Autonomy and Development.
A challenge from realism to utopia within South American integration*

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Introduction

This paper presents preliminary results of a research which intends to face the theoretical and analytical challenges concerning the dynamics and the trajectory of the integration model which has been promoted as a turning point in South American democracy in the XXI Century. Its point of departure is that autonomy and development have always come together in the history of Brazilian foreign policy, although not explicitly and – mainly – with different meanings. Moreover, despite the importance of strong institutional organizations, one might consider that the connection between autonomy and developmental policies has been submitted to each government plans and decisions along the shaping of Brazilian modern society, since the thirties.¹

Therefore, for the scope of these notes on the present South American integration, its political nature is stressed as an instrument for social development and political autonomy as well as a strategical attempt to insert the region within the global system, simultaneously. It is crucial to observe, however, that South American integration was still an unfinished political attempt to overcome the obstacles of its historically peripheral place within world economy, when the process was abruptly interrupted by the civil and parliamentary coup d’état against the government of Dilma Rousseff - reelected in 2014 with 52 million votes.²

Turning back to analyze the process itself, it is believed that, on the one hand, this ongoing innovative process has been a renewal of interest in the study of institutional, developmental, geopolitical issues and the integration mechanics of governmental decision making, since it shaped a research subject of great multidisciplinary potential. Moreover, it might even foster an advance in international political theory, inasmuch as it contributed to refine the world inter-state system concept by simultaneously approaching the possible degrees of

¹ A critical review of the conceptual conection of autonomy and development in the Brazilian Foreign Policy is an ongoing feature of our research proposal

² Although the objective here presented was to analyze the integration process which has been implemented since the elections of progressive governments in the continent in 2003, I could not avoid mentioning that this process has been severely harmed by the retrocession in our democracy.

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regional autonomy and questioning the range of democracy renewal in contemporary societies.

However, on the other hand, no matter how the academic literature on regionalism has privileged the need to differentiate between integration levels and institutionalization processes since the first attempts to understand integration experiences, the European Union remained overweighted as an analytical reference for the studies on the new integration experiences. And it remained so, despite global capitalist crisis and changes in the political economic role of South American and Asian powers.

This feature demonstrates a disregard for historical context influences and conditioning. According to Schmitter (2004:1), the so-called new theories of integration which have emerged from the eighties often mistakenly relied on the European historical process to such a extension that turned out not to be theories at all, but just *more or less elaborate languages* for describing what the authors thought had taken place in the recent past. Undoubtedly, the dialogue with this literature is always fertile since the EU remained as an emblematic post-war long case of integration, nevertheless a theoretical approach to any integration case needs to be rooted in the historical context if it is not to be a mere abstraction, or just an *elaborated language*.

Another perspective for a beneficial theoretical exchange is the political economic literature which inquires the potentiality of South American integration as a strategy to face hegemonic power and considers it an important source for critical thought (Anderson, 2013; Cox, 2009; Harvey, 2010; Santos, 2007; Wallerstein, 2009).

This paper relies on the assumption that South American integration is a unique historical experience, with its own specific goals and values, one which requires further studies to account for its complex and multifaced nature. The ongoing research intends to analyze its new dynamics, precise role and potential range of transformation regarding global power; and to evaluate the regional ability to promote development and increase democracy. Therefore, the paper aims to confronting and complementing the achievements and some of the questions.

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posed by the particular South American experience. It assumes that the mainstream literature tends to underestimate the political nature of integration projects by overestimating the influence of economic factors, a kind of interpretation which brings back the old and complex subject of the theoretical status of International Political Economy - EPI.³

*Global Assymetries and Autonomy*

Thus, a political model by definition, ongoing South American integration is part of a geopolitical and historical process which has been influenced by the world capitalist crisis conditions, but also results from the permanent search for the region’s autonomy along its far-reaching economic and social developmental process. Integration now, as it was symbolically in the past, is driven by the will to overcome the peripheral status of world capitalism where it has been placed since discovery and colonization.

However, now, for the first time in the continent’s history, these ideals were simultaneously promoted by several regional State governments, which -in different degrees- confronted the nineties neoliberal policies and adopted a political platform relied upon social and equality achievements. In a rather asymmetrical region, it was assumed that no South American country - not even Brazil, an emergent power, neither Venezuela, the oil power - could independently achieve an autonomous sustainable and equalitarian development: national efforts towards overcoming social and economic inequalities should be associated to an autonomous and sovereign regional insertion in global system.

