The Politics of Political Science and Toxic Democracies

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I - Introductory Notes

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 the 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.

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 more nuanced understanding of the international and transnational dimensions of political regimes and their transformations in the so called “Global South.” This two-step exercise sheds light on the limitations of the conceptual toolbox prevalent in the democratization literature today. In our project, we address some of the concrete ways in which past and current asymmetrical expressions of power have shaped political science, affecting both its institutional dynamics and its analytical discourse. To that end, we proceed to briefly historicize the intellectual division of labour of the social sciences, which emerged in the nineteenth century and increased throughout the twentieth and the current centuries. We intend to pursue the investigation of what we call the politics of political science, by tracing back the unbalanced (international) power relations that preceded and accompanied the institutionalization of our discipline, its recent process of specialization and the growing orientation towards problem-solving. Our perception is that the research on the worldwide processes of democratization or transitology, as a sub-field within political science, is largely dominated by a narrative that tends to reproduce international asymmetries, essentializing political regimes, cultures and countries. As a consequence, southern institutions are often seen as late and defective copies of the corresponding structures that are argued to be observed in Western Europe and English North America. These “others” are then conceptualized as imperfect democracies, some ruled by failed states and often characterized by low-intensity citizenship. This, we argue, speaks to the dominating nature of northern polities and their respective mainstream narratives. Furthermore, we are particularly concerned with the kind of “endogenism” that characterizes transition research and political regimes classification literature. As such, it 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 significantly explains the neglect of a serious analysis of “external” variables and the asymmetrical international power relations mentioned above, resulting in the imposition of universalistic parameters and a kind of epistemological paternalism that erases the dark side of some self-assumed “consolidated” northern democracies. The complex international relationality of political processes is thus not acknowledged. Therefore, we contend that the temporal and geographical location of the making of political science has had implications in terms of the political role and discourse that this discipline has developed. In
other words, mainstream political science has seen and still sees politics and the world through “Europeanized and North-Americanized lenses.”

In an attempt to address some of those perceived shortcomings in the political science literature, we have put forward the category **toxic democracies**, to refer to some of those northern political regimes, whose respective foreign policies have had and continue to have significant “negative” effects on the transformations (or “deformations”) of political realities in the Global South. After all, if we are to believe that democracy is truly regarded as a universal or widely shared value and goal, it is only natural to pay closer attention to the impact that the foreign policies of northern democracies have on other political regimes. Going even further, we also would like to suggest that to really grasp the democratic quality of a polity we need to take into account the inter-national dimensions of political transformations: if a liberal democracy is involved in the (re)production of authoritarian logics elsewhere, then its “democratic” condition or character should be questioned or at least “relativized.” Thus, if the object of analysis is the potential spread of democracy at a global scale, then every polity and/or political regime should be classified in terms of its contributions towards this aim. Ultimately, in an increasingly “globalized” context, democracy cannot be thought or measured only “internally” anymore. In summary, we will be arguing that the transnational “toxicity” of all polities/political regimes should be incorporated into the political analyses and taxonomic exercises of regime transformations so prevalent today.

In this paper, we provide a brief analysis of some of the more representative works produced in English on democratization, in order to showcase some of the shortcomings of this literature. 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. Such analyses tend to treat “others” as defective regimes or even failed states, and characterized by low-intensity citizenship. As such, the endogenism of transition research or “transitology” reflects the limitations of discipline categories. This 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. Thus, we argue that a new category, namely **toxic democracies**, is required in order to define the detrimental effects that their respective foreign policies have on the transformations or “deformations” of other political realities.

