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Nationalism and Globalization in Latin America

JAMES SIEKMEIER

Nationalism in Latin America is a powerful but sometimes illusive force. Situating it in a global context is the only way to fully understand the development of nationalism in the region and the ways in which globalization operates there. For in recent years, nationalism has become an important means by which Latin Americans have attempted to shield themselves against the negative aspects of globalization.

Resurgent Nationalism

Fifth in a series

It may seem that globalization and nationalism are antithetical to each other. Globalizers want to tear down national borders, real or imagined. Nationalists, for their part, want to privilege their own nation at all costs. Yet the two phenomena are symbiotic. Latin Americans borrowed ideas from abroad in building their nations, while globalization needs nationalism to ensure that rules are enforced at the local level.

Two types of globalization are relevant in this context. One of them, a more general type, is the increasing interconnectedness of social, economic, and cultural activity. A second type is more specific—the desire to create a world free of barriers to international trade and investment. Of course, nationalism and globalization are not static concepts, nor are they passively accepted as a given by Latin Americans.

WHOSE NATION?

Historical studies of Latin American nationalism have fallen out of favor in the past few de-

acades. Instead, researchers have focused on the cultural and social experience of the nonelites—indigenous peoples, Afro-Latin Americans, and women, among others. The last survey of Latin American nationalism was published nearly 50 years ago. Obviously, historical methodologies have dramatically changed in the last half-century. To understand Latin America today, one must examine the many nationalisms in the region, and particularly three general categories: the nationalism of the political elites; the nationalism of indigenous peoples; and the nationalism of the urban middle and working classes.

Nonelites can use nationalism to improve their standing in society. Throughout history, when soldiers returned home after fighting in a war, they often demanded that a new, more egalitarian nation be formed, in which they would not be subservient to their “betters”—and if it took a revolution to achieve that change, so be it. One such case involved the Bolivian soldiers of the Chaco War against Paraguay (1932–36). After demobilization, many rebelled against the hierarchical social system, and convinced others to join their drive to radically alter Bolivian society. No longer would the poor and middle-class majority accept a system in which a handful of economic, political, and military elites structured the society solely for their own benefit at the expense of the nonelite majority. These veterans were instrumental in the making of the Bolivian Revolution of 1952.

The nation and the state are linked, but distinct. The nation can be defined as a set of experiences, traditions, and myths that define a people; the state as a collection of institutions that a nation forms to govern itself. In Latin America, one could argue, the state preceded the nation by as much as

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a century. After the early-nineteenth-century wars for independence in the Spanish colonies, and Brazil's independence by the mid-nineteenth century, the elites who led the independence movements focused on top-down state-building at first. Institutions had to be built, particularly militaries and police to ensure that as many people as possible were subject to the power of the state.

Only after the Latin American states faced a serious crisis—the Great Depression of the 1930s—did they actually build nations. For it was only with the economic nationalist policies that succeeded the Depression, including industrialization and urbanization, that the Latin American states acquired the resources, and therefore the ability, to create the traditions, myths, and ideas needed to engage in effective nation-building and effectively disseminate them among their people.

One important manifestation of nineteenth-century Latin American nationalism can be summarized as various types of national integration—particularly physical and social integration. This took place on the terms set by the Europeanized elite. Physical integration meant infrastructure—roads and railroads—to connect the diverse regions of a particular country. Social integration meant forcing native peoples, most of whom lived in the countryside, to speak Spanish or Portuguese.

However, by the mid to late twentieth century, a new vision of the nation, known as *plurinacionalismo*, challenged this elite-driven version. It called for a pluralistic nation, made up of a variety of peoples, who would speak different languages and have different customs. As such, the nation is comprised of a number of different racial or ethnic groups, which support the core ideas of the nation even as they retain their own identities. For example, indigenous nationalists of the Andean regions view themselves as members of two nations: an Indian nation, spanning many national borders, and their own pluri-national nation. There is the nationalism of the traditional nation-state, in which they are subject to the juridical system of the state and the state provides security; and the coexistent nationalism comprising the history and memory of the indigenous people themselves. This latter nationalism can serve as a vehicle for attempting to achieve social justice.

