

Interview - Raúl Salgado

Written by E-International Relations

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Raúl Salgado is a Professor at the Master program in International Relations at FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales), Ecuador, where he teaches Methodology, Foreign Policy and Political Thinking. He holds a PhD in Political Sciences and International Studies from the University of Birmingham, UK, a post-graduate degree in Education from the Metropolitan University of Manchester, UK, and a master's degree in Political Science from the Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelm Universitaet, Germany. He is interested in geopolitics, Latin American foreign policy and the role of small states in building regional and global organizations. His most recent publications are *Small builds Big: How Ecuador and Uruguay contributed to the construction of the UNASUR*, *Latin American Integration: Regionalism a la carte in a Multipolar World?* and *Brazil's Geopolitical Lever in the Shaping of the South American Regional and Global Politics*.

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

I think the most interesting debate in International Relations nowadays is the one regarding the development of a Global IR theory, promoted by authors like Amitav Acharya, Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver, which is also discussed in Ecuador in a project directed by Ernesto Vivares. We are now in a different stage, a different era for IR, where we should look at how the discipline is being taught and how research is being carried out around the world. At FLACSO we have an interesting project trying to reflect the way Latin Americans are thinking about the discipline ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically. Global IR aims to build a more pluralistic, transdisciplinary and eclectic discipline, bringing in the most diverse approaches and contributions, not only in terms of empirical analysis but also regarding theory making. Over the 20th century, Latin American IR has created theory, but it faced several barriers and couldn't position itself at the global level of the discipline.

One of the most interesting debates we see now, due to the work being done in the Latin American context and our different global position, concerns which methodology and epistemological approach we use and why. We can see a huge contribution by Latin Americans but it is isolated, unorganized, and not presented as a regional, Latin American IR. It is more like an author-related or culture-related contribution and not a sustained work which unites different contributions from Latin America. Claims that there isn't a Latin American IR, may be wrong – it exists but hasn't been put together yet. This is an important debate that is just starting to emerge within the region.

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

The contributions from those I would say were the creators of the discipline of IR are very important when trying to organize thought and present IR as an independent and autonomous field of study. I think this is particularly the case for the work done in Aberystwyth, despite being normative, or the later debate promoted by Carr and Morgenthau. These debates have influenced both the way we understand the world and try to investigate it and the way we plan our teachings and studies. In terms of Latin America, it was the important work done within the Cepaline School of thought and the authors of dependency theory, such as Raul Prebisch, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Teotônio dos Santos. They really contributed to Latin American thinking until the end of the Cold War. In addition, I would say globalization has generated new ways of thinking and explaining regionalism in Latin America, over and above integration. In this context we have the works of Ernesto Vivares and José Briceño, among others. They show how,

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especially from the 2000s, a common set of ideas and culture which globalization has helped to strengthen was important in the development of a novel kind of regionalism in the region.

In this context of transformation of global politics, three events have impacted in the way my understanding of the world changed in the last 30 years. Firstly, the collapse of the USSR forced me to see a different world, a world with the sudden participation of a variety of new actors in international politics, such as transnational companies and terrorist groups, but also new states such as China, India and Brazil. The second event that motivated me to reinterpret world politics was 9/11. Suddenly, the idea of a global island in which I could travel without many difficulties was reduced to very strict forms of control and restrictions for travelers. In this context, the transformation of international security forced me to rethink about the new ways of international wars, alliances and geopolitical configurations. Finally, the geo-economic positioning of China in the world economy as one of the driving forces of industrial production and export in recent decades has definitely impacted upon our personal lives. I personally consume at least one item a month produced in China and I live in Ecuador. When I am traveling in Europe or in Canada I try to identify the origin of the products and a high number of them are made in China. This has not only impacted on my personal life in the sense of what I consume, but also in the way I try to explain the presence of such new actors in national economies and societies. Therefore, we need to constantly reinterpret the world in which we live while the world is changing.

How has geopolitics as a discipline evolved in Latin America, especially in Brazil and Ecuador? How does this differ to its development in Europe?

Geopolitics was thought to explain the way the state should organize itself territorially. This was done in Europe, particularly in Germany, in the context of the development of geography, political science and anthropology. This was a problem, since at the turn of the 19th century anthropology was mixed with Neo-Darwinism. Most of the geopoliticians and geographers practically used elements of competition in the international sphere and applied Neo-Darwinist theory to explain the relation between states and their necessity to expand in order to survive. Arguing that the state is like an organism and when an organism is too big it needs more space, the geopolitics originating in Germany was wrongly employed to justify the ambitions of the country under Nazism. A key difference in the Latin American perspective on geopolitics is that this idea of expansion was considered and put into practice domestically. In 1920s the Latin American states didn't have control of the whole of their territory, which was not fully populated or occupied. There were huge spaces without the presence of the state, and expansion meant internal aggrandizement.

Geopolitics in Latin America and particularly in Brazil was then thought and practiced primarily focusing on the conquest of the vast expanses of empty territory that existed inside each country. This is quite interesting because geopolitics wasn't accused of being a bad discipline like in Germany and most of the European countries after the Second World War, bearing in mind the external or international expansion tendency of the geopolitics thought and practiced there. In Europe, the discipline almost stopped being analyzed, discussed and taught in the universities from the beginning of the 1940s, while in Latin America it developed as a normal field of study in a different way.

