

The Politics of Political Science and Toxic Democracies: A Hemispheric Perspective

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Resumen

Este trabajo problematiza las perspectivas dominantes sobre los procesos de democratización, las cuales provienen principalmente de la academia anglosajona. Para ello, atiende a las relaciones de poder existentes tanto fuera como dentro de la ciencia política y muestra las falencias de dichas perspectivas a la hora de explicar las diversas realidades políticas de América Latina y otras latitudes. La literatura sobre democratización, argumentamos, *refleja* relaciones de poder asimétricas a nivel internacional. Nuestro ejercicio trabaja en dos vertientes. Por una parte, situamos a nuestra disciplina en tanto objeto de estudio, a través de lo que denominamos *la política de la ciencia política*. Y, como segundo paso, proponemos la categoría de *democracias tóxicas* a la que concebimos como una herramienta conceptual para la comprensión crítica de las dimensiones inter y transnacionales de los regímenes políticos y sus transformaciones en el llamado "Sur Global". En otras palabras, *la política de la ciencia política* nos ayuda a comprender y revelar los sesgos existentes en la literatura sobre democratización, mientras que el concepto de *democracias tóxicas* nos permite hacer una intervención analítica que tiende a interrumpir las dinámicas de poder dentro de nuestra disciplina. Después de todo, la epistemología y la investigación social se necesitan mutuamente para ser efectivas y críticas.

Palabras clave: La Política de la Ciencia Política, Democracias Tóxicas, Democratización

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Abstract

We are interested in problematizing the globally dominant analytical perspectives on democratization, which have mostly originated in English North America and Northern Europe, by way of looking at power relations from within and without political science as a discipline. We argue that such perspectives increasingly show serious shortcomings in explaining past and current realities in Latin America and beyond. They not only analyze “power” but in fact incarnate unequal international power structures. Our analytical exercise is twofold. On the one hand, we engage in the analysis of *the politics of political science*, looking at the discipline as an object of (political) inquiry. On the other, and as a product of the latter, we propose a new category, namely *toxic democracies*, as a conceptual tool that might allow for a critical understanding of the international and transnational dimensions of political regimes and their transformations in the so called “Global South.” In other words, *the politics of political science* assists us in understanding and unpacking the existing biases in the literature on democratization, while *toxic democracies* performs an analytical intervention that disrupts the power dynamics of our discipline. Once again, epistemology and social research need each other to become effective and critical in their knowledge-production pursuits.

Keywords: The Politics of Political Science, Toxic Democracies, Democratization.

1 Introductory Notes

The following discussion provides a glimpse at our larger research agenda, which problematizes dominant perspectives on democracy and democratization by way of looking at power relations from within and without political science as a discipline. We argue that such perspectives, mostly originated in English North America and Northern Europe, increasingly show serious shortcomings in explaining past and current realities in Latin America and beyond.

Our exercise is twofold. On the one hand, we engage in the analysis of *the politics of political science*, looking at the discipline as an object of (political) inquiry. We contend that past and current asymmetrical expressions of power have shaped our discipline, affecting both its institutional dynamics and its analytical discourse. On the other, we tackle the limitations of the conceptual toolbox prevalent in the democratization literature today and propose a new category,

namely *toxic democracies*, which might allow for a more nuanced understanding of the international and transnational dimensions of political regimes and their transformations.

2 Critical Reflections on some Institutional and Analytical Challenges

2.1 Institutional Disciplinary Constraints

In this section, we address concrete cases of institutional disciplinary constraints. Their relevance lies in the fact that they represent significant examples of the challenges faced with regards to the discipline's future and its capacity to contribute to our deeper understanding of diverse sociopolitical realities worldwide.

As we all know, knowledge frameworks are often implicated in the construction of unequal social and political institutions. Such inequalities have been manifested also in the academic field and its own structures (i.e. universities and disciplinary associations), through the geographic concentration of accepted knowledge production and the establishment of strict criteria that must be met by those aiming for recognition and acceptance within specific social sciences disciplines. Admittedly, previous efforts have addressed some of these institutional disciplinary constraints. For instance, in the case of political science in the United States, the Perestroika movement emerged in the year 2000 as a faction that claims to work towards methodological pluralism and the heightening of the relevance of political science to people outside the discipline (Monroe 2005). As such, the "movement" has positioned itself as against what it sees as the scientific dominance in political science, which has been expressed through a quantitative and mathematical methodological "obsession." One of their central critiques was that such dominance breeds academic isolation and poor quality in scholarship (Schram and Caterino 2006). As significant as the Perestroika movement might be, it was limited to the questioning of the discipline within U.S. borders. Our interest, however, is to look at the discipline at a hemispheric level. It is for this reason that we find it relevant to look at the increasingly popular current practice of ranking social sciences departments and faculties world-wide, especially given

the impact these exercises have on prestige and funding.

In a piece published in the journal *Political Studies Review*, Simon Hix (2004) presents a “global” ranking of political science departments, most of which have been increasingly modeled according to Western/Northern criteria. To his credit, Hix himself acknowledges that “*one possible problem with these rankings is the apparent English-language bias in the results, which undermines the aspiration to be truly ‘global’.*” (Hix 2004, 304) Yet the author justifies his exercise by stating that English is the international language for the publication and citation of research in political science, as in other social and the natural sciences. He goes on to state that as a consequence of this, and due to the ease of reading, publishing in (and teaching from) these international journals, scholars in English-speaking universities are inevitably more closely integrated into the “global discipline” than scholars outside the English-speaking world. Thus, a ranking of departments using research published in the “top” international journals in our field is inevitably not a fair representation of the quality of departments outside the English-speaking world. As an alternative to correct some of the biases in this type of ranking exercise, the author suggests that “*if ‘the discipline’, perhaps via a committee of the International Political Science Association, could agree on a set of English and non-English-language journals and book publishers that are the main vehicles for research output in the global discipline, it would not be too difficult to modify this method and establish a mechanized system for entry and updating of the dataset and for calculating new rankings every year. Ideally, each institution that wanted to be included in the rankings could be asked to provide accurate and up-to-date information about the size of their faculty.*” (Hix 2004, 310-12).

