

Interview - Andrés Malamud

Written by E-International Relations

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Andrés Malamud specialises in the role of political institutions and regional integration in both the European and Latin American contexts. He is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon and is a recurring visiting professor at universities in Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Mexico, Portugal and Spain. Previous roles include serving on the executive committee of the Latin American Political Science Association and as a representative to the European Consortium for Political Research. Andrés has contributed to a variety of journals, including *Latin American Politics and Society*, *Journal of European Integration* and the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*. His most recent article “Latin America and the World: Dependency, Decoupling, Dispersion” was published by the Inter-American Dialogue and he regularly offers political analysis to the television media. He holds a PhD from the European University Institute.

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

Assuming that my field is comparative regional integration, the hottest research agenda relates to differentiated disintegration. The quagmire of Brexit and the recent dissolution of Latin American organisations such as UNASUR (The Union of South American Nations) are not eccentricities but examples of a wider phenomenon: regional disintegration. I would phrase the key research question like this: is disintegration just integration in reverse or are they two asymmetric phenomena? Whatever the case, an ensuing question comes up: can the level of authority, the policy scope and the membership of an organisation evolve in opposing directions? In other words, is it possible to think of integration and disintegration as coexistent and intertwined instead of exclusive and contradictory? Thirdly, how do integration and disintegration relate to changing global governance? The first scholar that ever called my attention towards issues of integration reversibility was Philippe Schmitter, a self-aware and critical pioneer of neofunctionalism. In recent years, though, the issue has blossomed, and yet it is still in its infancy.

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

I once believed that the world was going regional. The failure of supranationalism to take root outside Europe, combined with the triple crisis of the European Union (Brexit, migration and the Eurozone), made me rethink my notions of size and politics. Authors that (unwillingly) helped me in this endeavour were Alberto Alesina, Enrico Spolaore and Josep Colomer, but the pioneer was Robert Dahl. The most important lesson of their work is that big and small are not symmetric: the factors that fuel expansion (aka integration) are not the same as those that bring about contraction (aka fragmentation or disintegration). Hence, I have come to question not only the ineluctability of regional integration but also, and more importantly, the relevance of symmetry to make sense of the world.

In describing Latin America, you have used the analogy that “states acknowledge they share a neighbourhood, but not a house: they might join forces to mow the front garden but will not sign the same lease”. Can you identify any prerequisites for a greater tendency to regionalism absent in the case of Latin America?

The idea of regionalism – understood as a common identity – has been present in all of Latin American history, but integration – understood as shared sovereignty – has not. Chiefs of state have looked for opportunities to get

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together, reinforce interpresidential links of solidarity and manipulate regional means to domestic ends. But they remain reluctant to share sovereignty with their peers – as much as they have been reluctant to share competences with domestic institutions such as congresses and cabinets. For liberals and neofunctionalists, the main reason for the failure of integration has been the low level of regional interdependence, which made regional coordination dispensable. For realists, the failure of integration does not need explanation. For constructivists, fragmentation can be overcome through identity-building activism. They are welcome to keep trying.

You have argued that the stability of individual Latin American countries depends largely on commodity prices and interest rates, determined by events in China and the US respectively. Would you expect an increase in regional integration to be a viable means to protect Latin America from these external forces?

The strict formulation is that the probability of presidential reelection depends on commodity prices and interest rates, but this applies to South America rather than all of Latin America. The political scientists that advanced this proposition are Daniela Campello and Cesar Zucco. Arguably, political stability is also influenced by the same two variables. I do not expect these forces to foster regional integration; on the contrary, they exert a centrifugal impact that reduces regional interdependence, therefore diminishing the incentives for integration. Most Latin American states have traditionally been more dependent on extra-regional powers than on their neighbours and the rise of China is not expected to change but to reaffirm this pattern.

You have argued that Brazil is not likely to invest further in regional security governance while it perceives the region as neither a significant threat nor an asset and also that the country does not intend to become a major military power. Does this assessment still hold true with President Bolsonaro taking office this year?

Under Bolsonaro, the Brazilian military – and military officers – are engulfed by domestic rather than external concerns. If Brazil faces any strategic threats, they are related to internal weaknesses – urban crime, poor infrastructure and state underfunding – rather than to external foes. Status-related claims in the international arena have been gradually reduced to nil since President Lula left power in 2011. Apart from Brazil, the only country with a significant scale as to provide regional public goods is Mexico. Due to Mexico's geographical distance from the rest of Latin America and its geographical proximity to the US, it is not a military power or security provider and will not become one. As the regional powers are neither wealthy nor fearful of their neighbours, their incentive to invest in regional security could only be fuelled by the blooming of regionalised threats like illegal trafficking or guerrilla movements rather than by conventional threats.

Approaching narcotics as a public health rather than a security issue is one area in which Latin America broadly has more alignment with the EU than the US. How realistic is the notion that Latin America can become a global agenda setter in relation to narcotics policy?

How realistic this notion is I cannot say, because it depends on political competence and policy innovation, both of which are generally lacking in the region. But Latin America has the potential to become a global agenda-setter on drugs issues simply because it is the largest world producer. In short, structure is enabling but more agency is needed. The Global Commission on Drug Policy, established in 2011 and first chaired by former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, was a promising – though so far fruitless – step in that direction. Small steps could be taken without prior policy change by the United States, as several US states have already legalized the growth and consumption of cannabis. Wholesale reforms, though, would probably meet the threat of US sanctions.

South American intergovernmental organisations including Mercosur (The Southern Common Market) and UNASUR (The Union of South American Nations) have limited common budgets, with headquarters funded by host countries and member states covering their own travel expenses. To what extent, if any, have those sceptical of deeper European integration looked to these as positive examples of shallower

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forms of regional cooperation?

The mission of UNASUR was definitely not to bring about regional integration but just intergovernmental cooperation – and most members have now abandoned the organisation anyway. Contrariwise, Mercosur is about integration from its very name (common market), though it has fallen short of promises and treaties. The 2019 agreement with the European Union – albeit the treaty has not been signed yet and ratification is not guaranteed – could further internal developments, but deeper integration or supranational governance are not to be expected anytime soon. As for Latin American shallow forms of regionalism being used by Eurosceptics as an alternative model to deep EU integration, I have found no evidence. Furthermore, close links between nationalist leaders, such as the one between Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro, have not been related to integration issues.

What is the most important advice you could give to scholars of International Relations or those with an interest in regional integration?

Many of the greatest scholars that developed the field of democratic transitions, like Juan Linz and Guillermo O'Donnell, had previously become experts on the opposite of democracy – i.e. authoritarianism. Although they remained hopeful, they were not blinded by their wishes or normative preferences. Similarly, in order to understand or even promote integration, scholars should study fragmentation and disintegration from both theoretical and historical perspectives. In short, we should be aware that the politics of scale may go either way and also that reversibility does not necessarily mirror progress but might stem from different sources and proceed through asymmetrical paths.