrillas, human rights activists, reformers, business elites, workers, peasants, and the urban poor view the U.S.–Latin American relationship in diverse ways and try to shape it accordingly. The region has traditionally been strongly presidential and highly centralized. As democracy spreads and new groups find voice, however, the policy context is becoming more multifaceted.

In short, there is no perfect theory. We strongly encourage students to engage different theories of international relations in the light of empirical evidence. (See Table 1.1.)

The second purpose of the book is to explain the historical and contemporary shifts in attitude and policy approaches that have affected the formation and implementation of policies, both in the United States and Latin America. There is much continuity to U.S. policy, to the point where at times the cliché “the more things change, the more they stay the same” seems to ring true, but at the same time important shifts have taken place over time. Latin American leaders, meanwhile, have not viewed the relationship in

8 1 Theoretical Context of U.S.–Latin American Relations

	Realism	Autonomy	Liberal institutionalism	Dependency
Core beliefs	States act in a self-interested manner to achieve security	Weak states can pursue policies autonomously from a hegemonic power	International institutions can constrain state behavior and promote cooperation	Less developed countries are exploited by the developed world
Key actors	Individual states, regardless of what type of government	Individual states, in some cases working together	International institutions	Developed countries and corporations
Main instruments	Military and economic power	Economic power and alliances	The rules and norms of international institutions	Economic power
Theoretical benefits	Explains the effects of power imbalance	Avoids the problem of focusing too much on the hegemonic state	Explains how states change behavior because of institutions	Explains the economic obstacles to autonomy in Latin America
Theoretical shortcomings	Does not always adequately explain Latin American responses to hegemony and complexities of policy making	Cannot pinpoint when and why greater autonomy is possible	Tends to overemphasize the power of international institutions	Does not adequately explain when and why autonomy increases

static terms, because their own interests changed. Although it is a truism to say that international relations contain elements of both continuity and change, understanding U.S.–Latin American relations requires teasing out the interplay between the two.

Often, shifts in policy correspond to the U.S. perception of the international system and the threats perceived to be emanating from it. Just as the U.S. response to Latin American independence was crafted with an eye to the reactions of Spain, France, and Great Britain, Cold War and post-September 11 policies were aimed at dealing with enemies with origins outside the region, whether from Western Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, or – increasingly – China. On many occasions, Latin Americans have

not agreed with U.S. assertions of imminent threat, and the debate over threats has continued unabated since the early nineteenth century.

Analysis of the Cold War period will highlight the persistent continuities, most notably the keen awareness of U.S. hegemony on the part of both U.S. policy makers and Latin Americans (whether presidents, diplomats, guerillas, workers, or peasants). The rapid collapse of the Soviet Union drastically changed U.S. perceptions in the region, but political and economic dominance remained. Barely more than a decade later, the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, therefore represented far more continuity than change. Although the specific policy priorities would not be identical, U.S. strategies would remain largely constant. The post–September 11 period echoes not only the Cold War but also U.S. responses to the wars of Latin American independence and the security issues arising during World War II.

Theory and political history provide a structure for understanding, but the third purpose of this book is to provide a guide to investigate topics in more detail or even write research papers. Given the mass of data and dates, names and nations, it can be difficult to narrow down ideas and focus on specific issues and countries, much less to gather sources from the truly vast quantity of available books, government documents, articles, and websites. In addition to the general References section at the end of the book, the end of each chapter has a research section to serve as that guide.

Each research section has an annotated selection of books, with an emphasis on those containing useful overviews of the chapter's period or topic. Although most of these books are recent so they incorporate as much updated scholarship as possible, the section also includes older reference works that have stood the academic test of time. There are also specific government document collections that are well indexed and readily available (in some cases online) for students. The suggested readings are accompanied by possible research questions for students to explore as a way to develop term papers and research ideas. The subject matter of these questions comes from the chapter itself, but addressing the questions will require further study, with the References as an initial guide. Each chapter also includes excerpts from prominent government documents, speeches, treaties, and agreements. Combined with the narrative, these documents offer a view into the world of diplomacy, negotiation, and international law.

Finally, the number of useful websites has skyrocketed but pales in comparison to the total number of websites on the topic. Therefore, the selected websites include those that have proved durable, credible, and/or useful for researchers. Most are in English, but a number of Spanish-only sites are also listed.



Map 1.1 Latin America and the Caribbean. Encyclopaedia Britannica / Contributor / Universal Images Group / Getty Images, with permission of Getty.

The book should help the reader understand the distinct nature of U.S. policy toward Latin America. But what is Latin America? The answer is both simple and unsatisfactory. In general, for U.S. policy makers and scholars alike, Latin America refers to countries in the western hemisphere that were colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese. More specifically, that means Mexico, most of Central and South America, and parts of the Caribbean. Although the Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island now called Hispaniola (a variation of Española, or “Little Spain,” so called by Columbus because of its physical resemblance to Spain), the latter was a French colony but is also often included. Aside from sharing the same colonial roots, a number of economic, political and cultural similarities bind Latin American countries together. Yet we have to be aware at all times that the people who live within this vast region do not consider themselves part of a single bloc. (See Map 1.1.) Even the similarities – such