It is not difficult to imagine the logistical problems of such efforts, let alone the actual agreement on the criteria and the shift in “power” dynamics that a truly global practice of ranking would involve, both in terms of resources and ideologically. More concretely, some assumptions are made that are quite problematic in engaging in that kind of ranking exercise, such as the fact that more publishing is necessarily a reflection of “better quality” knowledge production. After all, as has been pointed out by the Perestroika movement itself, in the case of the American Political Science Association alone, it

is often the same authors being published and cited by their own colleagues in certain “top” academic journals and not others. Even more problematic results the absence of research productions in other languages in those top-listed journals and the exclusion of different perspectives and methodologies. Additionally, there is also the issue of a strong association between publication and knowledge production with funding, particularly in cases where “results” are clearly linked to the foreign policies of U.S. and European administrations, both in cases of friends and foes.

Another interesting example of narrowness in the definition of the discipline is the volume edited by King, Lehman, and Nie (2009), *The Future of Political Science: 100 perspectives*. Almost all contributors to the volume are academics based in U.S. universities, although they claim to debate the future of our discipline at a global level. In Latin America, the institutionalization of political science has been relatively recent, being clearly related to the consolidation of the U.S.-hegemony in the region and the academic (and political) defeat of Marxism. If, as Sartori (2004) has said, in the United States exists a “dominant political science”, in Latin America several institutions and many political scientists embrace mainstream U.S. tendencies and perspectives as the unique way of developing a “true” and professional political science in the region. However, it is clear that this process does not go uncontested (See Luna, Murillo, and Schrank 2014)¹. In fact, Latin America is the home of many critical academic projects from within and without our discipline.

2.2 Analytical Shortcomings within the Discipline

We will proceed now to show how some texts, sometimes considered as foundational of mainstream political science, have tended to romanticize U.S. and European democracies, regarding others as faulty political regimes (or resulting in what we call *othering*, in Edward Said’s (1979) sense of “orientalizing”). In doing so, some main figures of our discipline have been forced to neglect simple facts such as racial

¹It is of particular relevance to refer here to the recent debate triggered by Luna, Murillo, and Schrank (2014) around the current state of affairs in the field of Latin American politics. Although their focus is on Political Economy more generally defined, as political scientists, we do share some of their concerns regarding the need to be more critical about the conceptual frameworks and tools we adopt or reproduce in our own analyses of democracy in the region.

segregation and the very late establishment of universal suffrage in the United States and other western democracies, along with the negative impact of northern countries' interventionism in different parts of the world. As will be discussed below, three such troubling examples are Almond and Verba, Lipset, and Putnam.

Othering Latin America and Beyond I: The Case of Almond and Verba

Political science has typically engaged with “culture” through basically two different notions: cultural policy and political culture. Both of them adapt the complex notion of culture to the liberal conception of politics. Culture, in fact, becomes enclosed by the “political system” and *electoral* politics. Here we will exclusively focus the attention on the notion of political culture. In his famous *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1982) explored the correlation between the identitarian features of the “American” people and the institutions it came to develop. One of his main arguments is the crucial role of the density of “civil society” (understood as generalized citizens' involvement in different kinds of social groups and organizations) to explain the emergence of U.S. Democracy. Therefore, we can say that here we find the foundation of both political culture and social capital (in Putnam's version). Almond and Verba (1963), and the school of research that they initiated, further developed some of Tocqueville's formulations, especially the idea that nations' beliefs and values affect their political performance. The logic of the argument is that given that nations are composed by individuals, then the character or nature of a nation can be grasped by exploring the beliefs and values of its citizens. Thus, the aim of the “culturalist” political scientist is to describe the attitudes of individuals towards a special set of social objects and institutions, namely those of the political system (Moreira 1997). Giovanni Sartori (1984) has well expressed the idea of “politics” behind this approach: “What is political?” he asks; and the answer is straightforward: the political is defined in spatial terms. In other words, politics is what happens “inside” the political system.

Consequently, in a liberal approach “political culture” should be, as Moreira argues, the beliefs, values and attitudes of a nation towards the

“political objects.” Thus, the aim of Almond and Verba is to characterize the political culture of a nation. Pushing their argument toward its simplest version, it is pretty clear that on the one hand there are civic (good) political cultures that sustain democracy, and on the other non-civic (bad) political cultures that propitiate authoritarian regimes. This operation “analyzes” and “judges” the objects of analysis at the same time. It is difficult not to see the ideological biases at play in this theory. Let us say a couple of things to justify this statement. First, liberal democracy is assumed as the most *humane* collective expression (being communism and other alternatives simply the expression of “barbarism”). Additionally, it is not a detail that the fact that some “democratic governments” and “civic societies” have imposed authoritarian regimes in some Southern democracies remains mostly unaddressed. The international *relational* dimension of social transformation (Shilliam 2009) and the capacity of human agency or even politics as such are simply denied by this culturalist fatalism, which reduces the other to a very convenient caricature. In fact, and predictably, Almond and Verba’s research “discovered” that U.S. citizens represent, together with the British, the most civic/humane nations in the world. Among other reasons, this conclusion is problematic given the absence of universal suffrage and the reality of racist segregation in the United States at the time this research was developed².