**II - The Politics of Political Science: Asymmetrical Power Relations and the Institutionalization of the Discipline**

As political scientists, it is only natural to think of the emergence of the social sciences as disciplines, and the subsequent intellectual division of labour that followed, as intimately tied to the social power structures within which they were born. In fact, as we will briefly discuss below, it is possible to see how historical and current expressions of power have shaped and defined the research agendas and the institutional structures behind the manufacturing of the most dominant disciplinary conceptual tools. Similarly, the separation of social sciences into disciplines and sub-disciplines has responded to power dynamics that should not be ignored, especially if there is a genuine epistemological motivation to understand the reality behind and around our disciplines. In Wallerstein’s (2006) view, for example, we must pay closer attention to such dynamics, if in fact as social scientists we want to make any claims of universality at all.
Thus, it is essential to make visible the asymmetrical power relations that preceded (and often continue to define) the institutionalization of political science, in an effort to shed light on the factors behind the process of specialization and the growing orientation towards problem solving. Ultimately, our aim is to contribute to a disciplinary self-reflection exercise, similar to what has been the case with critical sociological analyses (Gutiérrez, Boatca and Costa 2010; Bhambra 2010), by questioning whether the experiences and claims of non-American/European ‘others’ have been rendered invisible within the dominant narratives and analytical frameworks of political science. As such, one of the core concerns behind our query lies at the heart of the neglect within the discipline to problematize power relations, and the impact that these have in the selection or manufacturing of the conceptual tools that have been used for the analysis of political regimes worldwide. Thus, we argue that not unlike other social sciences disciplines, the very same history of political science responds to, and tends to perpetuate, some power dynamics, which in turn prevents it from engaging in self-reflection. Paradoxically, our discipline, which analyses power and collective affairs, seems to be among the least interested in the effects of its own discourse, body of knowledge, and intellectual and institutional practices on the very same object of its study. We find this absence of a systematic critical self-reflection quite problematic. Thus, we argue that an engagement with relations of power and their manifestations within the discipline may help to productively problematize some of its frequently biased approaches to specific Latin American realities, as well as those of the Global South more generally.

Our conceptual point of departure is that any knowledge is embedded in the social context in which it is produced. This has implications in terms of the relationship between social disciplines and the realities they study. For its part, the neo-positivist notions of objectivity and neutrality seem to be ineffective to grasp the specificity of knowledge production around social and political life. Thus, without elaborating much on the issue (it is not needed since so many scholars of other disciplines have addressed it), we would like at least to point to the enlightening contribution that Michel Foucault’s oeuvre represents in this regard. As is well known, Foucault’s axe of reflection was precisely the relation between discourse, knowledge and power. Truth in his analysis becomes a political construction and a space of contestation. In other words, there is no “truth” outside power relations. Although many scholars have followed and reworked his perspective, we strongly believe that political scientists should be the first in reflecting on these issues, opening the question of how our practices are related to structures of power in different ways. This, we regard as necessary, not due to a defensive protection of disciplinary boundaries or academic market niche assignations, but because of our responsibility as cultists of political science and as carriers of a deep knowledge and familiarity with its literatures, logics and dynamics. As political scientists ourselves, and interested in the concrete realities of Latin America, we will not remain in the abstract realm of “knowledge and power” theorizing. Our project’s aim is to base our argumentations on very concrete country examples and global power dynamics, both within and without the discipline. Thus, we highlight our condition of political scientists because this implies an “interior positionality” regarding what is being criticized – this is a self-critique. In the pursuit of these endeavors, we are interested in addressing some of the concrete ways in which past and current asymmetrical expressions of power have shaped political science, and affected both its institutional dynamics and its analytical discourse. Hence, we are interested in historicizing the intellectual division of labour of the social sciences, and in doing so we draw from previous efforts in that regard. This exercise is paramount, given that, as effectively recounted by Wallerstein (1991), the history of political
science as a discipline is inextricably linked to the most enduring (and often misleading) legacies of nineteenth-century social sciences – namely, the division of social analysis into three arenas or logics; the economic, the political, and the socio-cultural. As convincingly argued by Wallerstein (1991), the social sciences, as they came to be defined, consisted in the “empirical study of the social world with the intention of understanding “normal change” and thereby being able to affect it.” (18) Moreover, from this moment on, most of social sciences’ reflections were not the product of solitary social thinkers. In contrast to past contributions to social thought and other reflections on reality, they came to represent the creation of a collective body of persons within specific structures to achieve specific ends. As a consequence of these structural transformations, social research has increasingly involved a major social investment. Therefore, as one of the other major long-lasting legacies of the nineteenth century, we have witnessed the redefinition of the university as a bureaucratized institution. In its new configuration, it also became a site for structuring knowledge and reinvigorating a new kind of scientific universalism that claimed to set moral and ideological values outside of its concerns. In this context, and as argued by Wallerstein, the ongoing tension between a “scientistic” camp versus a humanistic camp originated. As a result, the social sciences as a whole found themselves in an ambiguous situation, facing an increasing pressure to favour empirical research as part of their own practices. Given these circumstances, disciplines and sub-disciplines were defined as claims to turf, where prestige turned out to be increasingly linked to the allocation of resources and institutional positions of power.

