

Silke LECHNER

Latin America and Europe -

Worlds Apart Yet on the Same Track: Which Latin America? Which Europe?

Which Latin America comes to your mind when reflecting on Europe–Latin America relations? Which Europe comes to your mind when thinking about Latin America–Europe relations? When talking about Latin America and Europe, we should take a differentiated view and keep in mind that we are not talking about homogeneous entities.

WHICH LATIN AMERICA?

When spending some time in various countries of Latin America some years ago, I was often asked the following question: “And how do you like Latin America?” I never knew what to answer. I did not want to be impolite, but I saw little sense in answering this question, as there is not one Latin America. So I usually asked back which Latin America they were referring to.

I guess one is generally prone to seeing a different continent as a homogeneous entity, but in the case of Latin America this seems to be especially true. Yet this continent is just as heterogeneous as every other one. Let me provide some anecdotal evidence.

A friend of mine from Uruguay told me that he was asked to dance during a conference somewhere in Europe. The music was salsa. When his dancing partner realised he was not actually able to dance salsa, she angrily dumped him, saying “But did your mother not teach you?” She was obviously unaware that salsa is not a national dance in every country in Latin America.

While at an international conference in Colombia some years ago, we had a participant from Suriname. Very often he was asked: “How is life in Africa?” Many people were unaware that Suriname is part of South America; generally there is little knowledge about the French- and Dutch- speak-

ing small countries of Suriname, Guyana and French Guyana.

When thinking of Latin America, we often think of indigenous people; yet significant numbers of indigenous people exist mainly in the three Andean countries, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Obviously great economic differences exist, for example between the rather developed Chile on the one hand and Bolivia on the other, which has macroeconomic indicators more common for African countries.

There are certainly many other aspects worth pointing out but this short sketch is meant to raise some thoughts about this. When talking about Europe–Latin America relations, we have to question our image of Latin America and keep in mind that we are not dealing with a homogeneous entity. Starting from here — which are the issues worth discussing when thinking about these two continents?

COLONISERS AND NEO-COLONISERS

What certainly comes to our mind very quickly is the history of colonialism, Latin America as the colonised region and Europe as the coloniser. And certainly without this history we could not understand the economic, political and social landscape of today’s Latin America. Basically every single country of Latin America was colonised by a European country, so it does make sense to think of this region as a whole in this respect.




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These days the concept of “Neo-colonialism” is often used, referring to continuing unequal power relations between the global North (the highly developed, industrialised countries) and the global South (the so-called developing countries).

Certain aspects of current trade relations between Europe and Latin America may be considered as neo-colonial; while no physical oppression takes place, Latin American countries are kept in their place still today to provide resources for industrialised countries by the way the global economy works.

Similarly, the high levels of external debt most countries in Latin America have, puts them in the position of permanent debtors towards the rich creditor nations. The lack of mechanisms for dealing with debt in the global financial system — be it cancellation, an international bankruptcy procedure or whatever — keeps these countries in a vicious circle, unable to leave the debtor position, unable to develop their economies.

Thus to some extent, a certain part of the current economic relations between Europe and Latin America may be interpreted as neo-colonial. Yet one should be careful with this analysis as well.

Generalising the concept may hide the role of Latin American governments in the political and economic situations of their countries, which were not always conducive to furthering development, to put it mildly.

WHICH EUROPE?

Coming from a Western European country, I have to admit that when I think of Europe–Latin America relations, I mainly think of these issues mentioned: the history of colonialism, current European policies towards Latin America, and debtor–creditor relations.

Yet, which Europe am I talking about when referring to these issues? When considering the history of Europe as a coloniser, one cannot speak of Europe as such. It was only certain European countries, mainly Spain, Portugal and Great Britain (and to some extent France and the Netherlands as well) who were the colonising powers 500 years ago.

Similarly, when analysing who are the creditor nations of Europe, they are mainly Germany, Great Britain, France and more generally the whole of Western Europe, Scandinavia and Southern Europe.