Othering Latin America and Beyond II: The Case of Seymour Martin Lipset

In his classic *Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*, Lipset defines democracy in extremely minimalist terms, as “a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials.” The emphasis is also put on the role of a “system of beliefs” that sustains democracy, because “if a political system is not characterized by a value system allowing the peaceful play of power (...) there can be no stable democ-

²The ethnocentric dimension of the approach is clear in the following quote: “Though (the leaders of the backward nations) cannot fully understand the subtle balances of the democratic polity and the nuances of the civic culture, they tend to acknowledge their legitimacy as the expression of an impulse toward the humane polity” (Almond and Verba 1992: 172).

racy. *This has been the problem faced by many Latin American states.*" (Lipset 1959, 71). In fact, in this account Latin America does not have any "stable democracy." Two main factors are considered by Lipset in explaining the problem of democratic stability: economic development (comprising industrialization, wealth, urbanization, and education) and legitimacy. The author departs from a four-category typology: "Stable Democracies" and "Unstable Democracies and Dictatorships" for Europe and English speaking countries, and "Unstable Democracies and Dictatorships" and "Stable Dictatorships" for Latin America. All the English speaking countries, including the United States, are of course among the stable democracies. The match between categories and cases is sometimes odd. The lack of universal suffrage in the United States, again, does not seem to require any interrogation (even when this right had been achieved in many Latin American countries). And the explanation offered by Lipset for his classification does not acknowledge international power relations in any sense (again, essentialism and endogenism). What is even more troublesome, methodologically speaking, is the confession that while "*in Europe we look for stable democracies, in South America we look for countries which have not had fairly constant dictatorial rule.*" Yet "*no detailed analysis of the political history of either Europe or Latin America has been made with an eye toward more specific criteria of differentiation; at this point in the examination of the requisites of democracy, elections results are sufficient to locate European countries, and the judgments of experts and impressionistic assessments based on fairly well-known facts of political history will suffice for Latin America*" (Lipset 1959, 74). Thus, for Latin American cases impressionistic assessments are enough – there is no need of a careful research. It is interesting that Europe presents "less and more" democratic countries, while Latin America is composed by "less and more dictatorial" systems. The vocabulary is not only arbitrary but also a clear expression of the way of "organizing" the political geography of the world from the mainstream (i.e. mainly U.S. and to an extent Northern European) political point of view.

There are many assumptions that are not unpacked, which simply universalize U.S. reality to the rest of the world. One clear example of this is the highly ideological premise that the well-educated middle-class does not embrace "extreme" ideologies (i.e. communism).

Historical accounts of Latin America show that, in many cases, it was precisely the well-educated segment of the population (artists, academics, civil servants, organized working class) who would embrace Marxism and other “radical” political projects during the 1950’s and 1960’s. This is explained partially because of the collapse of the vernacular version of the welfare-state, the crisis of the Import Substitution Industrialization Model, the impact of the Cuban revolution, and the reaction against U.S. “imperialism,” among other factors. Additionally, education is suggested as a powerful predictor of democracy. Unsurprisingly then, *“the educational enrollment per thousand total population at three different levels, primary, post-primary, and higher educational, is equally consistent and related to the degree of democracy. The tremendous disparity is shown by the extreme cases of Haiti and the United States. Haiti has fewer children (11 per thousand) attending school in the primary grades than the United States has attending colleges (almost 18 per thousand).”* (Lipset 1959, 79). However, the historical conditions and the multiple political events (the colonial rule and the struggle for independence, and the continuous foreign interventionism included) that help explain the Haitian reality are not addressed. Haitians seem to be the only ones responsible for their own situation. Structural power relations within the country and the inter-nationality of the production of Lipset’s preconditions of democracy are simply ignored. Ultimately, we are left with some unanswered questions: 1) what is being “known” through this analysis? 2) who knows and who is known? and 3) in which ways and with what kind of implications?

Lipset goes on to assert that democratic beliefs are a fundamental support for democracies, and that public opinion research demonstrates that *“the most important single factor differentiating those giving democratic responses (to the questions of the polls) from others has been education”* (highlighted in the original). And, again, the United States is the perfect model of democracy: *“The United States has developed a common homogeneous secular political culture (. . .)”* and *“This society has resolved the main issues that have emerged in “western societies” in modern times.”* We will now focus on one of them: *“the admission of the lower strata, particularly the workers, to “citizenship”* (Lipset 1959, 92). Lipset explains that *“the United States and Britain gave citizen-*

ship to the workers in the early or mid-nineteenth century." (Lipset 1959, 93) This narrative entirely ignores gender and race: while in Uruguay universal suffrage (including women's suffrage) was at work in 1938, in the United States African-Americans (men and women) had to wait until 1965. And in Switzerland, one of Lipset's "stable democracies" women could not vote until 1971! Lipset finishes his article in a very revealing way: *"the peculiar concatenations of factors which gave rise to western democracy in the nineteenth century may be unique."* Yet this discovery is not meant *"to be unduly pessimistic."* (Lipset 1959, 103) In fact, it is possible to develop democracy "elsewhere." And here we go again with the universalization of (an idealized and very biased version of) U.S. democracy: *"To aid men's actions in furthering democracy was in some measure Tocqueville's purpose in studying the operation of American democracy, and it remains perhaps the most important substantive intellectual task which students of politics can still set before themselves."* (Lipset 1959, 103) After reading this classical text of political science, we wonder if this "orientalization" of Latin America through "political culture" and the correlative idealization of the United States have been completely superseded by students of politics or remain as a mark of our discipline. We now turn to critically engage with a more recent but crucial contribution to mainstream political science: Robert Putnam's re-conceptualization of the sociological notion of "social capital."

Othering Latin America and Beyond III: The Case of Robert Putnam's Approach to Social Capital

From Aristotle to Durkheim and beyond, that human beings are fundamentally social creatures is assumed by almost every political and social theory. Therefore, *Making Democracy Work's* point of departure is a broadly accepted principle. The problem with Putnam's approach is, however, how it uses this idea of man's social nature. Let us briefly summarize the core of Putnam's argument: civic engagement³ gives rise to social capital which is a property of

³Civic engagement understood as citizens' intense and extended participation in any kind of civil society organizations. This involvement in community activities is positively correlated with the existence of relationships of trust among individuals; situation that obviously makes collaboration and coordination in large scale easier and more effective.

groups and *even nations* that facilitates both effective government and economic development. Consequently, in this view the quality of its social capital becomes a critical feature of the political culture of a nation. In Putnam's own words, "*by far the most important factor in explaining good government is the degree to which social and political life in a region (a country? a continent?) approximates the ideal of the civic community*" (Putnam 1993, 120). Thus, the North of Italy is close to this idea and the South is extremely far from it and that is why the former is rich and the latter is "underdeveloped". In the next few paragraphs we unpack the logic and the implications of this argument.

