

Interview – Daniele Benzi

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Daniele Benzi is a full-time Professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), specializing in Global Political Economy, Regionalism, and Latin American Studies. He is the author of *ALBA-TCP. Anatomía de la integración que no fue* (2017), a book grounded in extensive research and fieldwork conducted in Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia. Dr. Benzi holds a Ph.D. in Science, Technology, and Society from the University of Calabria (Italy), an M.A. in Latin American Studies from UNAM (Mexico), and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Catania (Italy). He has taught at several institutions across Latin America, including the Federal University of Bahia (Brazil), BUAP (Mexico), FLACSO-Ecuador, the Central University of Ecuador, and the Andean University Simón Bolívar. A list of his publications can be found [here](#).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am particularly interested in the ongoing debates about the decline of American global hegemony, the future of capitalism as a historical and social system, and how these dynamics are reshaping not only material conditions but also cultural and cognitive spaces worldwide.

My approach has always been fundamentally historical and comparative in nature. This is why I believe that some of the most exciting research today can be found in the fields of world and global history, macro-historical sociology, and critical global political economy. I also find emerging research programs, such as Global International Relations, to be exceptionally compelling, especially from a pedagogical perspective, since my academic environment is still largely influenced by Eurocentric traditions in the social sciences. However, these newer approaches often emphasize theoretical and constructivist perspectives within International Relations, frequently lacking a genuinely interdisciplinary scope and a solid grounding in historical analysis.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My understanding of the world has been profoundly shaped by C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*. The ability to connect individual biography with the broader trajectory of society — or even global society — within a historical framework remains, to me, one of the most powerful intellectual tools. I actively foster this mode of thinking in my course on Globalization and Society.

Largely, I have remained grounded in my intellectual foundations regarding social change, rooted in dependency theories, world-systems analysis, and critical approaches to political economy and development studies. Over time, however, I have become increasingly aware of the limitations of these approaches and more open to engaging with alternative perspectives — particularly those emerging from critical geography, global history, and certain strands of historical institutionalism.

You have extensively studied Latin American regionalism, particularly projects like ALBA-TCP and UNASUR. In your view, what were the key political and structural factors behind the rise and subsequent fragmentation of these initiatives?

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From a structural standpoint, it is challenging to comprehend the rise of ALBA-TCP and UNASUR outside the broader context of the ongoing erosion of American world hegemony. This process began with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and accelerated significantly after the 2008 financial crisis. Politically, the key factor was the growing exhaustion of neoliberal governance across Latin America, which triggered a remarkable wave of social and political mobilization that eventually crystallized into the so-called ‘Pink Tide.’ Latin American regionalism in the early 21st century was deeply rooted in this unique political and structural momentum — even in cases like the Pacific Alliance, which represented a counter-response to the broader regional trend. A decisive turning point occurred during the final stages of opposition to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, also known as ALCA in Spanish), between 2003 and 2005. This period witnessed a powerful — albeit ultimately fragile — alliance between left-leaning governments and radical social movements, a phenomenon that Perry Anderson aptly termed a global exception.

Understanding the subsequent fragmentation of these initiatives, particularly in the case of UNASUR, is a more challenging but intellectually rewarding task. While conventional explanations — such as political and economic instability, institutional weakness, and lack of leadership — are certainly valid, I believe there is still much to uncover. Since 2018, I have referred to this line of inquiry as the “mother question” of Latin American regionalism, drawing on a provocative question initially posed by French scholar Olivier Dabène: why has Latin American regionalism demonstrated such resilience and consistency over time, despite chronic instability and recurring crises? This remains a central puzzle for scholars of the region.

With some notable exceptions — particularly the important contributions of José Briceño Ruiz and Andrés Rivarola Puntigliano — most of the literature in Political Science, International Relations, and even International Political Economy continues to exhibit what Amitav Acharya has described as an “EU-centric” bias. That is, seeing the European Union as a universal model or benchmark for regionalism, assuming that theories developed in the context of the EU can be readily applied elsewhere. This tendency narrows the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and historical scope of our inquiries into the dynamics of Latin American regionalism — whose persistent instability and resilience have posed a complex intellectual and political challenge since the era of independence.

This has led me to engage more deliberately with interdisciplinary perspectives, grounded in a long-term and world-historical framework.

Much of your work draws from Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the ‘coloniality of power.’ How do you envision this framework enhancing our understanding of contemporary international relations and global hierarchies?

In my view, Aníbal Quijano was one of the three “godfathers” of Latin American critical thought, alongside the Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova and the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes. Originally from the Andean region of Áncash in Peru, Quijano engaged, since the 1950s, with all the major phases of Latin American social sciences — from early analyses of agrarian issues and urban marginality, through the periods of development, imperialism, and dependency, and into the more recent debates on modernity and Eurocentrism. In each of these phases, he made highly original and significant contributions, which ultimately earned him global recognition as the thinker who coined the concept of the “coloniality of power”. For a long time, Quijano has offered me a compelling lens through which to view Latin America within a global context — conveyed through a compelling and inventive intellectual style. I have written, and continue to believe, that he was the last great Latin American theorist of the “long twentieth century.” With his passing, a major cycle of critical Latin American thought came to a close.