Also, what is interesting in all Latin America is that the authors and proponents of geopolitics were in the army. In Brazil, at the beginning of the 1930s, geopolitics already started to develop itself, and throughout the 20th century a Brazilian school emerged, in which Everardo Backheuser, Carlos de Meira Mattos, Therezinha de Castro and Castro Delgado de Carvalho, among others were the most prominent members. In Ecuador, this took place between the 1950s and 1970s when Augusto Pinochet, later to become a dictator in Chile, offered courses on geopolitics and did some studies in the country. At that time, Ecuadorian geopolitics focused on understanding Peru's ambitions, and tried to explain why Ecuador needed to be strong in order to maintain its territory. In any case, it was also the army who developed new ideas most of the time.

In your book *Small Builds Big*, you present a study of the role of small states in building international organizations. Could you explain what you mean by small states and how they may influence regional integration patterns?

First of all, the concept of small states has been under debate in international relations for a long time, especially with

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regards to measuring smallness, which can be challenging to quantify in positivistic terms. Where should it begin and end? These are questions that cannot be completely addressed in a quantitative or material way. To me, in order to define small states, we should turn to a more subjective approach. Small states should not only be identified by quantification of power or material characteristics, but also from the perception of politicians and civil society. How states perceive themselves in order to formulate their foreign policies is important. This is particularly relevant to understanding how small states play a role in the building of international organizations.

There is a lot of work in Europe done by authors such as Thorhallsson, Wivel, and Gstöhl that tries to explain and understand small state policies in the context of the construction or formation of the European Union. However, these authors focused on perspectives that emphasize instrumental rationality and therefore look mainly to material benefits in order to explain the results. In South America it was necessary to look at this from a different perspective – these material benefits are important, but we also need to think about ideas, collective identity, shared culture, norms, and rules. These elements are also relevant to explaining integration or regionalism.

It is amazing to see, and it's kind of surprising that the early 2000s was the first time in the history of Latin American states where they met and identified a common set of ideas and cultural intersubjectivity. They were important for the identification of common regional problems and interests that fostered integration. In such a context, small states could act more easily because there is no competition for material gains. From the identification of similar values and goals, there is a singular opportunity for small states to act – this is the point I make in my book.

What was the role of Ecuador and Uruguay in the context of building The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)?

In my book I formulate a taxonomy to analyze small states in the context of building regional organizations and identify their possible role in the process. They were classified as region-engaging, region-constraining or region-adapting states. What is important in order to understand the role of Ecuador and Uruguay is the understanding of the two as region-engaging countries. This means that they were actually very active in promoting integration in South America, the same way as Belgium is regarding the European Union.

Ecuador, for example, introduced an amendment into its constitution that declares the state to be in favor of South American integration. Later, fulfilling this self-image, it was Ecuador who together with Brazil, went country to country promoting and lobbying for the confirmation of the UNASUR treaty in the region's national parliaments. This element is important because it shows how Ecuador perceived itself as a region-engaging state and later tried to build this idea of a Southern American union of nations. That was important to Ecuador, but not only in a material way. We see the same trend in Uruguay as well. Uruguay was strategically acting but has also introduced a norm in its constitutions regarding and supporting integration and regionalism. Under the Mujica presidency, it had a specific policy for promoting integration in South America. Incorporating the role of a regional-engaging state, Uruguay could then influence Argentina and Brazil to accept certain elements in the debates that anteceded the formation of UNASUR.

Recently you debated how Brazilian cooperation under BRICS could have a cost at the regional level, especially regarding its intention to exert leadership in South America. Why is this the case?

We must understand Brazil as a world player (but not a great power) that rarely turned its attention to South America until the end of the 20th century. Following the perspective that to be a great power a state first needs to be a prominent regional player, Brazil started engaging more with Latin America under the Fernando Henrique Cardoso presidency – an idea that was consolidated under Lula, taking advantage of an international context that allowed Brazil to better position itself in the region, but also globally, toward BRICS. That ended up creating a dualism and Brazil soon started losing its capacity to be the player it needed to be in South America, and so ended up losing its track regionally.

Of course, the position of being in the BRICS demanded energy, but there are many factors behind Brazil's difficulties in being a key player promoting regional integration. We also see the social and economic crisis that took

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place in the country after 2010 and forced the country to pay attention to its internal domestic issues. The recent rise of Bolsonaro is important as well, because he has a different discourse for how South America should function as a region and this has an impact on how other countries in the region perceive Brazil and its ambitions. Therefore, influencing its possibilities to become a main regional player and its leadership over South America.

Authors such as José Briceño are arguing that the wave of regionalism in Latin America that began in the early 2000s is now expiring. What is your assessment of the current changes in the Latin American integration landscape?

I wouldn't say it's expiring, but it has weakened. As the idea of Latin America is not only about government and must be understood from the point of view of its cultural similarities, I do not see the wave of regionalism expiring. Of course, for the next couple of years we will not have integration as strong as it was some years ago, and the issue areas and emphasis will transform. The main initiatives and organizations will probably be more oriented toward the material gains of cooperation, rather than cultural or ideational elements. And this is a different perspective on integration that surely departs from the one the region has been experiencing. Civil society integration would be lessened, because it is not the governments' focus. But it will not perish indefinitely, and it can be revived in a later moment in time.

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

To answer this question, I will focus my attention specifically on young Latin American IR scholars. First, I think they must recognize that there is a Latin American IR and that it has produced great contributions over time. We should study these contributions not only from the perspective of our countries, but also from the perspective of the region. There are fantastic works from Brazilians, Argentinians, Chileans, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Colombians, and Venezuelans. It is necessary to know each other first of all and then we can create and construct our Latin American IR, enabling us to situate our region in the context of Global IR. It is also important to perceive IR as a very diverse and flexible, but not unstructured, discipline and it should be acknowledged that there are different points of view under IR and that this is a strength. Recognizing this plurality and multiverse of ideas, we should learn to respect each other and identify the way others have tried to explain international relations.