



The third margin of the river: International relations narratives and authoritarian violence in South America

Gabriel Pimenta*

Abstract: *The narratives that build the field of International Relations (IR) are, in their majority, unable to cope with possible factors of instability, them being made of empirical phenomena or other narratives. In the Democratic Peace research agenda and in regional studies centered on the states interaction, two of the main strands that more commonly cover South America inside IR, the need for regularities is responsible for the obnubilation of important – sometimes even pivotal – trends and processes. This work intends to explicit this incapacity by presenting a major silence in the mainstream studies of the area: the canvas of the supposed South American peace against the evidences brought by the studies on the Condor Operation, orchestrated during the convergence of authoritarian regimes in the region. This operation, which consisted on the coordinated exercise of violence by authoritarian states to contain a diffuse threat posed by elements classified as aliens, retained symbolic and factual elements of the broad definitions of a war, but it is not considered as one. Using the image of the third margin of the river – a place that supposedly does not exist, until it is transformed in one – this work presents a critical reading of South American history and of those IR narratives concerning it.*

Keywords: South America, Authoritarianism, Democratic Peace, Critical Theory, Condor Operation

Introduction

The Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa, in his short story “The third margin of the river”¹, tells the tale of a man that decides to live on a small canoe. Leaving his family behind, he leaves to never set foot on land again, and his presence as a floating point in the middle of the wide river becomes a present absence. Narrated by the son of the man in the canoe, the story points toward an inexplicable redemption of a man that retires himself from the world, but it is after all open-ended as almost all works of good literature are. The point to be stressed is, after this obviously flawed resume, that crossings are not necessarily made from one point to the other, but also to places that

*Gabriel Pimenta, MSc Candidate in International Relations at the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia.
Contact: pimenta.gabriel@gmail.com

¹ “A terceira margem do rio” in its original title.

do not seem like destinations, unless they become it. This is the proposal of this work, at least at the symbolic realm: to present the possibility of a critical reading of South American politics.

A starting point to the proposed approach is the diagnosis of virtual absence of studies that at the same time focus on South American political issues and admits the limits of conventional International Relations (IR) analysis. The critical tradition in the region centers itself around epistemologies, methods, and themes that gravitate around areas of sociology and anthropology, and often fail to address the centrality of autonomous political happenings (Bialakoski *et al*, 2012). Furthermore, as identified by Taylor (2012), the pervasive influence of USA-centered perspectives on the field of IR as a whole is a narrowing factor is responsible for framing studies of South American topics in the broader field of regional studies and, consequently, molding those studies to adjust themselves to preconceived concepts and methods. Those limitations justify the need for a different approach, one that distance itself from the mainstream works usually crafted to understand the region.

Given the intentions, the work intends to build this critical reading through the exposition the limitations of two branches more frequently linked to South America in IR. The first is the democratic peace research agenda, a theoretical branch associated with the liberal tradition of thought. Its ties with the region are primarily due to the narrative of peaceful relations, supported by the apparent self-evident absence of major conflicts – in the second half of the XXth century, fights between states were sparse and of low intensity. The second is the South America area studies, whose academic selections and approaches consist primarily in historiographic and foreign-policy analysis studies. As the development of the work will show, both areas are designed to exclude certain phenomena that may harm their internal logic, in order to acquiesce to epistemological parameters of the so called ‘normal science’.

The evidence of the aforementioned limitations comes in the work through the presentation of the Condor Operation. The widespread use of transnational violence by authoritarian states defies the narratives of peaceful relations in South America, and, simultaneously, subverts the expectations of the democratic peace agenda regarding the war-prone nature of authoritarian regimes. In order to insert the operation in the political studies of the region, it’s necessary to join the debate on the nature of the political provided by critical theory and, at the same time, to pay attention to non-formal arrangements. An assessment of the incapacity of the IR field to comprehend important issues regarding authoritarianism and the use of violence by sovereign subjects closes the work, and the critical reading of uncovered subjects is expected to broaden the debate and helping in the conversion of this non-space of political studies into one.

A two-pronged International Relations approach on South America: the democratic peace research agenda and the narratives of peaceful tradition

In order to initiate the readings of the tropes connected to South America, it is necessary to grasp a fuller understanding of the mainstream narratives of International Relations. Considering the scope and ambition of this work, an exhaustive review of all theoretical trends framed in what could be

described as the mainstream is not possible (Lapid, 1989; Katzenstein, Keohane, Krasner, 1998). The focus will remain on the democratic peace research agenda, of liberal roots, given the commonly made association between the region and the absence of wars.