The hypothesis that "good government" and economic development are mainly the result of extended and intense "civic engagement" is, in our view, both tautological and biased. In fact, in Putnam's application of social capital the contrasting situations of the North and the South of Italy are explained *by their own –divergent– identities*: the North is civic (it has lots of social capital), therefore is very well governed; the South is un-civic (it has low levels of social capital), therefore is badly governed. This serious flaw in Putnam's work has already been identified and explored by many critics (Harris and Renzio 1997; Portes 1998; Putzel 1997 and Tarrow 1996 among others). In this context, our aim is to enrich the argument about Putnam's "culturalist circularity" with an idea that, as far as we know, has not been developed by the critical literature on social capital. This idea has enormous implications for the employment of "social capital" to understand the "Global South": We want to argue that Putnam's assessment of Southern Italy's "underdevelopment" exercises interpretative violence over this space/identity and beyond, reproducing or being functional to the discriminatory narrative that many in the North cultivate about the South.

And when we say "North" and "South" here we are not referring only to the case of Italy: Putnam's argument about the cause of "development" and underdevelopment does not seem to be circumscribed to a specific country and that is why we include him among our "troubling examples" that illustrate political science's frequent mistreatment of the South. His view in fact has huge implications for how the relationship Global North/Global South should (*not*) be thought. In this regard, we find it especially productive to problematize Putnam's view

employing an adaptation of the notion of “orientalism” of Edward Said –or, more generally speaking, using the concept of othering. Our argument is that Putnam not only does not clarify what should be explained but also simply blames “the poor for their poverty”. Thus, even if we accept that the North is more civic (which is *not* just an “empirical” question given the normative implications of “civism” as a concept) then the next obvious question is: why so? And in Putnam’s explanation of this situation, and similarly to the previous cases that we have been analyzing, *interregional power relations have been conveniently erased from the map*. The South is *unilaterally* responsible for its own situation. We see this *lack of relationality* in the argument as unfair and very ideological. Thus, under this “endogenous” explanation the North is the North, the South is the South, period. The historical relationship between them as *one* of the factors that may explain their different trajectories is not addressed. Thus, Shilliam’s (2009) international/inter-group dimension of social transformation which, in a Hegelian tone, states that any identity is only understandable in reference to other identities, is totally absent in Putnam’s work. However, it is clear that the pattern of state building and especially the colonial history of the South should have had an impact on the level of “development” of this region (and the South in general). In the perspective of many critics it is in fact absurd to pretend that what is going on in the South is not somehow related to the North and *vice versa*. We would add that this circular and tautological argumentation (civic engagement produces social capital that produces civic engagement) is not just a weak argument: as we already said, it is part of an epistemological strategy that denies power structures (which is a way of contributing to their reproduction) *constructing the South as the inferior other*. And we would say exactly the same about Putnam’s arbitrary decision of allocating the original cause of the North-South difference in the late medieval period (Tarrow 1996, 393): Putnam’s exercise of “historization” in fact avoids history: after the “big bang” (the creation of the republican cities in the North; the consolidation of social hierarchies in the South) history does not matter anymore. This excessive emphasis on path dependence and the notion of the “big bang” in itself de-politicize the analysis of these societies: from those remote times onwards the same patterns have been

reproduced without any change (again, essentialism)⁴.

Putnam's negation of *intentionality and agency* is also problematic: in his argument the aims and the type of communities and organizations in which people are involved are not relevant. What matters is citizens' involvement as such. The result of this perspective is that the role of a strong political party becomes undifferentiated of the role of bird-watching societies⁵. Putnam does not acknowledge that in society there are groups with political aims which want to shape social reality. And even if they do not shape it to the extent and in the way they wish, their actions do have an impact on history. In the case of the North of Italy, it is not necessary to be an expert on the case to see that the Communist Party created a specific type of "social capital". Beyond Putnam's intentions, this denial has ideological implications. The implication of this for the policies toward the Global South is that the developmental projects should not be "political" but merely "technical". It is not through contentious collective action and emancipation that the South will find a path towards "development". Again, this is an anti-political narrative that erases power.

We want to make a few more quick points. First, as we all know, social capital did not prevent fascism from emerging in the North (Putzel 1997, 943). Extending this argument: what about the racist groups and the anti-immigrant sentiments so spread today within the "civilized" North? Where is the home of barbarism, only the South? Secondly, what are the implications of the foreign policies of some of the "Civic Polities" of the North (among them, the official support of torture, selective killing, etc.)? These simple facts contradict the strong positive correlation between social capital and democratic governance and the "superiority" of the North in this regard. To sum up, Putnam's perspective exercises a sort of "orientalism" over "the South" (which as such is a discursive creation that he uncritically takes from the dominant Italian common sense). Instead of dealing with the "North/South" divide as an object of study and reflection, Putnam

⁴"Path dependence" can help us to understand the durability and reproduction of social arrangements and structures, but it may also be an excuse to deny change or to make it unexplainable.

⁵For Putnam *"Italian political parties have ably adapted to the contrasting contexts within which they operate, un-civic as well as civic"*. This means that political parties are completely powerless: they just adapt to the context without shaping it in anyway. Putnam's ideas are fatalist and therefore anti-political.

naturalizes it. His questions and answers are part of a logic based on the overlooking of power relations and the fabrication of a culturally inferior other who is unilaterally responsible for his troubled situation. This approach is problematic for both North and South, and there is a need to complicate this dichotomy, which does not mean to negate the differences.

It can be argued that Almond and Verba, Lipset, and Putnam are important “moments” in the making of political science and democracy theorizing. And yet, the lenses through which they saw politics somehow express and reproduce asymmetrical North-South relations. This should be incorporated into our reflections as political and social scientists. As stated above, the notion of *the politics of political science* tries to precisely conceptualize and reconstruct our discipline’s politics and ideological biases. We hope that the examples just explored are a persuasive way of “operationalizing” this notion. Furthermore, we advance the concept of *toxic democracies* as an analytical tool, the aim of which is to facilitate our critical reflections and to add another dimension to the democratization literature. But first let us briefly refer to another school of thought: new institutionalism.

