Interview – Sébastien Dubé

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/12/06/interview-sebastien-dube/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DEC 6 2024

Sébastien Dubé is an Assistant Professor and Director of the master's program in International Relations and Transborder Studies at Universidad Arturo Prat's Instituto de Estudios Internacionales in Santiago de Chile. With a Ph.D. in Political Science from Université de Montréal, Sébastien brings a unique perspective shaped by his background as a French-speaking Canadian. His expertise spans international relations, Latin American politics, and geopolitics, and his career reflects a commitment to diverse academic experiences, having taught in five countries and three languages. He has worked in both public and private universities in Chile and Colombia. Sébastien's research and publications can be found on ResearchGate.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I believe the central research question today revolves around the profound consequences of the decline of Western powers and the rise of emerging ones. Politically, this decline means a crisis of the international liberal agenda, a product of Western governments' numerous contradictions and double standards and the critiques and challenges of contesting powers. Its most explicit expression is that its self-proclaimed champion, the United States, raises growing mistrust among its allies and less fear among its challengers. President Trump's world vision is one of states as a business competitor or a business partner. For him, coalitions should not exist based on shared values and goals – as in a community as most U.S. presidents have historically claimed – but as mere strategic opportunities.

Thus, this decline has endogenous and external factors, and it causes a tremendous political void. The Global South, a conceptual creation more than a geopolitical reality, is too heterogeneous to present a straightforward project beyond the weakening of the international liberal order and some adjustments. For example, the BRICS are already discussing the costs and benefits of expanding the group. The bloc's primary goal is clear: a balanced structural power that would favor them. This straightforward principle easily coalesces and allows powerful pictures to go viral, but it does not propose a clear alternate geopolitical project or model. Many of the BRICS members do not even have a genuine material interest in, for example, a weakening of Western countries' economies.

In comparison, the Cold War presented two competing projects framed as ways of living. I do not see a joint project or shared vision of the world uniting diverse countries such as China, Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt. The BRICS has democracies, liberal market economies, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, regimes with a unique party or no party at all, theocracies, state capitalism, civilian leaders, and military leaders. You can also find major historical rivalries between some of them that are hard to overcome. Some BRICS countries give the impression that they want to crush the system, while others give the impression that they want more power over it. Therefore, this bloc is limited to discussing the global balance of power. We are still far from seeing an alternate model of functioning of the global system from the BRICS.

Nonetheless, for me, what is particularly interesting is how this disputed and chaotic global scenario affect Latin American countries, their foreign policy, and intraregional IR. Most Latin American countries share an understandable love-and-hate relationship with the international liberal order because it has had mixed effects on the story of the region, to say the least: flagrant human rights violations and rule of law with human rights guarantees. This is a unique historical situation in the international system. Today, many Latin American leaders are against different aspects of the international liberal order, but almost none officially reject it. Even efforts to combat insecurity

are often framed within the narrative of strengthening civilian-led institutions and promoting state responses to criminal gangs, reflecting a nuanced engagement with the international liberal order.

Looking ahead, I anticipate clear and tangible consequences in the future. From a geopolitical and economic standpoint, I expect that when the People's Republic of China invades Taiwan, the most influential countries in the region will neither issue condemnations nor make explicit calls to defend democracy. And this will be a breaking point. Regarding my personal research agenda, I am particularly interested in studying the impact of this broad geopolitical context on intraregional relations and how technology is used to facilitate movements of trade and control the movements of persons.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I would say three things. First, as a Québécois or French Canadian-born scholar who has lived in four Latin American countries for 15 years, I believe colonial thinking still affects how the "North" analyzes the region. There is something still perceivable in the "North" regarding Latin America that I would consider, like what Edward Said described as "Orientalism," when he referred to how the West constructed an image of a region that was pretty divergent from reality.

Second, social media has dangerously shrunk the space between beliefs, opinions, and knowledge. Even reputed media sometimes treat all three equally, just as fake news or social media platforms frequently do. This distinction is critical because many power dynamics are driven by loyalty and emotions. Identifying with political ideologies, following a leader, or adhering to religious dogmas must be separated from the rational, methodologically sound analysis that produces more genuine knowledge. Making this happen is a crucial challenge, especially for social sciences. There is a market for non-academic opinion disguised as "scientific analysis." At the same time, many individuals holding posts in the academic world push for activist agendas disguised as "academic research." Now, academics are citizens that can do good activism. However, academic analysis must remain as neutral as possible for social sciences to impact real life meaningfully and effectively—such as in public policy and decision-making.

