

## Decline of U.S. Hegemony?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Julia E. Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 342.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain*, 342.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Payeras, *Days of the Jungle: The Testimony of a Guatemalan Guerrillero, 1972–1976*, introduction by George Black (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 94.

<sup>7</sup> José Peralta, testimony in Rafael Railaf, Lucy Traipe, Félix Huentelaf, Víctor Molfinqueo, José Peralta, and Rudecindo Quinchavil, *A desalambrar: Historias de Mapuches y Chilenos en la lucha por la tierra* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial AYUN, 2006), 68–88, direct quotation on pp. 74–75; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Demetrio Cujtí Cuxil, “The Politics of Maya Revindication,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward R. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 19–50; and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Oppressed but Not Defeated”: *Peasant Struggles among the Aymara and Qhechwa in Bolivia, 1900–1980* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Peralta, in *A desalambrar*, 68–88. ■

U.S. president Donald Trump has pledged “to make America great again.” The premise of this exciting pledge is that U.S. power has been declining over some recent period. Applied to the trajectory of U.S.–Latin American relations, the hypothesis of decline raises three interesting questions:

1. Has the United States government suffered a decline in its ability to impose its own policy preferences by force or persuasion on the 32 independent governments in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past 50 years (since roughly the date of LASA’s creation in 1967)? That is, has the U.S. capacity to project power in the region actually declined? I think the answer to this question is no.
2. Have U.S. policy preferences evolved over the past 50 years such that governments in the region are more likely than in the past to find them attractive, or at least consistent with their own perceived national interests? I think the answer to this question is yes.
3. Hegemony is a wonderfully elastic concept. In its modern Gramscian articulation, it refers to the dynamic role of ideas and institutions in securing popular acquiescence or even support for objectively exploitative social arrangements. Translating this notion to the international arena, one might ask whether the ideas and institutions that support U.S. policy preferences in the region have become stronger or weaker over the past 50 years. I think the best answer I can give to this question is probably stronger.

On the first question, the impression that U.S. dominance has declined seems to be based on (at least) two kinds of evidence.

First, the U.S. share of trade and investment flows has declined over the past 50 years. U.S. leverage, the argument runs, must have diminished accordingly. However, trade and investment flows do not necessarily convey proportionate political influence. Most of the main trade and investment rivals of the United States in the region—Western Europe, Japan, and more recently, China—avoid openly confronting the United States. None has devoted much time and money to cultivating domestic interest groups within Latin America to serve as political allies. In any case, the United States will always be a more important economic partner to each of them than any Latin American partner or collection of partners.

The second kind of evidence cited for the decline hypothesis begins with the observation that the U.S. government has successfully intervened to overthrow a sitting government in the western hemisphere only three times in the 25 years since the collapse of the USSR, in contrast to the 22 overturned in the 29 years between 1961 and 1990. The U.S. failure to intervene, it is argued, has allowed governments hostile to U.S. interests to persist in power and made even friendly governments more difficult to bully or persuade. Ergo, U.S. hegemony has diminished.

I think this evidence actually argues against the decline hypothesis. The interventions of the Cold War era suggest a much shakier hegemony than the historiography suggests. A truly *successful* hegemon (like the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, for example) would not have felt compelled to intervene so often.

The Cold War strategy of the United States in Latin America was to seek reliably anti-Communist allies, mostly conservative and right-wing economic and political elites,

secure their support for U.S. Cold War aims, and back them with money, training, and equipment for the military and police forces that kept them in power.

This strategy was poorly conceived at best. In most Latin American countries, citizen majorities preferred more socially progressive governments than those supported or installed by the United States. When majorities managed to elect such governments or threatened to do so, the U.S. government usually backed minority rule. Eleven of the 22 governments overthrown between 1961 and 1990 had been elected, while a 12th intervention (the dispatch of 22,000 U.S. troops to Santo Domingo in 1965) prevented the *restoration* of a reformist democratic regime.

Worse yet, the Cold War strategy spilled blood needlessly. In 10 of the 12 cases, the political movements or parties tossed from power were reelected to office once military rule ended. And nothing bad happened.

Finally, the Cold War strategy of the United States in Latin America generated widespread opposition within the United States, even within the policy establishment. Policy discipline and coherence were continually undermined, particularly (but for quite different reasons) during the Carter and Reagan administrations.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, U.S. policymakers had long since stopped paying much attention to Latin America. Conflicts over mistreatment of U.S. companies and property holders virtually disappeared with the development of a new international dispute-settlement regime beginning in the late 1970s. Left-wing and center-left parties, movements, and governments, which once triggered

interventions, now worry more about the next election than they do about the CIA. Latin American military establishments, their budgets cut and their numbers falling, no longer threaten democratic regimes.

Or, to put it differently, since U.S. policy no longer treats social progress and majority rule as potential threats to its national security interests, most people in the region, according to opinion polls, now have a fairly positive view of the United States and frequently, but not always, elect leaders who share that view. “Soft power,” aided by transnational flows of people, ideas, images, music, sports, and business have generally contributed to this positive trend. This may help to explain why the various regional or subregional institutions from which the United States has been deliberately excluded over the past two decades have mostly languished without major impact.