This is a very limited view of Europe, however, and one has to specify which Europe one is talking about. Until only 15 years ago, basically half of Europe was under Soviet rule; countries were deprived of their independence and people lived under oppressive regimes. How can Central and Eastern Europe be brought into the picture when relating it to Latin America?

LATIN AMERICA AND POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE — ON THE SAME TRACK?

Comparing Latin America to post-communist Europe (I refer to Central and Eastern European countries here) seems a rather exciting endeavour, even though it is often overlooked both in popular discourse and academic research.

As a matter of fact, both of these regions have gone through dual transformation processes in the last two decades, and while certainly huge differences exist, one can also see clear similarities which make a comparison worthwhile.

Many Latin American countries were governed by various military regimes mainly during the seventies, and have undergone transitions to democracy usually at some point during the eighties.

On the economic level, Latin America applied an import-substituting industrialisation approach for most of the 1950s–1980s. Though a capitalist pattern, these systems provided for an active role of the state and high levels of protectionism.

In the eighties almost all Latin American countries undertook a U-turn in their development strategy and have increasingly implemented neoliberal economic policies. The dual transition thus consists of the change towards democracy and the opening of their economies, with both processes starting mainly in the eighties.

Changes in Central and Eastern Europe have been even more radical. After the fall of the Soviet regime, countries of the region introduced democracy almost overnight. At the same time, they started a complete overhaul of their economic systems: Soviet-style economic systems were replaced by market-oriented economies.

Certainly the starting positions of these two regions are different from each other, not least because in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, an “outer empire” existed between 1948 and 1989, so speaking of domestic politics or independence makes little sense regarding these countries.

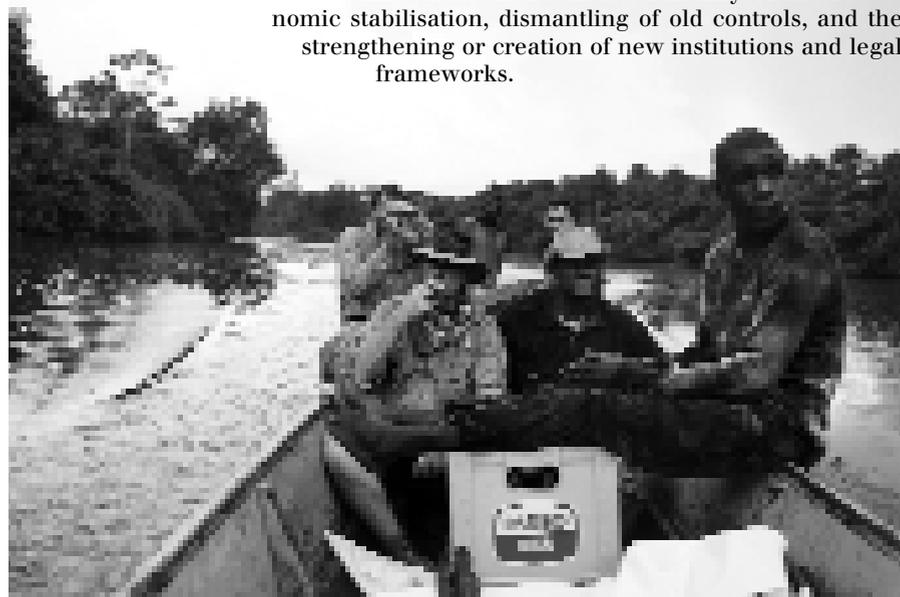
External influence was strong in many Latin American countries, of which the involvement of the U.S. government in various dictatorships is probably the main example. However, these international influences were not totally determinative and domestic political life was generally possible in the case of Latin American countries.

A POLITICAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

While differences thus clearly exist, many parallels can be drawn. Or can they? In political science and political economy literature, a debate is raging on the question of comparability: while some argue that comparisons are impossible as the differences are too large to make meaningful case studies, others hold the opinion that drawing parallels does make sense and one can draw useful lessons from these comparisons (see GRESKOVITS, 1998).