The third is the saddest. My four years in Colombia provided me with valuable tools to understand the dynamics of criminal governance and the security challenges faced by states transitioning into drug transit countries—such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay—rather than remaining solely in consumer markets. Living in Colombia for several years immerses you in the everyday realities of corruption, impunity, institutional weaknesses, and the complex relationships between authorities and criminal networks.

What do you make of the current state of regional integration in Latin America, particularly in light of recent regional political and economic challenges?

I would say that just as the international liberal order is in decline because of endogenous and external elements, Latin American regionalism is in stalemate for the same reasons. The project is unclear today; there is no authentic leadership, intraregional economic rivalries are too powerful, and civil society needs to see its points and benefits. There is simply no offer or demand for regionalism right now. However, we should not forget that the "waves of regionalism" have all reacted to specific contexts and challenges. This is why, politically and diplomatically speaking, Latin American regionalism has always been cyclical more than linear. For that reason, maybe one day, the geopolitical context will become a factor again that will foment regional integration.

Which wave of Latin American regionalism provides the most valuable lessons for constructing cohesive and effective regional governance structures, and why?

All the waves provide lessons regarding why and how the region has gained and lost cohesion and why it always rejected the idea of solid structures or institutions. Beyond specific conjunctures, one striking pattern is the persistent skepticism among Latin American leaders toward supranational organizations. For many reasons, they have not embraced such structures. The most valuable takeaway may be that targeted cooperation through specific regional

or technical organizations delivers greater public benefits than broad, idealistic integration projects, which often fail to materialize. Just look at some UNASUR infrastructures. The Ecuador seat was transformed into a university. The Cochabamba Parliament was turned into a business and administrative center that you could also rent for weddings. This is a clear failure. However, UNASUR also provided some confidence-building measures for security and military issues and helped resolve major internal or bilateral crises.

This mixed legacy highlights the enduring relevance of David Mitrany's functionalist theory, which emphasized addressing concrete, technical challenges rather than pursuing abstract political goals. Functionalism framed regionalism as a means to solve specific problems, not as an end in itself. Unfortunately, many Latin American leaders and academics continue to view regionalism as a vague, unattainable objective. This lack of clarity, coupled with widespread mistrust of elites and leaders, explains why regionalism struggles to gain traction among the public. To illustrate this last point, I would simply ask: do you think many Latin American citizens would be willing to protest, today, in the name of the protection of any of the integration treaties of the region?

What steps are necessary to bridge the gap between IR theoretical frameworks and the practical challenges of regional integration in Latin America?

I believe the gap between IR and practical policymaking should never be fully bridged because it is not the role of IR to resolve these challenges directly. Instead, IR analysis should focus on providing accurate data and insightful information to help decision-makers design policies and institutions that align with their goals. If leaders and civil society do not perceive sufficient concrete benefits to advocate for regional integration, it is neither the responsibility nor the purpose of IR to persuade them otherwise.

That said, IR and related disciplines can offer valuable insights into the costs and benefits of regional initiatives and cooperation. One concrete example is the management of infrastructure and borders. In South America, intrabloc trade remains low for most countries, with 40% of this trade reliant on land transportation. If the goal is to expand land-based trade—such as through the development of the five bi-oceanic corridors championed by the Brazilian government—policy decisions must be informed by a thorough understanding of the region's geography and local conditions. Decision-makers working from capital cities may overlook critical factors such as unpaved roads, insufficient infrastructure, border posts with limited operating hours, or the social dynamics of affected communities. These are practical challenges that significantly impact trade and integration but may not be apparent without localized knowledge and research.

Shifting to your work on human rights norms and geopolitics in Latin America, what do you identify as the most pressing challenges in implementing human rights standards in the region?

You could complement this reading with Comparative Politics scholars' broad literature on criminal governance in Latin America. For me, the most pressing institutional challenge to protect human rights is avoiding the deterioration of state capacity, the rise of corruption, and criminal influence on public institutions at all levels. Today, the notions of democracy, rule of law, and political rights make no concrete sense for millions of Latin American and Caribbean citizens. But for some sectors, they still do. The risk now is that for more people – and not less – these notions will just become a discourse and a façade. From a historical and *longue durée* perspective, I profoundly believe that the state has increasingly included more people over the decades and centuries. All serious indicators show that living conditions are generally better than ever before in history, and these advancements were made possible in part through public policies. However, setbacks are a real possibility, and social progress does not look as linear as it used to.

