LATIN AMERICA AND THE UNITED STATES

Gregory Weeks

Introduction

This chapter traces the study of the relationship between Latin America and the United States. Approaches have evolved in terms of orientation, theoretical perspective, and methodology. As a political scientist, I spend most—though not all—of my time discussing scholarship in that discipline. I touch on only a minuscule fraction of the thousands of books and articles published on the subject, so by necessity I leave out many such works.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of suggestions for where future research might fruitfully go. In a roughly chronological manner, the chapter shows how a predominately US-oriented literature became more critical after the US response to the Cuban Revolution. Yet after the end of the Cold War, that perspective shifted again as younger scholars questioned whether the critical approach downplayed Latin American agency. Within that discussion of changes over time, the chapter shows how US-based analyses differed from those coming from Latin America. The orientation and methodologies employed by both countries have been different. Latin America is much less concerned with security, while scholars in the United States pay too little attention to the works published in Latin America. Making these comparisons allows for a clearer sense of what avenues future work could take.

Background

Prior to World War II, few scholars paid much attention to US-Latin American relations. Historians wrote first and trusted to offer straightforward narrative history. Significantly, US scholars took for granted that the United States was a positive force in the region and that it should intervene for the benefit of Latin American countries. This came at a time when the United States intervened in and even occupied multiple Latin American countries, which continued well into the 20th century. Aside from the notion that US "assistance" was a boon for the region, these works did not explore causal relationships. They were descriptive and simply assumed good intentions.

In 1989, historian John Holdiday Latack gave a series of lectures and a book publication the following year as The Diplomatic Relations of the United States and Spanish America (Latack, 1990). His book concludes with a favorable assessment of the Monroe Doctrine. The same easy acceptance of US interference is evident throughout the first textbook on the topic, by diplomatic historian Samuel Flagg Bemis (1943), who warned "protective imperialism" as a worldly salutary outcome of US policy.

The study of US policy toward Latin America was rethought after the Cold War began in the early 1940s and for a time scholarly works remained complimentary. The 1959 Cuban Revolution quickly shifted the approving view of US policy toward a critical stance. During the 1960s, a new generation of scholars stopped accepting the US government's public statements on foreign policy and questioned US government motives. Ironically, many of them did so while receiving federal funding for research that indexed, administered deeply dedicated to fighting Communism funded fieldwork by US scholars that yielded highly controversial published studies. They saw the imbalance of power between the two regions not as a source of protection but rather as aggression from a dominating state.

After the Cuban Revolution: focus on power

One result of the Cuban Revolution was a state of military coups that showed its repressive dictatorships, with the 1964 Brazilian coup as a watershed. Conservative military leaders labeled virtually all progressive movements as subversive and toppled democratic governments, arguing they were saving the country from Communique rule. Without fail, the US government lent its support to those governments, which generated more scholarly backlash. Especially after the coup that overturned the democratically elected government in Chile of Salvador Allende in 1973 and the outrage it generated, books and articles proliferated at a dizzying pace. As graduate students or young assistant professors, scholars came of age at a time when distrust of US foreign policy generally was high, and with evidence of chronic wrongdoing was being unearthed for the first time. Overwhelmingly, these historians and political scientists were critical of US policy, especially with regard to support (or more accurately lack thereof) for democracy and human rights.

Realism emerged as a major theoretical approach in International Relations and was used extensively to explain the relationship between the United States and Latin America. There are many variants of realism theory, but in its simplest form it points, "Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order" (Waltz, 1979: 111). The options of any given state are conditioned by their capacity, or power, to pursue actions based on self-interest. In the context of US-Latin American relations, this meant analysis of power imbalance. As one prominent textbook noted, it entailed "how the United States has chosen to apply and exercise its potential preeminence" (Smith, 2006: 5). Similarly, the "History of US-Latin American relations has always been characterized and shaped by significant differences in military and economic capabilities and the absence of international institutions to constrain the actions of the United States" (Weeks, 2015: 2). For the most part, this accounts for US efforts to use its hegemonic position to Latin America's disadvantage, and the ways in which governments in the region responded.

