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From issue: **Latin America Goes Global** (Spring 2013)

■ AQ FEATURE

Latin America Has Moved On: U.S. Scholarship Hasn't

by

Mariano Bertucci



Photo: Serge Kozak/Photolibrary/Getty Images

The bias in research on U.S. foreign policy in Latin America skews analysis and understanding.

The study of what scholars focus on and debate helps to shape how policy is understood and discussed in the public realm and, sometimes, even made. However, a close look at the past three decades of scholarly publications on U.S.–Latin American relations, covering 174 peer-reviewed articles and 167 non-edited books, reveals a disconnect with many of the themes and realities in the region today.

International relations or other fields of inquiry related to global studies, such as international political economy or security, are severely underrepresented in scholarship on the Western Hemisphere.

Instead, most of the research in the field is based on the study of foreign policy. Over 94 percent of the scholarly publications noted above that are dedicated to the region could be qualified as foreign policy analyses rather than the more current or trendy themes of international relations theory or international political economy.

And within foreign policy studies, it is essentially the study of the U.S. foreign policy–making process. Virtually all (89 percent) scholarly works offering foreign policy analyses of U.S.–Latin American relations make U.S. foreign policy a central focus in their understanding of U.S.–Latin American affairs. Roughly half of the articles and books (51 percent) focus on foreign policy initiatives and reactions of the U.S. and Latin American countries toward one another; and almost 40 percent of published works only analyze U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America.

As a direct consequence of this approach, there is almost no attention paid to international political economy

or security. And that, in turn, has led to a neglect of some of the most central and challenging issues in today's policy agenda: narcotics trafficking, migration, the environment, and energy cooperation.

Alongside the U.S.-centric understanding of Latin America, there are relatively few policy articles and books on foreign policies of Caribbean countries, on South American countries—including, most notably, Brazil—and even on Mexico's policies toward the United States.

As a result, there are serious gaps in our understanding of how much latitude nation-states in the Americas have to set their own policy, especially in a region in which U.S. influence is becoming more diffuse.

Other gaps concern the migration, drug-related, and energy security issues and threats faced by the United States. These problems are likely to be solved only through sustained cooperative efforts with countries such as Mexico and Brazil. But these countries' foreign policies toward the U.S. are under studied. Only 12.9 percent of all articles and books focus on U.S.-Mexico relations and less than 3 percent focus on Mexico's foreign policy toward the United States. Similarly, less than 5 percent of articles and books analyze U.S.-Brazil relations and no more than 2 percent examine Brazil's foreign policy toward the "Colossus of the North."

These are critical gaps. Any informed foreign policy must be based on an understanding of both sides...

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