At an ideological level, it is particularly relevant for our historical recount to remember that the mainstream of the nineteenth century was characterized by the idea that, somehow, only Europe or the dominant Global North had effectively progressed and reached the state of “modernity.” According to this logic, it then followed that “others” were more often than not regarded as frozen in their trajectories and somehow incapable of transforming themselves without some kind of intervention from outside. Thus the birth of political science as a discipline, which was part of these historical and ideological developments, was linked to a very particular interpretation of world reality, which inevitably determined its own knowledge productions. This is not to say that critical thinking was banned or completely absent. But it is necessary to be aware of the historical and structural links of our disciplines with power, and the institutional and ideational challenges confronted by most scholars in being able to remain independent. Following Wallerstein’s historical recount into the twentieth century, it is clear that 1945 marked a significant shift, since a tarnished Eurocentrism and the spread of anticolonial revolutions opened up some significant space for questioning the prevalent bodies of knowledge. Also, the second half of the new century was characterized by the emergence of a more organized civil society and the increasing centrality of the human rights discourse (Moyn 2010). There also was a hegemonic shift from Europe to the United States as the center of power. In this context, first Anouar Abdel-Malek’s “Orientalism in crisis” (1963) and then Edward Said’s “Orientalism” (1979) questioned western conceptualizations of the “Orient” (as an object of study) as reflecting an essentialist perspective. Said’s work, in particular, defined orientalism as a mode of knowledge and interpretation of the reality of the non-western zones of the modern world. Their work, together with other productions of critical knowledge, such as cultural studies, made evident and challenged the essentialist particularism of Orientalism and the type of scientific universalism that had become so dominant in the academic milieu. As an alternative to such reductionist views, Wallerstein (2006), for example, has more recently proposed a new universal universalism that refuses essentialist characterizations of social reality. For his part,
Dussel’s (1995) notion of trans-modernity has also offered an alternative as the potential universality of all cultural elements representing the excluded exteriority. Admittedly, there has been an increasing recognition that some of those dominant views and disciplinary constraints are wearing thin. Yet there is also an ongoing resistance to relax the inter/cross-disciplinary and geographical boundaries among disciplines and sub-disciplines in the social sciences and a lack of serious efforts to historicize our intellectual analysis as political scientists. However, it has become clearer that we cannot continue to do without an explicit recognition that our knowledge frameworks are often a causal (although not the only or the most important) factor in the construction of unequal social and political institutions. In the same line of thought, it is more than clear than there is a tension within contemporary political science between its pretension of “universality” and pluralism and its condition of being mainly a product of North America which has been institutionalized during the Cold War. The shift of global hegemony and the rise of the United States have had an impact at academia in general (both institutionally and theoretically) and political science is a clear example of this process.