The literature on the so called democratic peace research agenda has been growing in the last decades. Loosely associated with the foundational moment of the International Relations field and its normative task of eliminating wars, the trend seeks to explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of international conflicts as the outcome of the interaction of states with different or equal internal political regimes. Deriving from the philosophical endeavor of Kant, the trend employs currently sophisticated formal models whose objective is to refine explanations, vivisectioning governmental institutions and their insertion in democratic or authoritarian regimes.

The current trend of democratic peace research agenda started with the seminar Michael Doyle article "Kant, liberal legacies and foreign affairs", published in two parts in 1983. The article's main premise rested in the statement that "Even though liberal states have become involved in numerous wars with nonliberal states, constitutionally secure liberal states have yet to engage in war with one another" (Doyle, 1983, p. 213). Departing from moral justifications on the benefits of democracy, the author identified democratic states as ontologically different from autocracies, a division whose result was that democratic states had peaceful bias, at least among themselves. This assumption is relativized by Chan, according to whom "Democracies are less likely than non-democracies to become involved in crises. Once in a crisis, however, violence-even against other democracies-is not precluded, although democracies do tend to limit the severity of violence against their fellow democracies" (Chan, 1997, p. 63)

The growth of the research agenda provided many insights on how internal institutions could generate or avoid conflict. The dyadic nature of the studies (democracies do not fight democracies) was complemented by monadic studies on how the shape of institutions and the processes of decision-making varied among democracies and autocracies, and how this could make them war-prone. Ishiama *et alii* (2008), for instance, poses the perspective that differences among authoritarian forms matter, and that those autocracies with more stable and efficient checks on executive authority – a strong single-party, for instance – tend to avoid war with more frequency than other non-democratic states. In the same trend, Lai and Slater (2006) study the authoritarian propensity in institutions, reaching the result that the lack of safety in executive command posts, provided by non-democratic rule, enhance the possibilities of radicalization and, consequently, conflict.

Peceny and Butler start from the selectorate perspective to observe that regimes with larger winning coalitions tend to be on the same side of international disputes. This triggers a mild critique of a part of the literature of the democratic peace research agenda. "These results reinforce the importance of moving beyond the simple democracy/autocracy dichotomy that has driven most research on the relationship between political regimes and international conflict." (Peceny; Butler, 2004, p. 580). On the opposite side regarding the level of analysis, but also not questioning core assumptions of the research agenda is Harrison (2010), who proposes a systemic approach to the study of democratic behavior.

The historiographical trend that supports that the peaceful nature of the relations among South American countries during the second half of the twentieth century is relatively uncontested. Episodes of transnational use of military force are restricted to isolated episodes, in which formal declarations of war were not issued and levels of mobilization, as defined by strategic studies, were low (Kacowicz, 1998; Hobsbawm, 1994).

In 1978, a dispute between Argentina and Chile over the sovereignty of a handful of islands and the subsequent control of the Beagle Channel witnessed some escalation, and an aborted attempt of seizing the territory by Argentina. Direct negotiations and the brokering of a deal by Pope John Paul II conducted the affair to a pacific settlement (Gertner, 2014). In April of 1982, the military junta that ruled Argentina ordered the military occupation of the South Georgia and the Falklands Islands, both archipelagoes under British sovereignty. Despite its inconsistency regarding statutes of the international law, the seizing of the islands happened effortlessly at the beginning, without strong resistance from the local population or reported cases of serious abuses from the Argentine troops. The quick response of the British government came through multilateral action towards the condemnation of the Argentine acts and military response, of relatively large scale, but restricted to the surroundings of the islands. The reestablishment of the *status quo ante* and the institutionalization of the dispute were political result of the conflict, which also caused the death of approximately 900 persons. (Luna, 2006). The war over the Falklands, small scale in comparison with the majority of international conflicts, was the major South American war of the second half of the twentieth century, and this fact, aligned with the observation that it happened between a local country and an external power is often evoked to underline the stability of the region concerning security matters.