A Note on New Institutionalism and the “Orientalist” Danger: Problematizing some Assumptions about Southern and Northern Institutions

New institutionalism is one of the most relevant contemporary developments within (and without) our discipline. It has allowed us to conceptually overcome both the narrow methodological individualist assumptions of behaviorism and the “socio-economic-centrism” of Marxism, pluralism and functionalism (Immergut 1998; March and Olsen 1984; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Hall and Taylor 1996; and others). Thus, thanks to this school of thought we are now able to grasp the fact that “institutions” are not mere effects of social processes or individuals’ choices. Or, formulated in positive terms: new institutionalism reminded us (the idea is of course not new) that formal and informal institutions have an important role in shaping individual and collective reality and, consequently, they matter –or should matter– if our goal is to understand politics. As

a consequence, the set of questions raised by new institutionalism are of a great contemporary importance. In fact, that “institutions” matter has been (re)incorporated into the academic common sense. Turning our attention to historical institutionalism, notions such as the relative autonomy of the State (which implies an emphasis on its creative capacity), State capacities and policy instruments, State effects on collective action (which capitalizes the cultural dimension of institutions and politics), among others, have been incorporated into our academic language and commonsensical assumptions about how the political world operates.

The institutionalist way of looking at political problems –particularly the role of the State– enriched Marxism, pluralism and other schools of thought. Yet, we want to argue that institutionalism in general lacks a full awareness of the international dimension of social transformation (Shilliam 2009), especially in terms of the effects that Northern interventions have had on the institutional development of some countries of the South. In this sense, some established democracies in the North (e.g. the United States in the Americas) have a very dark side: many of their interventions within the Global South (at least in Latin America) have undermined the institutional developments of the State and of democracy itself. Therefore, strong states can feed the weakness of other (weaker) states. Additionally, “new institutionalist” scholars tend to assume a sharp distinction between the institutional reality of the Global North (“Constitutional Polities” in the words of Skocpol, in Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985) and the Global South (addressed in the section titled “States as Actors” of the book’s introduction). Thus geography delineates institutional development: in her discussion about state autonomy Skocpol reviews some studies on “instances in which non-constitutionally ruling officials attempt to use the state as a whole to direct and restructure society and politics” (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985, 11). These cases are located in the Global South. Meanwhile, *“other scholars have teased out more circumscribed instances of state autonomy in the histories of public policymaking in liberal democratic, constitutional polities, such as Britain, Sweden, and the United States.”* There, the State is not just a coercive entity, it also “thinks”: *“(...) the autonomous state’s actions are not all acts of coercion or domination; they are, instead,*

the intellectual activities of civil administrators engaged in diagnosing societal problems and framing policy alternatives to deal with them." (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985, 11).

We are of course aware that in recent times, following conventional criteria, the majority of the openly authoritarian regimes were/are located in the so called Global South. That is out of the question. What we find concerning though is the "division of labor" in this program of research. In the review offered by Skocpol there are no references to analyses of the policymaking processes, welfare state structures and institutional dynamics of the "Constitutional Polities" of the South. Basically, what seems to be taken for granted is that in order to look at democratic institutions "at work" we should study (only) the "Advanced Industrial Societies." The reality is of course much more complex. If we examine some Latin American cases, especially in the Southern Cone (for instance, Chile and Uruguay) what we find are long periods in which extensive welfare programs, democratic institutional structures and relatively strong states were in full and "normal" operation, the interruption of which can be partially explained by the intervention from some of the Northern "Constitutional Polities." This is precisely why we argue in favour of including the international effects of national political regimes and their respective polities as an item in the process of assessment of their democratic or undemocratic condition. The fact that some "institutionalized" polities may prevent the institutional development of others complicates *who is who* both in institutional and democratic terms.

3 Toxic Democracies: Democratization Studies and the Need for Serious Geopolitical Considerations

In this final section, we will provide a brief analysis of some of the more representative works produced in English on democratization in Latin America, in order to showcase a few of the shortcomings discussed above. We will then outline the rationale for proposing a new category, namely toxic democracies, and some of the elements that we are hoping to incorporate into its definition.

For the purposes of this article, we decided to limit the analysis to three edited volumes, with contributions by a group of authors

whose work often appears in some of the “top-ranked journals” and who represent a good sample of the dominant approaches to the subject in the subfield of recent regime transitions to democracy within political science. As repeatedly stated above, we contend that most of the political science production on democratization is dominated by a narrative that tends to essentialize political regimes, regarding local structures as late copies of the corresponding institutions that are argued to be observed in Western Europe and English North America. As such, the endogenism of transition research reflects the limitations of discipline categories, which tend to focus on developments and experiences imagined as originally internal to the Global North and as the future and desirable destiny of the Global South. This, in our view, leads to the neglect of a serious analysis of external variables and conditions of asymmetrical power relations, resulting in the imposition of universalistic parameters and a kind of epistemological paternalism that erases the dark side of northern democracies.

First, the edited volume on *Democracy in Latin America* by Diamond, Hartlyn, Linz and Lipset (1999) represents a good example of the literature on democratization of the 1990s. It is part of a relatively recent literature that claims to be more sensitive to the need to pay attention to a broader set of institutions and factors than those simply associated with free elections, including a coherent state, effective and democratic accountability, the rule of law, and civilian control over the military. Yet the contributors make a very sharp distinction between procedural issues and substantive outcomes. This, although potentially useful for the organization of the analysis, strikes us as problematic due to the fact that they end up defining political, social and economic dimensions as separate realms, and without establishing clear links between them and the institutionalization of democratic structures. Similarly, throughout the volume, an engagement with ideology and global hegemonic structures is almost completely absent. Moreover, in their remarks on the responsibility of national leaders and their commitment to the democratic process, there is no mention of the limited power of elected officials. This despite the fact that the latter is often explained by external factors, such as the long-term incentives and conflicts of interest associated with the “revolving-doors” phenomenon which refers to the move