At this point, it is important to re-state the purpose of our inquiry as a contribution to the self-reflection we want to see fostered. On the one hand, our investigation centres on the politics of political science and the challenges confronted in its aspirations to become a truly global discipline. On the other, we want to build on the existing literature on democratization and add toxic democracies as a new category that can shed light on the very nature of the so-called consolidated democracies and their polities, by looking at their effects on other socio-political realities. Our commitment to this endeavor is based on the strong conviction that a rigorous social discipline that aspires to understanding must subject itself to revision and self-reflection. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1973) used to suggest, epistemological reflections may help to refine our analysis of social reality (that is, they have a “technical function”). Although political science has been progressing in this regard, in our view it needs more of a self-reflective approach that incorporates “power” as a dimension of analysis. Otherwise, other colleagues (especially non-political scientists) will do it for us and something will be missed in the process. As such, the politics of political science and toxic democracies are our contribution in this regard. The latter is intended to perform an intervention at the core of the former, in order to show what mainstream political science (given its own “politics”) has tended to neglect, and it also represents an analytical contribution to democratization as a field of research. Along these lines, we argue that Latin America, as a whole, has long been a rich site of production of knowledge. Yet it has often been imagined as a mere recipient of “northern” social theories. By challenging the coloniality of knowledge production in political science today, it is our goal to contribute to a fairer global epistemological and academic division of labour. Ultimately, we think that indifference towards both epistemology and the contributions of other disciplines to our own analyses may itself be toxic. Our hope is that the politics of political science can make more explicit the fact that the discipline not only “studies” power but it embodies power relations itself; or put another way, the forms of studying politics are themselves shaped by politics. This does not imply a disqualification of our discipline, quite the opposite. In fact, we are convinced that epistemological self-reflection in “Foucauldian” terms –without much attachment to the specific vocabulary of the French author– may help us to stay aware of these complexities, consequently strengthening our analytical performances.
III - Critical Reflections on some Institutional and Analytical Challenges

i - Institutional Disciplinary Constraints

In this section, I will limit myself to simply mention some of the concrete cases of institutional disciplinary constraints that we intend to further analyze as part of our larger project of self-reflection. Their relevance lies in the fact that they represent significant examples of the challenges faced in the discipline’s future development, and for the furthering of potential contributions to our deeper understandings of diverse sociopolitical realities worldwide.

As discussed above, knowledge frameworks are a causal factor 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 scientistic dominance in political science, which has been expressed through a quantitative and mathematical methodological “obsession.” One of their central critiques is that such dominance breeds academic isolation and poor quality in scholarship (Schram and Caterino 2006). As important as the Perestroika movement might be, it will take longer to tell whether it will have any substantial and long-lasting impact on the discipline and its institutional realities. Plus it has been limited to the questioning of the discipline within U.S. boundaries. 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. For instance, 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 sciences 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: 310-312).

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 so 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 American 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”, it is clear that 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. Latin America is the home of many critical academic projects from within and without our discipline.

**ii – Analytical Shortcomings within the Discipline**

I will proceed to show how some fundamental or sometimes even considered as foundational texts of mainstream political science have tended to romanticize U.S. democracy, regarding others as faulty political regimes. In doing so, some main figures of our discipline have been forced to neglect simple facts such as racial 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 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 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 liberal 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 developed.

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 democracy. 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 “ Democracies and Unstable 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 in many Latin American countries this right had been already achieved). And the explanation offered by Lipset in classification does not acknowledge 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 US 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 South 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 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 System, the impact of the Cuban revolution, the reaction against US “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 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).” (Ibid: 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?

Democratic beliefs are a fundamental support for democracies. And 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 (…)”. 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 citizenship to the workers in the early or mid-nineteenth century.” (Ibid: 93) This narrative
entirely ignores gender and race: while in Uruguay universal suffrage (including feminine 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 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.” (Ibid: 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**

This section develops a critical review of 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 engagement gives rise to social capital which is a property of groups and even nations that facilitates both effective government and economic development (Harris and Renzio 1997; Laitin 1995; Portes 1998; Putnam 1993; Putzel 1997; Tarrow 1996). 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 of 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 in how the relationship Global North/Global South should (not) be thought. In this regard, we find it 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. In two words, 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 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 (2009)’s 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). (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).

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 birds watching societies. 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 in 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 “being 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.

Two more quick points: 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? 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. However, and more importantly, Putnam does not even have a clear concept of democracy: its conflation with mere “effective government” is inappropriate –and dangerous. 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” motive as an object of study and reflection, Putnam 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 we in fact need to complicate this dichotomy in itself (which does not mean to negate the differences).