That said, I have never been particularly drawn to the concept of the coloniality of power itself, nor to the academic industry that has grown around it. To me, the notion of coloniality is somewhat self-evident — it points to the *longue durée* of modern capitalism’s history, with its colonial and explicitly Eurocentric roots, which remain visible today beneath the surface of global structures. What I find most compelling in Quijano’s work is not this single concept, but rather his attempt to bring together a wide range of theories and perspectives within a broader conceptual and historical framework.

I also believe that the theory of the coloniality of power bears the clear imprint of the 1990s, marked by the so-called

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“end of history,” the “unipolar moment,” the height of globalization, and the rise of social movements resisting neoliberalism. But today, the world looks quite different. To make sense of contemporary dynamics, we need to rethink coloniality historically — recognizing the spatial and temporal heterogeneity, as well as the discontinuities, that have shaped the expansion of what Quijano called modern, colonial, and Eurocentric capitalism. This need for historical nuance has become increasingly evident to me through the rereading of modern history in recent works on World and Global History, as well as in macro-historical sociology.

While Quijano’s attempt to construct a global social theory around the coloniality of power may have ultimately fallen short, he nonetheless offered a profoundly human and intellectually generous approach to social science. His work continues to provide valuable insights — not only in his writings on coloniality but across his entire intellectual trajectory — for rethinking Latin America’s place in the modern world. In fact, to understand many of Latin America’s contemporary challenges — including the persistent instability of its regionalism — I find Quijano’s earlier concept of historical-structural dependency, developed in the 1960s and 1970s, to be far more helpful today. Based on his work, we can grasp the historical specificity of Latin America as a region — or, in Marxist terms, as a historical social formation. In my opinion, this perspective was eventually overshadowed by the more totalizing and arguably ahistorical view presented in the concept of coloniality of power.

In recent years, you’ve examined the growing presence of China in Latin America. Do you believe Chinese cooperation represents a genuine alternative to traditional Western development models?

China’s re-emergence at the center of the global political economy is unquestionably one of the defining features of our era. It has fundamentally reshaped how we think about development and political economy while also challenging longstanding Eurocentric narratives — a shift I find both remarkable and intellectually stimulating. My work engages closely with debates on the hybrid character of Chinese capitalism — or socialism — and the enduring imprint of its imperial past on shaping both domestic development and international relations. While I find realist and liberal interpretations of China’s rise overly reductive, I also approach some Marxist and critical perspectives with caution.

Over the past two decades, China’s approach to international cooperation has increasingly positioned itself as an alternative to traditional Western models of development and foreign aid. However, “alternative” does not necessarily imply superiority or long-term viability. It simply denotes a different model: in modes of engagement, priorities, and practices, as well as in the narratives it constructs. Yet, recent scholarship has shown that there is a growing mutual influence between traditional development cooperation and China’s model — or, more broadly, the landscape of South–South cooperation. What we see today is a complex mix of convergence, competition, and, in some cases, cooperation between these paradigms. This is part of an evolving academic debate and a dynamic research field.

That said, I have become increasingly skeptical of the analytical utility of the “South–South” label when applied to Chinese cooperation. At least in its current form, it often obscures more than it reveals. At the same time, I also firmly reject the notion that Chinese cooperation is simply “more of the same,” or that it replicates the imperialist or neo-imperialist logic of traditional Western donors — at least not thus far. There is a growing tendency to view China merely as a new great power behaving in the same way as traditional Western powers. I believe this perspective is misleading, as it overlooks how Chinese officials understand their own history and their relationship with the rest of the world. This does not mean that it escapes the structural dynamics of a center–periphery model of exchange, as Chinese cooperation is deeply embedded in a capitalist global system; in fact, as seen in both Africa and South America, such asymmetries are clearly present. However, it should not be seen as embodying an imperialist power either.

You have critiqued PROSUR as a conservative response to previous regionalist efforts. What do you think this shift tells us about the broader ideological transformations in Latin American foreign policy?

In retrospect, PROSUR was part of a broader strategy aimed at delegitimizing and ultimately trying to overthrow the Maduro regime in Venezuela. That effort ultimately failed, PROSUR no longer exists, and unfortunately, Venezuela’s severe social and economic crisis remains largely unchanged. The deeper issue, however, is that in this process — despite UNASUR’s many shortcomings — the most viable regional initiative for collectively addressing the

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challenges of contemporary world politics was also dismantled.

PROSUR reflected the ideological preferences of a specific political conjuncture, shaped by the rise of right-leaning governments across South America in the late 2010s. That said, I'm not convinced this represented a broader or lasting ideological transformation in Latin American foreign policy. Instead, what we are witnessing seems to follow a more familiar pattern: the reaction of Latin American elites to a period of more autonomous and progressive regionalism, such as that embodied by UNASUR.

Latin America has long struggled to reconcile national sovereignty with effective regional integration. Based on your research, what would a more emancipatory and post-hegemonic model of integration look like in practice?