CLASS AND CULTURE

Latin American nationalism is unique in comparison with the nationalisms of other regions in the developing world because it achieved political independence at least a century before it gained social and economic independence. In other non-industrialized regions, most nations achieved political, social, and economic independence (or autonomy) at about the same time—during the wave of decolonization that swept the European empires after World War II. This was the case in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Because of this difference, one could argue that Latin America's nationalistic passions have had time to cool compared with other regions. However, that is not the only reason for the relative weakness of Latin American nationalism. Since the region's population is incredibly diverse in terms of race, religion, and ethnicity, and split by some of the world's deepest chasms between social classes, national coherence is weak.

By the mid-twentieth century, the nationalism of the nonelites raised its profile considerably with the development of urban populism in many Latin American countries. The idea that urban dwellers, in particular the working class, deserved

more of a voice (political participation) in the national government became prevalent. Although urban populism runs deep in Latin American history, its most prominent leaders, such as Víctor Paz Estenssoro of Bolivia, Getúlio Vargas of Brazil, and Juan Perón of Argentina, among others, burst onto the world stage in the 1940s and 1950s with a powerful message: Urban infrastructure, especially education, needed to be improved, and better jobs, through industrialization, had to be created for urban dwellers. The nationalism of the nonelites thus became dominant, whether in Bolivia, Brazil, or Argentina. Elements of this populist nationalism are still a force in the region today.

Cultural nationalism is another important element of Latin America's nationalist mix. The Indian cultures and the mestizo (mixed European and Indian) culture that arose from the European conquest are the bases of Latin American socio-cultural distinctiveness. In some respects, Latin American culture defined itself as opposed to other cultures—specifically, North American culture. It was a French mapmaker who coined the

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term “Latin America” in the nineteenth century. His point was that the culture of the nations from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego was a Mediterranean, “Latin” culture—very different from the culture of the former North American British colonies, now the United States. In the early twentieth century, the Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó wrote an influential book, *Ariel*, in which he posited that Latin American culture was more concerned with the “higher” culture of cultivated Europeans (literature, art, music), whereas US culture was obsessed with material accumulation. This type of nationalism appealed mainly to the upper class and the small middle class of the time.

THE NORTHERN EMPIRE

Economic nationalism is based on the idea that national economies must not only diversify but also achieve a degree of autonomy from the economic world-system. Latin American nationalism cannot be understood unless one examines its collision with the expanding influence of the industrialized powers that spurred on globalization, particularly through their search for raw materials. Above all, Latin American economic nationalism responded to the growth of US strength.

The United States became an imperial power by the mid-nineteenth century. The two most significant thrusts of early US imperialism were into Latin America—the Mexican-American War (1846–48) and the Spanish-American War (1898). The Mexican-American War resulted in the United States’ annexation of about a third of Mexico’s northern territory. One lasting legacy of this history is that Mexican nationalism has a strong anti-United States side to it. The Spanish-American War resulted in the United States acquiring two colonies from Spain—the Philippines and Puerto Rico—and placing a protectorate over Cuba.

US motives included a desire for Latin America’s considerable stock of raw materials, as well as the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which held that the United States had a God-given right to spread its culture across the continent—and that those on the receiving end of this expansion (Native Americans and Mexicans) would automatically benefit from US-style “progress.” Latin America became a laboratory for the further projection of US power in the name of progress.

As the industrial revolution in the United States took hold in the late nineteenth century, capitalists looked to Latin America for raw materials, opportunities to invest in infrastructure, and markets for their products. Investments in railroads (especially in Mexico and Peru) yielded plentiful profits. Responding to Mexico’s desire for foreign capital, US investors bought up a vast amount of Mexican land, not only for mineral extraction, but also for agricultural production. US capitalists’ purchases of Mexican land proved to be an important cause of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–40. Although the dictator Porfirio Díaz was the architect of Mexico’s policy of opening up the nation to foreign capital, he later lamented the surge of US influence, reputedly saying, “Poor Mexico—so far from God, and so close to the United States.”

As US involvement in Latin America grew more extensive, economic nationalism came to the fore. Some Latin Americans—mainly those on the political left—alleged that US business activity was, in essence, economic exploitation. Selling the nation’s raw materials to foreign

investors rapidly and inexpensively, and thus ceding control over critically important resources, was seen as a threat to national sovereignty, and denounced as *vendepatria*—selling out the nation.