In 1981, Peru and Ecuador fought over a frontier settlement. The episode, known as the Paquisha War, lasted 10 days and once again exposed the tension that gave the major outlines to border relations between the two countries since their formation, in the context of the Spanish America independences. The conflict happened despite the 1942 Rio Protocol that gave an end to the Peruvian-Ecuadorian war waged between 1938 and 1942, and ended with the reestablishment of the status quo ante- the retreat of both parties of the demilitarized area on the Condor mountain range (Mora, 1991). The last conflict in the region was once again the result of Peruvian-Ecuadorian border rivalry. The Cenepa War took place during the two first months of 1995, resulted in less than a hundred officially recognized deaths and the reinforced the border design decided back in 1942. Sovereignty over the disputed area was granted to Peru through the cease-fire agreement consubstantiated by the Brasilia Act, brokered by Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and the United States (Mora, 1994; Lima; Hirst, 2006).

A historical development that contributes to frame South America as a peaceful region, somewhat contradictorily with the predictions of balance of power and neorealist perspectives, is the relationship between Brazil and Argentina. During the second half of the XXth century, the geopolitical rivalry between both countries was not completely erased by hemispheric solidarity that oriented the international insertion of the majority of the American countries under the Cold War logic. The relationship between Brazil and Argentina, during the period, was marked by

reverse paths regarding the possession of economic and military capabilities - Brazil ascended to the post of regional power, taking Argentina's place - and strategic issues that could trigger a military conflict, as the dispute over strategic usage of the hydric resources of the Plata basin and the development of nuclear and missile technology (Spektor, 2002; Candeas, 2005). The rapprochement between the two countries during the 1980s decade, followed by the construction of a regional integration framework consubstantiated in the MERCOSUR in the subsequent years granted the virtual elimination of the conflict risk - a highlight of such a trend are the security cooperation measures taken in sensitive areas, as the bilateral regime for nuclear research and development (Candeas, 2005).

Area studies literature, as well as security and foreign policy analysis works help to sustain the narrative on the peaceful conduction of inter-state relations on South America. In the prestigious Cambridge History of Latin America encyclopedia, in the entry dedicated to state organization in Latin America, Laurence Whitehead writes that

“Indeed, in the twentieth century they [the Latin American countries] had had far less exposure to international warfare than other states in the world. There were no veterans of foreign wars; there were not even many serious rivalries over territory (certainly not over inhabited territory); the Chaco War (1932 - 35) constituting a major but isolated exception to this rule.” (Whitehead, 1994, p. 4)

Lima and Hirst, analyzing Brazilian foreign policy and presence in relation to its neighbors, sustain that South America is fundamentally pacific, further concluding that “Brazil's presence in South America has represented for the most part a factor of stability and peace that has contributed to the region's profile as a zone of relative peace” (Lima; Hirst, 2006, p. 38). The same goes with Meunier and Medeiros, in their analysis of public discourse by regional leaders. Accordingly to the pair, South American discourse-based identities present special characteristics, whose main tract is to associate themselves to social, democratic, and peaceful values. The conclusion is reached after identifying the high frequency of those terms in public announcements related to security (Meunier; Medeiros, 2013)

Fuccile and Rezende, from the standpoint of the Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory, assert that the South American RSC depends on Brazil to keep its stability, consisting in a security regime, but not a security community - the latter definition, by Weaver and Buzan, needs an interwoven network of security decision stances, added to peace-reinforcing measures. Albeit denying the highest ranking of peacefulness foreseen by the theory, the authors therefore advance the perspective of a peacefully stable South America, even though their original stance of analysis is different from the FPA frame presented before (Fuccile; Rezende, 2013; Buzan; Weaver, 2003). Resende-Santos, through a similar security studies prism, goes further in presenting his diagnosis of regional dynamics:

“The Argentine-Brazilian rapprochement is puzzling also because it occurred under conditions-such as military rule-that are usually assumed to militate against international peace and cooperation. (...) Cooperation emerged at a time when both regimes still adhered to the Doctrine of National Security and Development, prevalent among South American armed forces since the 1950s. By the 1970s, moreover, the doctrine had expanded to include a “diplomacy of national security” based on geopolitical competition, mercantilist practices, and Realpolitik thinking.” (Resende-Santos, 2002, p. 91)

In a refined version of the realist framework, also based on a regional approach, the focus on the stable and peaceful course of relations is kept. Flesmes and Wehner, seeking for an explanation based on polarity and its possible historical conditionings, find a unipolar structure that oscillates between non-aggressive competition and cooperation. South America is defined as “a unipolar zone of peace without major aggressive rivalries between Brazil and the secondary powers.” (Flesmes; Wehner, 2012, p. 24)

Approaches that distance themselves from realist positions, or from the direct studies of the security theme, converge to the narrative of South America as an inherently peaceful region. Merke, from the English School standpoint, argues that material and ideational factors sustain the region’s considerable absence of conflicts. According to his work, a somewhat even balance of military and economic capabilities is enhanced by norms.