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 the 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: the 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; Skocpol and Evans 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 into 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 – has 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 even democracy itself. Therefore, strong states can feed the weakness of other (weaker) states. Additionally, the “new institutionalists” tend to assume a sharp distinction between the institutional reality of the Global North (“Constitutional Polities” in the words of Skocpol, 1985) and the Global South’s (addressed in the section titled “States as Actors” of the introduction to the book). Thus geography delineates institutional development: in her discussion about state autonomy Skocpol reviews some studies about “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 Heclo highlights 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.” (Ibid: 11)

We are of course aware that, following conventional criteria, the majority of the 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, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay) what we find is 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 today both in institutional and democratic terms.
IV-Toxic Democracies: Democratization Studies and the Need for Serious Geopolitical Considerations

In this final section, I will provide a brief analysis of some of the more representative works produced in English on democratization, with a special focus on Latin America, in order to showcase a few of the shortcomings discussed above. I 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 paper, I 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, treating “others” as defective democracies, ruled by failed states and characterized by low-intensity citizenship. 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 set of conceptualizations that claim 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. 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 associated with the move from national governments to international organizations 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 active support and collaboration of several U.S. administrations for the involvement of Latin American militaries in combating such crimes (Diamond, Hartlyn, Linz and Lipset 1999: 22). It is puzzling, however, that although they recognize the fact that the U.S. war on drugs and trafficking 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. Paradoxically, the full responsibility for the maintenance and consolidation of democratic rule is put exclusively 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” (Ibid: 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.”(Ibid: 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 concentration in mining commodities such as oil for export purposes, and its perverse 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 debts 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 seems puzzling to us that they argue that the only world competitors to the liberal democratic model are Islamic fundamentalist and Asian’s authoritarian values (Ibid: 57-58), ignoring completely the possibility of democratic contestation within different polities, as has been recently the case in Latin America.

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 combining 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 (Ibid: ix). However, once again, no attention is paid to the external dimension. In contrast, a significant contribution to the volume 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 (Ibid: 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, 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/polities on others. If those regimes are considered to be democratic, then the polity as a whole must be accountable and assessed in their democratic character.

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 factors, with little attention to the role of global corrosive effects and any toxic external components. 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 -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 fact that class structure in Latin America does not necessarily fits with the popular argument that democracy requires 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 volume’s, in the sense that they find serious limits 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” (Ibid: 8).

Admittedly, there have been 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 analysis to the troubling segregationist realities of the twentieth century. Quite tellingly, and particularly relevant for our analysis, is the recognition by Whitehead (Ibid: 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, which he defines as a central concept for the incorporation of external analytical factors and for the importance that he places on the need for a serious geopolitical analysis of democratization. In his view, our comparative analyses cannot continue
to be focused on the local, and our considerations must be applied to all democracies, North and South (Ibid: 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 born 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. It is our contention 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 liberal democracy expectations. As in postcolonial political sociology, 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 concept of a democratization process.

Interestingly enough, it is a Brazilian scholar’s - Leonardo Avritzer - 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 (Ibid: 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 rights.

It is with the intention to contribute to a critical theory of democratization, like the ones proposed 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 current force of the neo-liberal discourse, which emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness, there is no serious attempt to assume some responsibility for the shortcomings of other political regimes as a result of the international interconnectedness of polities and economies. In fact, just like modernization theory was the result of funding by governments to produce certain knowledge and a body of literature, at the end of the cold war transitology seems to have – knowingly or not - reproduced certain power narratives.

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 and in the process could help us to raise 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 decided to exclude (Ibid. 445). 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. For the most part, and 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. 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 economic growth, income distribution, economic liberalization and adjustment, and international conflict. vi 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 I would add universal and nonnegotiable human rights) as key determinants of the democratic character of the state (regardless of whether a country is considered to have a democratic regime).