So what about hegemony in the Gramscian sense? Are Latin American citizens and their governments embracing U.S. policy preferences, even when by any reasonably objective standard their own interests should be propelling them to do otherwise?

The best example of this would be the U.S.-driven war on drugs, a war that has inflicted shocking losses of blood and treasure from the Mexican-US border to the high Andes. Some have argued that the market-oriented reforms and free trade agreements of the past quarter century provide another example. In these cases, as in most others, however, Latin American political interests and interest groups are deeply engaged for their own good (or bad) domestically rooted reasons.

Thus, it does not seem to me that the capacity of the U.S. government to impose its own policy preferences on the region

has diminished over the past 50 years. If anything, it seems to have increased, both because U.S. post-Cold War policy goals are more modest and because Latin American interests, however defined by mostly elected governments and increasingly vibrant civil societies, are more likely to converge with those of the United States on a broad range of issues.

The key issue for the Trump era is whether Latin American governments have developed, individually or together, greater *capacity* to balance against U.S. pressures to embrace policies they would like to oppose than was the case 50 years ago. I think the answer is no.

This is especially true for the smaller countries of Central America and the Caribbean, but the balancing capacities of larger states are also quite limited. Latin American governments can mobilize domestic support (easier for democrats and populists than dictatorships), appeal to regional or international organizations (usually ineffective), look to other superpowers for encouragement (seldom interested), even seek to influence public opinion or mobilize influential interest groups in the United States, but none of these strategies have worked very well in the past.

Two cases bear watching more closely in the coming years. The first, Mexico, is especially interesting. It is now true that almost any damage the United States might contemplate imposing to avert or reverse unwanted Mexican policies would be likely to damage significant U.S. interests as well. Mexican leaders may soon find themselves pushed to choose between exploiting the advantages of hyperintegration more effectively than they have up to now or reverting to “making *Mexico* great again.” The second case is Cuba, an

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improbably sovereign nation struggling to remain independent even as it transitions cautiously to a more productive economic model. For both of these countries, the next few years will likely involve more volatility in relations with the United States than they would prefer.

In the absence of serious threats to U.S. economic and security interests, now or in the past, the Latin American policies of the United States have usually been driven either by the vagaries of U.S. domestic politics (with generally suboptimal and sometimes appalling outcomes) or bureaucratic inertia (usually calm, but with missed opportunities). Trump may choose to revert to Cold War style bullying and interventions to please domestic constituencies, but only at the cost of provoking a decline in U.S. hegemony. Neglect and inactivity (and a Twitter ban) would better serve American greatness.

March 2017 ■

I wish to focus on a question of politics and culture that frames somewhat differently a half century of transformation. I hope this approach will serve to complement the excellent insights of my colleagues. My goal is to draw out some politico-cultural implications, as seen through a different lens, of the half century of economic growth, migration, political mobilization, new social movements, and hemispheric power so well analyzed by my colleagues.

What large ideas captured the political and cultural imagination of “troublesome” intellectuals and youths in Latin America during the last half century? A corollary follows. How might answers to this question have changed over time?

The question and its corollary offer an interesting angle for the theme of this dossier. They recognize that intellectuals and youths—although by no means uniform in their political and cultural sensibilities or in their degrees of sociopolitical conformity or nonconformity—have been significant social actors, albeit not the only ones, in the skepticism and mobilizations that drove social justice and inclusion struggles during a tumultuous half century. Such questions are also pertinent because as a scholarly organization, the Latin American Studies Association has been a space of intellectual and intergenerational communication, attuned to shifts of thought and social action and repression affecting intellectuals.

The term “troublesome” carries a double valence useful for the purposes of this commentary. First, the term embraces the idea that a fundamental *positive* consequence of critical thought and generational identity formation is precisely to “trouble” the status quo ante. Second, its elasticity recognizes the diversity of social justice critics: they did not all adhere

to a uniform analysis of what was wrong with the status quo, let alone how best to combat or transcend it. The elasticity also recognizes the diversity of the targets of critique and their responses to dissent. The social actors who found themselves under fire by youthful or intellectual critics varied considerably. In the 1960s/1970s era of radical politics, for example, they could range from leftists considered too reformist or compromised by Old Regime politics, to moderate populists and centrist reformers, to landed oligarchs and conservatives and military dictators. The responses to troubling actors also varied. Military dictatorship regimes and their hard-line supporters often framed dissenters as dangerous antinational “subversives” fit for destruction in a “dirty” war. Others responded to them as political adversaries, albeit misguided or mistaken or ineffectual, to be won over or contained or neutralized politically.

During the last half century, the large ideas that captured the politico-cultural imagination of troublesome youths and intellectuals—what such a question meant, how it might be answered—changed dramatically. Consider three key moments: the 1960s/1970s, the “long” 1980s, and the post-1990s.

Before proceeding, it may be wise to note the limits of this commentary. I am speaking here of general tendencies and am aware that national chronologies vary and that countercurrents are also important. For example, my description below of the transition from heroic to postheroic conceits took place earlier in Chile than in Nicaragua, and awareness of the Nicaraguan example also provided a certain countercurrent within Chile. Moreover, it is worth recalling the multiple and overlapping temporalities—the “tricks of time”—that have long shaped