Latin Americans’ concern with husbanding their nations’ resources and preserving them for future generations goes back centuries. In response to growing US and European economic power in the early twentieth century, governments carried out a series of expropriations. A key early example was Mexico, which nationalized the subsoil with its revolutionary constitution of 1917. Since Mexico was one of the world’s biggest producers of oil at the time (before Venezuela and Middle Eastern nations began to export significant amounts of crude), this nationalization provoked protests from US and European companies (and their governments) that had investments in the country.

Another trailblazer was poor, landlocked Bolivia, with its inauspicious tradition of foreign relations. Described by one author as “the incredibly shrinking nation,” politically weak and socially divided Bolivia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had lost a series of wars to its neighbors and almost half of its original territory. Bolivia expropriated foreign oil operations in 1937 and mining enterprises in 1952, forming state-run compa-

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nies intended to provide resources for economic diversification and development.

Latin America's fear of foreign businessmen draining the region of its valuable resources caused a surge of economic nationalism, setting up a clash with the United States. Desiring to continually expand US economic influence, Washington used a variety of techniques, including military force, in an attempt to open the Western Hemisphere to trade and investment. This perpetuated conflict and further fueled Latin American nationalism.

GLOBALIZATION AND RESISTANCE

Latin American nationalists' conflicts with the United States presaged the region's experience with twentieth-century globalization. Yet globalization could not exist without nationalism. Nationalism, at least since the Westphalian state system emerged in the seventeenth century, has provided the basis of globalization in at least three ways. First, the European powers (including Russia and the former Soviet Union) and the United States expanded into empires that influenced or even absorbed many nations. Second, transcending national boundaries is the very definition of globalization. And finally, powerful multinational organizations that operate as globalizing forces (for example, corporations and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs) have used the nation-state system as a springboard for expanding their power.

In the most basic sense, globalization is the growing economic, social, cultural, and political interconnectedness of the world. Even though the term goes back only to 1983, globalization has become a lightning rod. Some see it in positive terms. By bringing down borders that separate economies and cultures, international exchange and understanding increases. The world becomes a more prosperous, stable, peaceful, and even cosmopolitan place. However, others see globalization as a pernicious force that creates economic inequality among nations and between social classes within nations, enriching the wealthy and creating more poverty, and with it political instability and violence. According to its critics, globalization destroys traditions central to the identity of millions of people around the globe, particularly in the Third World.

Three of the more important "transmission belts" for globalization include migration, economic interaction, and the rise of a global media through which information spreads increasingly

rapidly across national borders. In these ways, globalization affects large groups of nonelite people, organizations, and individuals.

Globalization's impact on nonelites can give them tools and opportunities to challenge the prevailing narrative of nationalism. If a Latin American government promotes a top-down form of nationalism, in which the governing elites impose their rule on the nonelite majority, the latter may resist. Indigenous nationalists in southern Mexico's Chiapas region and in the Andes have used resources from outside of their countries or the region, including tapping NGOs for help. Globalization offered them opportunities to voice their grievances more loudly—even in international forums.

The paradox is that globalization can both weaken and strengthen nationalism. The power of globalizing forces can overwhelm nationalism. But fear of the overwhelming effects of globalization leads many to turn to nationalism as a way of preserving their economies and societies.

The neoliberal turn in the 1980s and 1990s brought calls for minimal government intervention in the economy, along with promotion of free trade and investment. As a result, the power of many Latin American states and nations declined and the dark underside of economic globalization appeared. One problem of neoliberalism was that powerful foreign economic actors (multinational corporations) exerted more control—similar to the experience of Mexico and other nations in the late nineteenth century. Secondly, it brought increased emphasis on monoculture—overdevelopment of a product desired by foreigners, and increasing vulnerability to volatility in world markets, which resulted in economic setbacks once demand for that export fell. A third problem was increased skewing of income toward the wealthy in a region with the greatest inequality in the world.