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 with the little space left for the expression of other socio-political possibilities, and the actual actions taken by state representatives and political 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. )vii Toxicity is also associated with strong nationalist narratives and self-perceptions of exceptionalism. In the case of the Americas, it is quite evident that the case in point is 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. The issue here is not to discuss its contribution to the falling of democratically elected governments, on which there is some general consensus - even though it is harder to agree on it having been the main cause. The concern is how to account for the undemocratic character of a democracy’s
behaviour. The challenge for us is to define toxic democracy as a type and not just as a concrete case. Fortunately, 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 might argue that they are toxic also because historically their consolidation is associated with a long tradition of colonial and neo-colonial domination of others (politically, economically, and culturally).

Conceptualized this way, we argue that the negative effects on others diminish the democratic quality of those societies/polities as a whole, and not just of governments/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 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/societies that tend to see themselves as superior forms of democracy. After all, democracy theory has traditionally emphasized the centrality of public space analysis in the definition of the democratic nature of Northern societies. A key question to be posed and answered is whether societies that exclude or discriminate against others (within and without) can be considered consolidated democracies.

The fact is that a few among those 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 of them support the practices of their own governments and trans-national corporations that either undermine democratic processes or incur or are co-responsible in human rights violations of all kinds. For Latin America, as for other regions, this is an ongoing challenge, not just in terms of trade but more concretely when it comes to the mining industry, whose activities can be regarded as part of a kind of neocolonial exploitation and extraction of natural resources from the South. The toxicity of some democracies is also determined by the official foreign policies of various governments and their negative effects on citizen security. A good example of these being 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 within some Latin American countries. Therefore, it is paramount to incorporate an analysis of the responsibility of the U.S. and other Northern countries’ electorates for their governments’ 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 and public officials. In summary, in an increasingly globalized context, international effects are especially patent and central for any serious analysis of regime transformations, both at the level of state-to-state relations and through the increasingly important networks of non-governmental organizations and other societal groups that are interacting across borders.

V- 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 transnational 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.”

Along the lines of a growing multiplicity of critical projects, we support the construction of a border epistemology that complicates the North-South divide as it has been thought by the mainstream of our discipline. Latin America has long been a rich site of production of knowledge. Yet it has often been imagined as a mere recipient of social theories. By challenging the coloniality of knowledge production in political science today, the goal is to contribute to a fairer global epistemological and academic division of labour. One of our central concerns is the fact that indifference towards epistemology can in fact be toxic itself. One potential reason for the resistance or neglect that exists in the field, when it comes to the analysis of power and ideology within the discipline, is that political scientists want to see themselves as doing “pure and objective” science, negating the ideological and power content/dimension of our different approaches and the effects that our analyses and conclusions have on specific policies and governmental practices. In Democracy in Developing Countries, the editors state that there is “no longer any dispute that issues regarding democracy in the region are of real concern to political and social actors within each of these countries and not arbitrary impositions by ethnocentric foreign scholars” (Diamond, Hartlyn, Linz and Lipset 1999: 1). However, and although we could not agree more with this statement, the real challenge is to understand that our analyses must incorporate the international dimension and the diversity of the manifestations of democratic practices, as well as the factors that hamper or foster the viability of democracy in both the Global North and the Global South, some of which often tilt the balance one way or another in the name of national or geostrategic interests.

VI- References


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\(^{1}\) Most specifically, we refer here to the lenses of the dominant power configurations prevalent in the United States and Northern Europe.

\(^{2}\) The almost openly racist 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).

\(^{3}\) Civic 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.

\(^{4}\) For Putnam “Italian political parties have ably adapted to the contrasting contexts within which they operate, uncivic 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.

\(^{5}\) For an illuminating analysis of public spheres in Latin American that builds on Avritzer’s work see De la Dehesa, Rafael 2010. *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

\(^{6}\) As 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.

\(^{7}\) In 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 Agamben (2005) and his analysis of the concept, which draws from the legal theory of Carl Schmitt, and 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).

\(^{8}\) As part of the bigger project, we engage in the discussion of the public space drawing from Nancy Fraser’s analysis of the public sphere in a transnational setting. See Fraser, Nancy 2007. “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 4: 7–30.