“*Concertación* is a key practice that forms the core of diplomatic culture in Latin America. It can be defined as a loose form of (regional) international organization based on consensus-seeking and peaceful settlement of disputes. Its normative instrumental follows predictable lines, namely *utipossidetis*, non-aggression, non-intervention and international arbitration.” (Merke, 2014, p. 185)

Such an institutional view is also present in Dabene’s work. Presenting a study of integration phenomena in Latin America as a whole, he describes the continent as relatively pacified. This condition is surprising, given the fact that a certain degree of hostility is expected to pull the trigger of integration initiatives (Dabène, 2009).

South America’s recent past poses a challenge to the democratic peace research agenda. Despite the presence of many factors pointed as causes of conflict – co-existence of authoritarian and democratic countries, military regimes, shaky institutions, and transitions to democracy amidst unstable scenarios – the region presents a relatively long trajectory of peace. The contradiction that results from contrasting empirical findings to theoretical developments, however, cannot be solved through refinement and continuation of experiments, but only be highlighted as the discursive mechanisms operating under both throngs are revealed.

The third margin of the river

The narrative of peace among autocracies constructed around South American history during the second half of the twentieth century poses two different challenges, in different depths, to mainstream International Relations studies. Superficially, the lack of conflict in the region presents a logical contradiction regarding what the democratic peace research agenda predicts. Albeit configuring a weak negative test, to remain in the realm of normal science concepts, the narrative of peaceful relations in the region poses a puzzle to the assumption that non-democratic regimes tend to be war-prone. But this is not the main observation that can be drawn from this analysis.

Both the democratic peace research agenda and the conventional historiography of International Relations adopt a discourse of separation between two kinds of politics, or else, between politics and non-politics. Even when dealing with levels of analysis other than the systemic, international, and national conflicts are framed as two separate, essentially different phenomena. Violence and discourses on violence are used as the means to perpetuate difference among sovereign subjects and to keep sovereigns and avatars of sovereign power on top of the national arrangements of power (Der Derian, 2009). The politics of frontiers defined in territorial terms seeks to explain security and the functioning of borders that divide supposedly ordered communities from the realm of danger. The space outside the space, constructed as dangerous, is also the broader definition of humankind – dehumanized by the denial of politics and prevalence of conflict. Therefore, discourses, on a definition that encompasses different forms of expression and includes academic narratives, help to sustain the divide between images of order and temporal progress (inside) and the lack of it (outside) (Walker, 1993).

The widely accepted narrative of South American peace during the second half of the twentieth century is an attempt, by the International Relations discipline, to erase or silence the widespread use of sovereign violence against nationals and foreigners in an indiscriminate fashion. Under the justification of the need to protect national security against ideological movements – diffusely defined as the International Communist Movement (ICM) – State forces of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay imprisoned, kidnapped, and killed individuals who were considered possible security threats. The coordination of such acts, granted by a loosely structured network of contacts and intelligence sharing, became to be known as Condor Operation.

Following a coup d'état that ousted Salvador Allende from the Chilean presidency in 1973, some efforts of knowledge exchange between military personnel on the control of subversive actions took place between Brazil and Chile. The new Chilean government invited members of the Brazilian repression organs, as the DOI-CODI², to teach officers on techniques of interrogation and anti-subversion tactics. In 1974, a joint action between Argentinian and Chilean military culminated in the assassination of the Chilean general Carlos Pratz Gonzáles and his wife, both seen as threats

² Destacamento de Operações de Informações – Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna

to the new regime in Buenos Aires. In the same year, 119 Chilean members of a leftist revolutionary movement disappeared in a joint action by the DINA³ and the Triple-A⁴ (Marmontel, 2014).