LEFTIST RESURGENCE

Critics of neoliberal-style globalization in Latin America began to promote nationalism as a shield against the problems spurred by globalization. In several countries, the nonelite majority elected nationalists to insulate the nation from powerful foreign entities and unpredictable world markets, and to limit US influence. This trend brought about a resurgence in Latin American nationalism on the political left, an ideology that is avowedly socialist. In a number of countries, notably Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, nationalists won power by

making a compelling case that they could improve nonelites' economic situation.

The most influential revival of post-neoliberal nationalism occurred in Venezuela, whose oil exports had historically enriched only a small sliver of the elite, leaving a yawning gap between the wealthy and the nonelites. Hugo Chávez, who became president in 1999, increased the power of the state, and proved very popular with the working class and the poor. He aimed to strengthen Latin American nationalism through a regional movement that he called Bolivarianism, attempting to reunite the "northern tier" nations of South America—a goal that had briefly been the dream of Simón Bolívar, who led revolutionary armies against Spanish rule across the region in the nineteenth century. Chávez garnered some support for his Bolivarian vision in Bolivia and Ecuador, but it has failed to attract many adherents elsewhere.

Chávez made frequent use of heavily anti-US rhetoric, and sought to form alliances outside the region with nations such as Iran to counter US influence. More importantly, he nationalized key sectors of the economy, including petroleum, to harness them for the economic benefit of the state, and, indirectly, the people. Chávez, and the like-minded successor who took over after his death, Nicolás Maduro, aimed to funnel the proceeds of a revived public sector to the economically disadvantaged. Unfortunately, Chávez's government reflected many of the authoritarian impulses of the populist nationalism of the 1940s and 1950s and of governments in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales rode to power in 2006 with a social organization and political party called Movement Toward Socialism. Morales benefited not only from a backlash against neoliberalism, but also from the self-destruction of most of the traditional political parties that had proved unpopular and corrupt. Moreover, he was the first Latin American president to publicly identify as an Indian. About 60 percent of the Bolivian population is of indigenous descent. (Indigenous nationalism in Latin America goes back to the 1940s. One prominent recent example is the 1994 Zapatista rebellion by Mayan Indians in Chiapas.)

With regard to the oil and gas industry, Morales's policy in a way harkened back to a previous era in Bolivian history. The state controlled the industry from 1937 to the late 1990s, when it was

privatized. Morales sharply increased taxes on foreign companies operating in the growing energy sector. He used the revenue to give subsidies to the poor in one of the hemisphere's poorest nations. He also wanted to curb the US "war on drugs," which stretched back to the 1970s, and which some Bolivians, in particular those on the political left, viewed as mainly a vehicle for increasing US influence. While US counternarcotics assistance increased (much of it directed to law-enforcement and military agencies), Bolivian public opposition grew stronger, as it became clear that the increasingly expensive efforts had proved ineffectual, decade after decade. Morales demanded the withdrawal of the US Drug Enforcement Administration, and Washington complied in 2008.

A third example is Ecuador. Because of its smaller size and lower-profile leaders, it has not been discussed in the world media as much as Venezuela and Bolivia. Nationalist Rafael Correa, who took office as president in 2007, was determined to contain US influence, in part by refusing to renew a lease for a US military base. Also, Ecuadorian leaders passed a law (similar to Bolivia's) that increased taxes on foreign companies operating in the oil and gas industry.

POTENT FORCE

Latin Americans have not passively accepted a given form of either nationalism or globalization. Some authors see Latin America as essentially prostrate—helpless as globalization (driven by outside, powerful forces) rolls over it—but this is far from the truth. On the contrary, Latin Americans in some cases have actively shaped the process of globalization. Even though the roots of Latin American nationalism cannot be ascribed to simple reaction against the outside forces of globalization, nationalism has been skillfully used by Latin Americans to counter the more negative aspects of globalization and protect themselves from the impact of outside forces.

Nationalism has grown in strength as Latin Americans have seen it as a useful or even necessary force to maintain their economies and, more broadly, their way of life. Some leaders have whipped up nationalist sentiment to preserve themselves or their parties in power (such as Fidel and Raúl Castro in Cuba, or Chávez in Venezuela). Yet nationalism remains a potent force in Latin American society in general, beyond the political leadership. ■