from national governments to international organizations (especially financial institutions) by many of these officials. The authors make an explicit link of crime and insecurity at the domestic level to international economic and political issues, especially in the case of drug-trafficking and the U.S.-lead “War on Drugs,” resulting in active pressures from several U.S. administrations for the involvement of Latin American militaries in combating such crimes (Diamond et al. 1999, 22). It is puzzling, however, that although they recognize that such U.S. policy runs counter to the market-oriented logic and acknowledge the risks involved in strengthening the autonomy and distorting the missions of Latin American militaries, there is little effort to analyze the concrete negative impact of such actions. Even more troublesome is the fact that there is no explicit recognition of any U.S. co-responsibility in the potential weakening of democratic structures and processes as a consequence of this “war”. Paradoxically, the full responsibility for the maintenance and consolidation of democratic rule is put solely on the shoulders of political leaders of countries such as Colombia, Peru and Mexico. Overall, they neglect the role of external sources in any current democratic failure, in spite of the fact that they emphasize the relevance of historical legacies, paths and sequences. They conclude that *“the United States has typically been able to do no more than influence events, and sometimes not even that”* (Diamond et al., 59). The different authors attribute the course of political developments and regime change primarily to internal structures and actions. This, in spite of their own assertion that in assessing *“U.S. policies on democracy in Latin America, one must consider their salience, their direction, and their effectiveness. When national security concerns were paramount, policies of democracy promotion were tailored to these concerns, were superseded by them, or were actually sculled.”*(Diamond et al., 59).

It is perhaps as a result of the sharp separation between social, political and economic spheres mentioned above, that when they refer to international economic factors faced by Latin America, such as the protectionist challenge from the United States and other industrialized countries, they fail to consider this as a variable potentially undermining the success of democratic regimes in the South. A similar failing occurs when they discuss the renewed

concentration in the extractive industry or mining commodities for export purposes, and its potential negative effects on a country's economic and social structure, and hence on politics. Instead, they argue that the steepest international challenge to democracy in Latin America derives from the need for countries in the region to adapt to the demands of economic globalization, while still recovering from the debt crisis of the 1980s. This reasoning could easily be reversed and lead us to argue that the challenge for the global economic system is to adapt to the demands of democratic aspirations in the South. However, once again, they contend that whether those challenges are met effectively will depend on the capacity, courage, judgment, and values of domestic political actors alone. As a last note on their conclusions, it is puzzling to us when they argue that the only world competitors to the liberal democratic model are Islamic fundamentalist and Asian's authoritarian values (Diamond et al., 57-8), ignoring completely the possibility of democratic contestation within different polities, as has been recently the case in Latin America⁶.

Secondly, in a more recent compilation by Diamond and Morlino (2005), there is an attempt to offer methodologies for democracy assessments that could be applied to both "established" and transitional democracies, which are claimed to reflect the growing interest of the *Journal of Democracy* in the challenges confronting democratic regimes worldwide. There is also a declared commitment to promote the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in democratization research. As such, they propose to offer an analytic framework that is meant to apply to all the world's democracies. Furthermore, and in contrast to the previous volume, here there is an explicit recognition of the need for reforms to improve democratic quality even in "long-established" democracies, in order to achieve the type of legitimacy that marks consolidation and to attend to their own gathering problems of public dissatisfaction and even disillusionment (Diamond and Morlino 2005, ix). However, once again, no serious attention is paid to the external dimension. In contrast, a significant contribution to the volume

⁶For a discussion of the ascent to power of leftist governments or the so-called "pink tide" in Latin America see: Eduardo Silva 2009. *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Geraldine Lievesley and Steve Ludlam 2009. *Reclaiming Latin America: Experiments in Radical Social Democracy*. London: Zed Books; and Francisco Panizza 2009. *Contemporary Latin America: Development and Democracy beyond the Washington Consensus*. London: Zed Books.

is the skeptical perspective provided by Marc F. Plattner, who questions the very meaning of the quality of democracy put forward by most of the volume's contributors. He identifies two basic complications: 1) the composite nature of modern liberal democracy, consisting of often conflicting aspects; and 2) the fact that democracy must not only be a democratic form of government but also effectively govern (Plattner 2005, 79). In other words, Plattner's analysis points to the fact that democracy must be considered not only a goal but a form of governing that is able to deliver concrete benefits to all. Another major concern raised by Plattner is the increasing tension, at the international level, between human rights and security, which is intimately linked to the foreign policies of 'western' democracies, especially after September 11, 2001. His concern has to do with the need to consider a country's assessment, in terms of the quality of democracy, through the lenses of its performance with respect to civil rights at home and abroad, and he warns against the risk of losing sight of the complexity of the issue. This is a critique that can be extended to the inter/trans-national effects of some governments and polities on others.

Lastly, in *The Third Wave of Democratization in Latin America* (Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005), the editors set themselves to explore the circumstances that allow democracy to survive in hard times and inauspicious places, motivated by the perception that such regimes sometimes unexpectedly survive. However, they too focus on internal circumstances, with little attention to the role of global corrosive effects and any toxic external factors. For the most part, they uncritically subscribe to the ideas put forward by Lipset - that democracy is more likely to emerge in more developed countries- and Przeworski (1991) -that the building of democracies is a difficult enterprise in poor countries and less likely to endure. This, in spite of the fact that the region's reality has not confirmed other assumptions regarding the emergence of democracy, such as the requirement of either a strong bourgeoisie (Moore 1966) or a strong working class (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). When it comes to the analysis of external factors, the various authors reach a similar conclusion to that of the previous volumes', in the sense that they find serious limitations to the explanatory power of international variables, which according to them have rarely been the cause of regime change in the region

(Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005, 7). In what seems to us a very timid and marginal note, they admit that “*vulnerability may grow if the United States becomes less concerned with supporting democracy; its initial support for the April 2002 coup in Venezuela suggests that this is a realistic possibility, in the aftermath of Sep. 11, 2001*” (Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005, 8).