While this debate is going on, defenders of the latter view put forward intra-regional studies — an area that is growing, yet still not quite flourishing as scholars usually stick to studying the region or country that they know best (and few people have knowledge and interest in two continents).

Analysts who do, however, dare to enter this field, discuss the similar reform processes in the two regions: in both Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe, the market-oriented reforms undertaken consisted mainly of macroeconomic stabilisation, dismantling of old controls, and the strengthening or creation of new institutions and legal frameworks.



It can be argued that a comparison between these two regions makes sense as it is only here that dual transformation processes (both on the economic and on the political level) were roughly simultaneous.

While this is true for other countries in the world as well, it is only in the case of Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe that a whole region underwent these processes (NELSON, 1991). This is what makes the transformation processes that have happened in these two regions worth analysing in a comparative perspective.

WSCF — FOSTERING RELATIONS

In the above we have considered different perspectives on the two continents and on the relations between them. Yet, what is the role of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in all this? Why does Mozaik, the journal of the WSCF Europe Region, dedicate an issue to Europe–Latin America relations?

WSCF has throughout her history taken a critical perspective on all forms of colonialism and oppression and has fostered reflection and action on this. Around the 500th anniversary of the colonisation of Latin America in 1492, WSCF organised two bi-regional encounters: “500 Years... And What Now?” in Quito, Ecuador, in 1991; and “Europe ’92 and Latin America — Looking 500 Years Ahead” in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1995.

European and Latin American students came together to exchange and discuss this history between the two regions which had begun 500 years earlier. A participant reported on the conference in 1991:

“The perspective was the colonisational past, and the different oppressive structures prevalent through the five hundred years. But also the hopes and perspectives for future democratic, independent development within the region, and the relations of the region to other parts of the world ... The conference and the follow-up work gave rise to an enhanced global consciousness” (Mozaik 1992/2. 25.).

Yet the perspective of these events was not only oriented towards one side of Europe. In an article on the aforementioned WSCF conference in Portugal in

1995 a participant wrote about the perspectives and contributions given by the participants from Central and Eastern Europe who shared about their own experiences of repression (Mozaik 1995/1. 17.).

A decade after this event, WSCF organised another bi-regional encounter of these two regions: “*Window on the World: Economic, Cultural and Political Relations between Europe and Latin America*” held in Agape, Italy, in 2004.

From the beginning this conference aimed at giving a differentiated perspective on the two regions. It turned out that one of the highlights of the meeting was a panel during which students from Cuba, Venezuela, Belarus and Hungary shared about the recent political and economic transformation processes (or lack thereof, as in the case of Belarus and Cuba) of their countries.

A window comparing Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe was opened. Many European participants did not know about, for example, the dictatorship of Paraguay in the eighties (which was another input). On the other hand, many of the Latin American participants heard for the first time about the situation in Belarus, a current dictatorship in the middle of Europe.

HOW WSCF BUILDS BRIDGES

WSCF has thus played an active role in fostering relations between students of these two continents. For me personally, WSCF has built bridges both within Europe and to Latin America.

Some years ago I went to live in Ecuador for a whole year, working in the WSCF office of the Latin America region, a year that basically changed my life or at least brought it on a certain track.

On one hand, I became extremely excited about the work of WSCF and decided to get more involved after my return to Europe; on the other, Latin America as a research interest opened up to me.

But WSCF also facilitated a new perspective on my own region: through my involvement in WSCF Europe in the past years, I grew more and more interested in the transformation processes of Central and Eastern Europe. I went to meetings in various countries and made friends from this part of Europe, from whom I learned a lot. I owe my personal Europe–Latin America relation to WSCF.

Which is your Latin America? Which is your Europe?

Suggested Reading

GRESKOVITS Béla, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience — East European and Latin American Transformations Compared*. Budapest, 1998.

LINZ Juan J. – STEPAN Alfred, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore – London, 1996. *Mozaik* 1992–2004.

NELSON Joan M., *Intricate Links: Democratization and Market Reforms in Latin America and Eastern Europe*. New Brunswick – Oxford, 1994.

PRZEWORSKI Adam, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge, 1991.

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