Saying the regime from Communism was not the focal point for Latin American scholars. Dependency theory was a Latin American theoretical counterpoint, where US hegemony was explained as a structural outcome of global capitalism. The core, which in the 20th century meant the United States, extracted primary products from Latin America while exporting finished manufactured goods. This unequal arrangement provoked independent Latin American economic development. US policy was therefore considered part of an economic imperial project. Among dependency theorists, Latin American agency was tightly constrained and conditioned by the power of US capital and the US government that supported its expansion. André Gunder
End of the Cold War

The Soviet Union’s fall in 1990–1991 fundamentally shifted the study of US-Latin American relations. Within a short time frame, not only did the specter of Soviet encirclement disappear, but the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were voted out, the Salvadoran government and rebels signed a peace treaty, the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet left power, and the Cuban dictatorship was overthrown without an external juncture. The absence of threat to the United States created space for researchers, especially in the United States, to question long-held assumptions and probe new areas.

Analytically, the end of the Cold War promised new ways to question the primacy of power to understand the dynamics of US-Latin American relationships. Kathryn Sikkink (2004) worked on the power of human rights ideas as an important example, as she demonstrated that ideas can have their own independent influence of the power of even a hegemon. As human rights became publicized, with the activities of international non-governmental organizations they received more attention both globally and in the US Congress. Over time, this meant US policy makers could not ignore their importance and policy changed accordingly. The inbalance of power between the United States and Latin America certainly matured, but it did not necessarily determine outcomes as much in previously assumed.

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The 2000s marked a new generation shift in the United States, as scholars who were not ever alive at the time of the Cuban Revolution entered academia. To criticism of US policy they asked Latin American agency and questioned whether everything the US government did was harmful almost all the time. As Tanya Harraw (2011: 274) wrote about the Chávez coup, “And it was, in the end, other Chávezes who let this happen.” When Russell Candall (2006: 4) asserted, “we cannot ask whether U.S. bayonets helped lead to more democracy, not less,” it was the argument of an ideologue. Even established scholars began to question the assumptions that some combination of national security and economic self-interest drove US policy. In fact, other variables (like Latin American lobbying mattered a lot (Gore, 2008).

In both History and Political Science, US published studies brought Latin American agency more into the picture, with the logic that “Geopolitical research tends to produce nationalistic explanations and to ignore the role of players from countries other than those whose words are examined” (Candall, 2006: 4). A member of authors pushed back on the power imbalance emphasis and showed how Latin American governments mattered more than generally appreciated (Leng, 2015; Mota and Hey, 2003; McGlennon, 2013). They were not powerless agents having power exerted on them, but rather were instrumental in shaping outcomes. Even efforts during the Cold War both by the US and the Soviet Union to co-opt and control Latin American intellectuals was frustrated by their ability to define their own version of nationalism that was beholden to neither (Ibert, 2015).

At the same time, the ongoing declassification of US government documents fostered rich and highly critical analyses of Cold War policy. In particular, President Bill Clinton’s Chile Denuclearization Project released approximately 23,000 documents related to US-Chilean relations. Examples of publications using such documents include Kornbluh (2003) and Morey and McGlennon (2013) on US policy toward the Pinochet dictatorship; Harmer (2011) on US policy toward Salvador_Allende; McChesney (2005) on Operation Condor; Lee-Kavanaugh (2014) on US-Cuban relations; and the US role in the 1961 Brazilian coup (Pereira, 2018). No doubt these will continue to emerge and will lead to rethinking of the US role in Latin American political crises.
to reduce poverty and income inequality. The George W. Bush administration in particular was hostile, and in 2002 applauded the coup that briefly removed Chávez from power. From then on, bilateral relations were especially tense. The literature includes analyses that place the bilateral relationship in historical perspective (Kelly and Roman, 2002), of Venezuela's efforts to balance US power (Corrales, 2009); and of use of oil revenue to challenge US hegemony (Clem and Mian- gox, 2011). Similar to studies of US-Cuban relations, the ideological bent of such works varies widely, but the vast majority reflect power imbalance, where for example Venezuela resists US policy preferences and forges international alliances and organizations that conspicuously exclude the United States.