Admittedly, there have been isolated efforts to address some of the shortcomings identified in the field and discussed above. Among them, Whitehead (2002), in his *Democratization: theory and experience*, has explicitly pointed to the need to question some of the basic assumptions in the democratization literature and to engage in what he calls the generation of useful knowledge. In the same vein, Whitehead argues that even the hegemonic definition of democracy has to be regarded as provisional and subject to collective deliberation. Without mentioning any names, he further questions the impartiality of some of his colleagues and observers of southern democracies, who are sometimes interested parties themselves. Furthermore, and along the lines of our own position, he is also critical of the northern neglect for a more self-reflective analysis of democracy. Unlike other democratization scholars, Whitehead questions the democratic character of the United States before the end of slavery, but falls short of extending his critical analysis to the troubling segregationist realities of the twentieth century. Quite tellingly, and particularly relevant for our research agenda, is the recognition by Whitehead (2002, 43) that western powers would not accept the right of others to advance any judgments about their own democracies. Even more significant for advancing *toxic democracies* as a new category is Whitehead’s emphasis on the notion of the viability of democracy. Both concepts emphasize and facilitate the incorporation of external analytical factors, and the need for a serious geopolitical analysis of democratization. In Whitehead’s view, our comparative analyses cannot continue to be focused on the local, and our considerations must be applied to all democracies, North and South (Whitehead 2002, 364).

Unfortunately, not all democratization analyses offer the same kind of self-reflection. The overall narrative focuses on internal conditions in the Global South, and they tend to limit the analysis of external variables to the Cold War context and the more open military or

logistical interventions that occurred in this period, such as the well-known episodes in Central America and a few other cases where the intervention from the North halted the democratization processes generated from within. However, as we all know, a military coup is not the only means by which democracy may be eroded, but intervention has to do also with economic and strategic interests and policies. Thus, we contend that the democratization literature would be enriched by developing its analysis of the international level, as well as by paying closer attention to southern analyses and borrowing from other social sciences and the humanities, which have a lot to contribute and inform one another. Unfortunately, as we have seen above, a global historical analysis is often absent or at least not made explicit in study after study, in spite of the need to provide a serious account for the past and current inhospitable international climates for political regimes that go against the pre-established/defined expectations associated with liberal democracy. As in postcolonial political sociology (Bhambra 2010), for us, national borders do not shape the central analytic unit, nor do national political institutions constitute the preferential focus of investigation. Instead, the emphasis lies on all power relations, which involve actors of various natures (states, multilateral organizations, social movements) and on different levels (local, regional, national, global). Additionally, the temporal dimension (Schedler and Santiso 1998) must be more seriously incorporated into our analyses, being ready to come to terms with the fact that the longer the period considered the more diverse our conclusions will be and more elusive the concepts of democracy and democratization.

Interestingly enough, it is Leonardo Avritzer's - a Brazilian scholar - work on *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* (2002) that represents a refreshing view and an important contribution to a critical analysis of democratization theory and scholarship. In particular, his distinction between political public space (understood as the site for collective action) and political society (a form of organization of political competition among groups and state administration) is very useful for re-thinking political regime transitions in the region. Avritzer questions the relevance of the elite-masses dichotomy (which assumes a contradiction between popular sovereignty and complex administration and dominates democratic analysis in the Northern

hemisphere) for the analysis of other realities and late democratization experiences. He underlines the need to produce theory outside of the core of the West and, like us, questions the extent to which external forces might prevent the transformation of local democratic practices into institutional relations between social actors and political societies (Avritzer 2002, 8). Avritzer has argued that new social movements, which have proliferated throughout much of the region since the 1970s, are restructuring the public sphere in fundamental ways: by reformulating the way claims are made in public discourse in terms of nonnegotiable human rights⁷.

It is with the intention to contribute to critical analyses of democratization, like the ones put forward by Avritzer and Whitehead, that we argue that *toxic democracies*, as a new category, can help us in identifying and understanding the detrimental effects that some countries' foreign policies and ways to relate to others have on the transformations or "deformations" of those others' political realities. There are, of course, some challenges associated with any strategy of conceptual innovation and the proposal of new typologies for the definition of political regimes (See Collier and Levitsky 1997). But as argued before, the fact that the external dimension of political transformations has not been recognized as central in establishing the democratic character of both Northern and Southern regimes and societies calls for an analytical intervention that could contribute to remedy some of those shortcomings. This is especially important given that the tendency to deny or neglect the impact of direct and indirect pressures has been reinforced by the mounting and guarding of strict disciplinary borders, which enable and reinforce the analytical split between internal and external factors (i.e. political regimes and transitology analyses vis-à-vis international relations approaches). Ironically, and in spite of the still current force of the neo-liberal discourse in the Global North, which emphasizes the importance of global interconnectedness, there is no serious attempt to assume some responsibility for the weakening of democratic regimes as a result of Northern foreign policies and the international interconnectedness of

⁷For an illuminating analysis of public spheres in Latin American that builds on Avritzer's work see: Rafael De la Dehesa 2010. *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

polities and economies. In fact, just like modernization theory was the result of funding by northern governments - after WWII - to produce certain knowledge and a body of literature with a particular agenda, at the end of the Cold War transitology scholars seem to have – knowingly or not - reproduced certain power narratives associated with neo-liberal economics and politics.

Admittedly, the concept of toxic democracy has not been fully developed yet. However, some elements of the category can be outlined here. The toxicity of a regime/state/society has to do with the undemocratic interventionism on other regimes/states/societies. It has to do also with the little space left for the expression of other socio-political possibilities, and the actual actions taken by state representatives and political/economic elites to block and derail autochthonous and/or alternative democratic experiences and models at home – think McCarthyism - and abroad (e.g. Chile in 1973, Guatemala in 1954, Mexico in 1913, etc.)⁸. Toxicity is also associated with strong nationalist narratives and self-perceptions of exceptionalism. Conceptualized this way, we argue that the negative effects on others diminish the democratic quality of those societies and polities as a whole, and not just of governments and administrations. Thus, citizens and polities must be seen as co-responsible, accomplices, and/or enablers, given that they are the beneficiaries of a global set of conditions and actual undemocratic policies and practices (often associated with human rights violations and an unlawful material distribution of resources), regardless of whether they are the result of active support or simple neglect. As such, toxicity is also conceived as a central feature and a qualifier of the democratic character of polities and societies that tend to see themselves as superior forms of democracy. After all, democratic theory has traditionally emphasized the centrality of public space analysis in the definition of the democratic nature of Northern societies⁹. A key

⁸In the analysis of U.S. interventionism, especially during the Cold War period and under the so-called War on Terror, scholars and analysts have used the notion of a “state of exception” to justify its actions (See Giorgio Agamben 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: Chicago University Press). Agamben (2005) draws from the legal theory of Carl Schmitt - which is similar to a state of emergency - and refers to the sovereign’s ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the “public good.”