The initiative of officially linking military personnel with the aim to coordinate efforts against movements defined as subversive came from officers from DINA. Bolstered by the efforts of the right-winged Pinochet dictatorship, the contacts between South American officers began in a meeting held in Santiago, on October of 1975, and from the very beginning relied on material support of the State Department of the United States, which provided free communication channels afterwards named as CondorTel (National Security Archive, 2001). Other meetings were held in emergency situations, and special groups of skilled military members were assembled to act abroad, each time a possible subversive cell was identified (Marmontel, 2014; Barcelos, 2014). There is no evidence of an official termination of the Condor Operation, but recent evidence points that a surveillance activity held by the Brazilian army intelligence unit, followed by the kidnapping of the Argentinian Norberto Habbeger, member of the Montonero guerrilla army, in 1978, is the last proven action under the Condor Operation network. (Barcelos, 2014)

The actions were not confined to the geographical limits of the executing countries, and acts of assassination and kidnapping, committed by governmental or para-governmental forces, took place in other South American countries, such as Venezuela, as well as in the United States, France, and Italy. The highlight of this trend came in 1976, when the former Foreign Affairs minister of Chile, Orlando Letelier, was killed in Washington D.C. after the explosion of a bomb placed in his car by DINA officers with help by American operatives (Marmontel, 2014). From 1966 to 1979, approximately 300 people were assassinated or disappeared after operations that received support from the military regimes of the region⁵ (Paredes, 2004; Cuya, 1993; Mariano, 2006). The Condor Operation was simultaneously defined and definitive to the foreign policy – as usually defined – of the states involved, given that it was of pivotal importance in the elimination of actions deemed to be foreign threats and was executed many times through the official channels of the diplomatic bureaucracy – embassies and consulates, whose functions are to support nationals abroad, were also basis for logistical support and data generation to the coercive acts (Penna Filho, 2009).

The acts of violence perpetrated under the Condor Operation can be described, therefore, as the use of violence by sovereign power against foreign forces in order to assure national security. Under this prism, it seems unreasonable not to frame such acts as a war. The erasure of this war from the International Relations historiography and analytical approaches reflect the inability of the field to cope with phenomena that should be in its interest, but aren't embedded in the concepts that constitute the core of the field's ontological security. The deliberate use of violence by state forces, may it be against its own citizens as well as against foreigners, is the central trace of the political actions and the ruler that usually measures derived concepts as the

³ Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, Chilean intelligence organ

⁴ A paramilitary Argentinean group with close ties with the national army

⁵ It is necessary to point to the fact that this number does not includes assassinations and disappearances whose link with foreign operations did not happen or is not clear.

authoritarian/democratic dyad, legitimacy and efficacy. It is therefore symptomatic that researches about the Condor Operation, like the one presented in this work, must base their findings on information gathered to studies in areas as History and Law, especially inside the sub-area of Transitional Justice, and not from International Relations. The virtual non-existence of the narrative around Condor Operation in the International Relations field thus is an example of the incapacity of the discipline to understand politics as a whole – an example of the deleterious academic segmentation whose product is to blind itself in relation to events that should be central in its initiative to understand the world (Wallerstein, 1996).

The inability in framing Condor Operation reflects not only as an inept development during the disciplinary path, but as a deliberate movement, whose objective is to sustain sovereign arrangements. If the absence of this violent narrative in mainstream channels helps to condemn it to the oblivion, an important path to criticism on the acts of the sovereign powers is shadowed. A narrative of the lack of official violence helps to sustain the sovereign arrangements that constitute the basis of International Relations historical and analytical ground. Consequently, the narrative, highlighted by the absence of competing narratives, reinforces the International Relations field itself. To divide foreign policy acts in different categories and to select one of them to build the official narrative grants International Relations the right to avoid the implications of moral judgments towards certain phenomena, such as authoritarianism. It also allows the field to ignore fundamental debates, such as legitimacy, a trait of political life that is supposed to matter exclusively in the national realm, not on the realm outside the organized state structures that constitute its focus.

Final remarks

The field of International Relations, populated by a myriad of approaches and facts, cannot hide that its structure is built on narratives – and cannot also hide the inconsistencies that leak through the narrative cracks. The absence of one of the major acts of coordinated violence by sovereign powers in recent history from the narratives that compose International Relations recent historiography and analytical entrepreneurship highlights the need for a new approach regarding the authoritarianism and use of violence. As the man in Guimarães Rosa's story, the field risks going from one place to nowhere, unless its builders and practitioners are able to deal with facts that put traditional narratives into risk, but help to expand the capacity of comprehending. The journey towards integrating approaches and, consequently, being able to understand cases not included in the International Relations canon is not from one margin of the river to the other, but a crossing towards the mythical third margin – a place built on fluidity.

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