That development has gone hand in hand with studies of China's rising influence in Latin America and how that affects the United States (Koert and Paz, 2008; Callaghan, 2016; Demou, 2017). The Chinese economic presence in Latin America is considerable but still relatively new so its long-term impact on US-Latin American relations remains mostly a matter of speculation. Latin America views the Chinese influence largely through the lens of trade and economic calculation. Chinese trade with Latin America increased 22-fold between 2000 and 2015, and Foreign Direct Investment reached the tens of billions (OECD, 2015). In the United States, the focus is often on how China may threaten US security and hegemony. As times have veer into automation, and assume Latin America prospects in the face of Chinese influence, which the United States should counter.

Studies on the Barack Obama presidency have focused on his doctrine of engagement (Karn and Rose, 2016) and use of soft power (Weeks, 2016) but there are also critics on the left who argue that President Obama showed more substantive continuity than change with the George W. Bush presidency (e.g. Buxton, 2013). The latter criticism was based less common after 2014, when Obama threw diplomatic relations with Cuba, but even more so after the election of Donald Trump, whose presidency is too new for publication of academic works at the time of this writing, based on his initial Latin America policy policy on racial issues, affects toward allies and adversaries alike, harsh criticism of NAFTA, and partial rolling back of Obama's Cuba policy. When former Chilen President Ricardo Lagos said that Trump's election "was not good news for the world," he spoke for many Latin Americans (quoted in Rosson, 2016).

Methodology

This chapter has covered the substance of the literature but we need also to consider methodology. One constant has been qualitative methods. Of course, this is to be expected for work by historians, but it is also true of political scientists, whose discipline has otherwise been moving in a decidedly quantitative direction. As Mariam Benchetrit (2013) points out after an extensive study of peer-reviewed books and articles, the study of US-Latin American relations does not reflect broader trends in international relations research. This fact has been noted in Latin America as well, where the use of quantitative political science has grown (Moret and Reyes, 2016).

There are various possible answers to this question. Authors have tended to use considerable historical context to explain US-Latin American relations, which leads towards more historical (and thus qualitative) analyses. Nonetheless, in Political Science we might expect more mixed methods approaches, which would reflect trends in the discipline in this direction, but in general have been the exception. General International Relations literature focuses extensively on interstate conflict and terrorism, which are much less prevalent in Latin America than elsewhere in recent years. Latin America has the lowest incidence of interstate war of any region in the world. The worst guerrilla conflicts, such as the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) or the Peruvian Shining Path, were negotiated to an end and defeated militarily.
Latin American studies of bilateral relations are overwhelmingly qualitative, unless they focus squarely on trade. In an excellent literature review, Giacalone (2012) outlines the approaches of Foreign Policy Analysts in the larger Southern Cone countries. With variation, Latin American scholars have tended to use US theoretical models but adapt them to local realities and inflate those more with interpretive arguments, often founded on Marxist principles. Across all countries, autonomy was an important variable. Overall, Latin American studies of International Relations are often interdisciplinary and transnational, as one extensive review of Mexican articles showed (Cal Capetti, 2008). US studies are not. Not surprisingly, Latin American perspectives are often highly sceptical of the motives behind US policy, such that even prominent scholars like Ferguson criticise US foreign-policy articles referring to it as a principle of US policy toward Latin America (Baxter, 2000).

Another important difference between US and Latin American scholars is the issue of security. For US-based scholars, the concept is focused primarily in terms of how the current US administration defines it. That shifted from the Cold War to the war on drugs, and then also to organised crime and transnational terrorism. US researchers pay little attention to how Latin American policy makers define security, and how it differs from security assumptions in the United States. Given that foreign-policy decisions flow in part from calculations of opportunities and security concerns, this represents a major shortcoming.

Perhaps more significantly, Latin American governments sometimes consider US policy and actions to be part of a threat they face. Certainly, this is the case with a number of leftist governments, especially Venezuela, where the Bush administration supported the 2002 coup and the relationship has been entirely adversarial since. But some Latin American countries, for example Bolivia, also came to view the traditional militarised US response to the drug war as a threat to its citizens. Even more recently, many governments in the region believe climate change to be a major threat to security, whereas the Trump administration declares it to be false science.

Hey (1997: 652) conducted an extensive literature review on studies of Latin American foreign policy and concludes that “when the core deems a policy area salient, it is likely that core pressure will affect Latin American foreign policy in the desired direction.” In other words, US policy preferences – the looks at the market-drivers “Washington Consensus” in particular – were decisive even for Latin American foreign policy decisions. She argues that the literature ignored Latin American foreign policy bureaucrats as too unprofessional and undervalued to merit inclusion into any overarching argument. Hey concludes with a call for more theory building.