First, I would like to clarify my position regarding the premise of the question. I do not see an inherent — let alone a “logical” or “theoretical” — contradiction between national sovereignty and regional integration. On the contrary, as numerous scholars have shown, the pursuit of greater national independence — understood in terms of both autonomy and development — has often been a key driver of regionalism in the postcolonial world. Tensions between national sovereignty and regional integration may arise, but primarily when integration is narrowly defined through the lens of the European Union. This framing reflects a distinctly “Eurocentric”—or more precisely, as Amitav Acharya argues, an “EU-centric” bias.

In my view, the real obstacles lie elsewhere. Latin America has long grappled with two profound structural challenges. The first lies in the difficulty of reconciling the deep and uneven internal heterogeneity of Latin American societies — a condition aptly described by Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta with his concept of *sociedad abigarrada* (“motley society”) — with the institutional framework of the modern nation-state and, more broadly, with the projects of modernization, national development, and the construction of a homogeneous national identity.

The second challenge stems from the historical context of Latin American independence. Unlike Brazil, whose colonial structure remained territorially intact, Spanish America fragmented politically in the wake of imperial disintegration. Despite this fragmentation, there has been a persistent commitment to regional unity, driven less by shared colonial experience than by the common threat to the sovereignty of the newly formed republics. This commitment has often manifested in the defense of national sovereignty against European and U.S. imperialist pressures, exacerbated by the structurally dependent position of Latin America within the global economy.

Although expressed in different terms, these two challenges closely mirror the condition Quijano described as historical-structural dependence, which links internal social heterogeneity and external dependency within a unified historical framework. From this perspective, a more emancipatory model of regionalism would aim to reduce structural dependency and enhance Latin America's autonomy in international affairs. Also, it would foster a regional identity that acknowledges and respects the entangled, plural, and often tragic histories that have shaped the idea of “Latin America.”

While such a model remains normatively compelling, its implementation under current conditions is extremely challenging. The region continues to face deep political divisions, recurrent economic instability, and sustained external pressures that undermine long-term cooperation. As a result, national governments — especially key players like Brazil — often prioritize unilateral strategies over collective regional action.

Given the ongoing geopolitical realignments and the impacts of global crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, what role do you see Latin America playing in the evolving global order? Is there still space for autonomy in this context?

We are currently experiencing a period of increasing global instability. This turbulence is, in some respects, deeply rooted in longstanding historical patterns, while in others, it is influenced by unprecedented disruptions. From my theoretical and analytical perspective, the concepts of interregnum and systemic chaos provide valuable frameworks for understanding this historical moment.

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It is not only states, governments, markets, firms, or ideologies that rise and fall; entire regions — and the regional orders they underpin — can also undergo profound crisis or even collapse. Since the first signs of the erosion of American global hegemony, we have witnessed the weakening or disintegration of various regional orders, including those in the Middle East, Europe, Southeast Asia, and West Africa, among others. In this broader context, the ongoing crisis of Latin American regionalism is far from anomalous; it is part of a broader global trend.

The implosion of the so-called Pink Tide has considerably weakened the region's capacity to play a meaningful or constructive role in shaping a future world order — even as that order remains undefined in terms of when, where, and how it might emerge. At the same time, while the collapse and fragmentation of the liberal international order are eroding both the structural foundations and the political will necessary to pursue greater regional autonomy, this disintegration is not without its contradictions. It also opens up spaces of maneuver and experimentation that could be seized by Latin American actors seeking to recalibrate their place in a rapidly shifting global landscape.

How do you view Peru's position amid the growing fragmentation in Latin America and the current fragility of the international liberal order?

Peru finds itself caught between the strategic gravitational pull of the United States and China, at a time when global tensions are intensifying, and the traditional paradigm of globalization is under significant strain. Domestically, the country continues to face acute political instability and persistent social unrest, both of which severely constrain its capacity to contribute meaningfully to regional cohesion or respond to the broader erosion of the liberal international order.

Rather than acting as a stabilizing or counterbalancing force, Peru's trajectory over the past 25 years seems to reflect both the promises and the contradictions of a neoliberal globalization now under pressure. Unless the country undergoes a profound — and currently unforeseeable — transformation of its political and institutional structures, it is difficult to imagine it emerging as part of a regional or global solution. At this point, it is more accurate to view Peru not as a mitigating actor but as symptomatic of the broader regional fragmentation and the systemic fragility of the international liberal order itself.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

My advice would be to distrust conventional wisdom and the inherited assumptions of twentieth-century social science. We are living through a moment of profound historical crisis, and — as Immanuel Wallerstein once urged — it is the time to “unthink” the social sciences.

It is crucial to cultivate a deep awareness of the historical, political, and epistemological foundations of the discipline — and never stop questioning them. International Relations has long been shaped by dominant paradigms rooted in Western, state-centric, and often Eurocentric worldviews. Understanding how these frameworks emerged, whose interests they serve, and what they leave out, is essential — not only for developing a critical perspective but also for imagining alternative futures.

Read beyond your field. Embrace intellectual discomfort. Above all, remain open to complexity: the world rarely conforms to neat models or binary explanations. The most meaningful contributions often come from those who are willing to cross boundaries — disciplinary, cultural, and conceptual — with both intellectual rigor and human humility.