⁹As part of our larger research agenda, we engage in the discussion of the public space drawing from Nancy Fraser’s analysis of the public sphere in a transnational setting (Nancy Fraser 2007. “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, 4: 7–30)

question to be posed and answered is whether societies that exclude or discriminate against others (within and without) can be considered consolidated democracies.

For the Americas, it is evident that the case in point would be the United States of America, as it has played an interventionist role in the hemisphere for most of its recent - and not so recent - history. Our concern here, however, is not to discuss the well-documented contributions of different U.S. governments' to the falling of several democratically elected governments in the region, nor is it to engage in the debate about whether those interferences were the only or the determining factor. Our focus is on how to account for the undemocratic character of a democracy's behaviour. In light of this, one of our central challenges is to define toxic democracy as a type and not just as a unique case. Yet a *longue durée* historical and global analysis points to other cases as good candidates for toxic democracies, apart from the U.S. As some authors (Boli and Thomas 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998) rightly remind us, metropolitan democracies arose in tandem with colonial subjection. Thus, we could argue that some among them might be toxic too, because their consolidation and functioning has been associated with a long tradition of colonial and neo-colonial domination of others (politically, economically, and culturally).

Drawing from Collier and Levitsky's (1997) analysis, thinking of *toxic democracies* might be defined as an exercise in "precising" the definition of democracy, with the intention to change the way particular cases are classified. It could also be seen as a category that might allow some clarification (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 445) and in the process could help us in raising the standard for democracy. It is, without any doubt, *an attempt to unsettle the semantic field*, with the goal of bringing back into the definition of democracy attributes that scholars previously had explicitly or implicitly decided to exclude. It also represents an effort to draw attention to the misrepresentation of states/regimes/societies, which have traditionally defined themselves as fully democratic or consolidated. It is important to acknowledge that given that concepts are used as data containers, most of the literature emanating from the North has standardized and limited the usage of the term democracy on the basis of procedural definitions

(in the tradition of Joseph Schumpeter and Robert A. Dahl), partly due to the relative easiness of measuring variables associated with such definitional criteria. However, we must insist on questioning the validity of classifying countries based purely on the presence of some institutions, and must press on the need to look at the impact of concrete democracies on factors associated with democratization such as income distribution, human development, social justice, human rights, and international conflict¹⁰. It is not surprising, again, that Southern scholars Francisco Weffort and Guillermo O'Donnell, respectively a Brazilian and an Argentinian, have been the ones to argue – with a relatively small following – in favour of a definition of democracy that considers some level of social equality and the actual protection of certain basic rights of citizenship (and we would add, universal and nonnegotiable human rights) as key determinants of the democratic character of the state.

The fact is that most of the so-called consolidated democracies claim to stand in favour of democracy and human rights in countries in the Global South, while at the same time some among them support the practices of their own governments and trans-national corporations that either undermine democratic processes or are co-responsible in human rights violations of all kinds. For Latin America, as for other regions, northern practices associated with trade and the mining industry – which can be regarded as a kind of neocolonial exploitation and extraction of natural resources from the South – represent an ongoing challenge for the pursuit of their own democratization processes. The toxicity of some democracies is also determined by the official foreign policies of various governments and their negative effects on citizens' security. As stated above, good examples of these are the support for certain practices under the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism that several U.S. administrations have set up, pressuring other governments in the process and neglecting the impact of such policies on human rights, the actual economic and social performance, and democracy as a whole in some Latin American countries. Therefore, it is paramount to incorporate an analysis of

¹⁰As pointed out by Collier and Levitsky (1997), scholars differentiate what they view as the more specifically political features of the regime from characteristics of society and the economy, on the grounds that the latter are more appropriately analyzed as potential causes or consequences of democracy, rather than as features of democracy itself.

the responsibility of the U.S. and other Northern countries' electorates for their governments' and private sector actors' actions abroad, and the ways in which they benefit themselves from political and economic asymmetrical power relations. This will serve to question the democratic nature of those polities, apart from the actual responsibility or accountability of governments, public officials, and private actors. In summary, in an increasingly globalized context, international effects are especially patent and central for any serious analysis of regime transformations.

4 Concluding Remarks

As political scientists, we must be open to intellectual and analytical challenges and be willing to complicate the exercise of classifying political regimes. This might allow us to break with the linearity of democratization literature, such as the idea that national democracies effectively promote democracy globally. The latter, is often negated by an overt contradiction between the commitment to democracy within and the support of such processes abroad, putting "national interests" first. Thus, the need to actually pay closer attention to geopolitical inter and trans-national interests and dynamics. The tendency, however, has been to create reductive categories, versus some others that could be applied to both North and South. Notions such as the deterioration and consolidation of democracies are used very selectively, with some adjectives or qualifiers seldom used to define northern political regimes and polities. We propose then to incorporate the notion of toxicity to our taxonomic exercise, as a category that helps in qualifying widely considered democratic political regimes that have negative effects on others. This way, we can actually identify both *toxic democracies* and toxic "democrats."

One of our central concerns is the fact that indifference towards epistemology and self-reflection can - itself - be toxic. Thus, along the lines of a growing multiplicity of critical projects, we want to complicate the North-South divide as it has been thought by the mainstream of our discipline. By exposing and challenging the asymmetrical power relations of knowledge production in political science, our goal is to contribute to a fairer global epistemological and academic division of

labour. The politics of political science and toxic democracies attempt to be a step in this direction.

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