Indeed, the US-centric nature of the field poses potential obstacles to a fuller understanding of the US-Latin American relationship. To a large degree, data collection centers on the United States interviews with US policy makers, analyses of US aid programs, public opinion data, government-generated data, archival documents, and the like. In part, this stems from the lack of reliable data in Latin America, especially during eras of repressive military regimes, but that has changed significantly. Latin American data is now more available, but US scholars have been slower to utilize it.

It may be that many found the language skills, time, and resources required to do extensive fieldwork in Latin America to be too onerous and expensive. US published works contain considerable reference to policy issues with US policy makers. For our cabinet secretaries, assistant secretaries, ambassadors, national security advisors, and members of Congress become rich sources of information about US Foreign Policy. However, the other side of “international relations,” namely Latin American policy makers, get very little attention. These can only be found in case studies generally published in the country itself (e.g. Bymanes, 2014; Fernández de Castro, 2015; Tichenor, 2016). To be fair, many (perhaps even most) analyses of Latin American foreign policy toward the United States use official documents and statements much more than interviews, as we already noted.

Only recently have Latin American public-opinion data become available and used to understand US-Latin American relations. These have focused on sources of “anti-Americanism” (Baker and Capetiy, 2013; Arput and Bonsi, 2015) and whether US influence is diminishing (Aripura, 2010). They questioned assumptions about how Latin Americans perceive the United States, which is much more positive than conventional wisdom would suggest (perhaps at least Donald Trump’s election). These analyses were made possible by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University, which has been conducting surveys in the region regularly since 2004. These works also point to a different methodological approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods. A mixed-methods approach takes advantage of newly available data but infuses it with the context that had made qualitative work so valuable. Until recently, researchers have used LAPOP data primarily to understand Latin American domestic politics, so the extension to US-Latin American relations is a welcome, albeit nascent, development.

Future research

The study of US-Latin American relations has come a long way and has gained in nuance as time goes on, but there is still work to be done. There is tremendous variety of approach, methodology and theoretical perspective. That diversity is essential for understanding the new era of US-Latin American relations we are in, characterised by Latin America reaching out to other parts of the world for trade and other kinds of exchange while US attention wanders or, in the case of Donald Trump, even becomes unpredictably hostile.

Especially in a (usually) democratic era in Latin America, where so many resources are now publicly available, researchers should make use of and even expand having the Latin American perspective front and center. In large part, this trend increased use of sources from individual countries, both primary and secondary. Yet especially for US researchers, it requires shifting a long-held belief that US power is overwhelming to the point of being sight of Latin American agency.

More attention should be paid to the differing definitions of security in the United States versus Latin America. Too narrow a focus on Latin American resistance to US policy obscures the fact that policy makers in the region are viewing policy choices through a lens that keeps local issues more in mind. Especially through the efforts of Hugo Chávez, new international organisations like the South American Union (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, are defining regional security, which matters more to local actors than US action and effect US-Latin American relations. At the same time, US policy makers and domestic politics should receive more attention and should play a role in trade agreements. For US problems, Latin America has not been a major priority, which means policy gets made in large part by lower level cabinet and National Security Council appointees.

From a methodological standpoint, the increased quantification of International Relations studies has barely touched US-Latin American relations. In and of itself, this is not a problem but the different types of research questions are best suited to different methods. Some issues require qualitative case studies to explain historical context and complex interplay between different political actors. Nonetheless, the dearth of quantitative work should at least give pause. In particular, this would be an opportunity time for exploration of what method used might
accomplish. The study of Latin American public opinion toward the United States points one direction that this might take.

Finally, scholars should more deliberately apply theoretical perspectives from the subfield of International Relations, regardless of methodology. The wealth of largely descriptive studies offers considerable insight, but do not always build upon prior literature to develop new theoretical insights. Moreover, US scholars would benefit greatly from greater attention to the literature produced in Latin America, which is heavily influenced by theories generated in the United States but which retains its own flavour and develops its own insights based upon local contexts.

Note

1 In other words, I apologize if I do not meet the publication of whoever happens to be reading this.

References