Autonomy in this case is conceptually characterized by its intrinsic opposition to the historically unbalanced global order (Moniz, 2003). Under the somewhat diffuse expectation that post Cold War context would lead to some power equilibrium in a multilateral world system, South American integration and a South-South relationship - with prominence to middle powers - were also

³ As a result of an ongoing research, this paper reproduces here some of the arguments which have been debated and published in the 8th ECPR General Conference (Glasgow, 2014) and the 13th Annual International Conference on Politics & International Affairs (Athens, Greece, 2015).

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conceived as a strategy towards a more balanced new international order (Jaguaribe, 2007).

Thus, the BRICS’s attempt to find new alternatives for a financial and infrastructure architecture based upon their own interests and needs is a strong convergence with the South American strategy towards a new world development. The importance of the New Development Bank is stressed as a relevant step in the attempt to reduce assymetries in the global order. In short, asimmetry is a keystone not only internationally but also among regional States and inside each one; to overcome it at the three overlapping levels is a central task to be faced by new creative tools along the integration process.

Notes on the South American integration trends

For the scope of this brief presentation, it is expected that the following notes that will be submitted to further reflection along the research help to understand the present overall stage of South American complex integration scenery.

Specialized literature – though highly fragmented – points out the political and analytical challenges that arose from the remarkable differences between its blocs, the main ones of which being the South American Common Market – Mercosur and the South American Nations Union – Unasur. While the last was founded by the 12 governments in power in 2008, the first has already accomplished more than 20 years, which introduces an analytical problem in order to distinguish continuity from rupture in the integration process. As for the newborn Unasur, its structuring Councils are trying to implement new paths for exploring and preserving natural resources and protecting State sovereignty in the continent (Carvalho, 2013).

Together, though through different paths, Unasur and Mercosur decision-making processes towards an innovative developmental experience have unfolded new areas, such as education, science and technology, immigration and civil rights. Regional commercial interchange increased along with financing cooperation tools

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4 There are other integration blocs in South America, which bring light to the new highly heterodox polical processes that have arisen (Rodrigues, 2013), such as The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America – Alba-, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States – Celac.

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which are still incipient. Despite social participation increment in the integration decision-making process, it remains as an important claim to be pursued in order to increase democracy in the continent, one which has already demonstrated a remarkable dynamism in the progress towards a democratic inclusive development (Sarti, 2014). However, the recent and outstanding Chinese presence as a commodities importer in the Mercosur economy became a matter of concern inasmuch as it strengthens the traditional underdeveloped industrialization pattern (Guimarães, 2013). Thus, the need to promote industrialization and to build the required communication, transportation and financial infrastructure for integration seem to be the crucial challenge for South American success.

Two other aspects are controversial as far as they question some assumptions in the academic literature. The first one regards an increment into the regional historical presidentialism through the increase in presidential diplomacy - a feature that shakes the conceptual importance of supranational institutions (Malamud, 2004). However, due to the cultural and political influence of the presidentialist pattern in the continent, this variable might not be conclusive for analytical purposes, especially if it leaves a door open to a search for an innovative institutional architecture. It has been already pointed out that the strong executive performance was a positive trend for Unasur’s decision making process (Emerson, 2014). However, one cannot deny that it is a vulnerable feature, one which might turn to an important threat in moments of crisis and government changes.\(^5\)

More relevant in theoretic and analytical perspective is the political nature of the present South American integration, a feature which is often disregarded which is our point of departure as a decisive cognitive feature (Sarti, 2014, 2015). Nevertheless, it is a matter of concern that a political and presidentialist nature may reveal a conceptual fragility in the medium-term which lies in the dependence upon electoral outcomes within the context of highly ideological dispute that prevails in the continent’s democracies. Last but not the least, South American integration has not achieved a consensual theoretical status, neither in

\(^5\) The threat to the whole process is quite clear in this moment when the article is written while the Brazilian elected government (2014) is submitted to a civilian coup d’État through an arbitrary parliamentary impeachment process (May 2016)

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International Political Science nor in the global power specialized literature, which, in common, debate its length and depth. A mere historical conjuncture, a transitional stage or a new structural change? The subsequent implications are at strife.

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