How do domestic political and geopolitical factors influence Latin America's capacity to uphold human rights norms?

Even though it seems simple, I would say this is a "billions and billions of dollars question." Today, the main threats to human rights in the region do not come directly from the governments – except those from crystal-clear authoritarian states – but from criminal groups and corrupted public officials. Some serious reports relate illegal and criminal

activities, such as drug trafficking, to as much as 15% of global GDP. But everywhere, regarding drug trafficking activities, the discourse is focused on the use of force to fight the offer. Human history shows that looking at eliminating the offer of illicit substances is a bad strategy. It just never works. For geopolitical and internal political reasons, however, no Latin American leader questions the international regime of drugs while they are in office. Gustavo Petro is probably the only exception. Others like Ricardo Lagos, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, or Ernesto Zedillo took clear positions on the issue only once they had left office. The whole logic of drug traffic relates to geography, territory, and the capacity of criminal organizations to coopt public institutions.

In your recent study on transborder spaces, you discuss significant epistemological shifts in how international relations scholars understand borders. Could you elaborate on these shifts and explain how they challenge traditional state-centric views in the context of Latin American cross-border regions?

In this paper written with Gonzalo Álvarez and Sebastián Monsalve, we claim that traditional IR analysis has been and remains absolutely useful in analyzing many international realities. However, we also claim that the current international relations dynamics between Latin American countries are highly related to localized and territory-dependent phenomena. In highly centralized countries, capital cities – where foreign policy and decision-making mostly happens – are usually thousands of kilometers away from borders.

To illustrate this, I refer to two very concrete examples. In June of this year, Argentines installed a solar panel a couple of meters within Chilean territory in the border area of Tierra del Fuego. If you look at the pictures, you can see that the people and authorities there – who cooperate daily – could not notice that the wire fence was a few meters away from the formal and recognized border. From the capitals and the media, this “border crisis” was framed within a context of geopolitical considerations for Antarctica and historical mistrust between the two countries on border delimitation issues. That is an exaggerated response that pressed the presidents and diplomats to react while managing a bilateral relationship involving billions of dollars of investments and many cooperation areas between the countries. Here, a better knowledge and understanding of the territory would have allowed better communication management and avoided a diplomatic impasse.

A second example is that while you are assisting with ideological and diplomatic disputes between Mercosur members – for instance, between Argentine and Brazil leaders – there is an ongoing project of connectivity in development primarily pushed by subnational regional leaders to facilitate the exportation of Brazilian products to Asia through the Chilean northern ports of Antofagasta and Iquique. That is, you have a parallel regional agenda with issues that have significant subnational impacts but do not receive much attention at the national level in capital media.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

I would recommend three things. First, ask good questions. Good research can only be done with good research questions. And by good questions, I mean questions that lead to hypotheses and the defense of an argument. Mere descriptions are usually insufficient. Always think about why someone should read your paper until the end and what he/she should remember after reading it. If you are not clear about it, your research question is probably not clear enough in your mind.

Second, forget your personal preferences and your ideologies. Research is about what happens in reality – facts – and not what we would like to happen. When you send a manuscript to a journal, the evaluators –when the journal is serious– do not know or care about who you are and what your opinions are. They do not evaluate you as a person. They evaluate what they read and the analysis presented. If they find that what they read is bad, that does not make you a bad person incapable of doing a good job. It just means your paper needs more work. Just as the most excellent professors are also those who tell you where the weaknesses of your paper or thesis are, their job is not to congratulate you all the time. Academic work is about constant critique and intellectual challenges. Would I prefer to live in a world where evaluators would always be polite and constructive in their comments? Of course, I would. However, as an academic, I must accept receiving nasty comments and seeing my manuscripts rejected without

taking it personally. Why do I see it as an essential advice? I have the feeling, as a professor, that undergraduate and graduate students, for example, are today much less resilient and emotionally prepared to receive bad grades or papers rejected than we were when I was a college student.

Third, for every generation that passes, the academic difficulties grow. It is not fair, but that's the way it is, and this can be explained by the fact that every generation also has access to more technological resources and information. That said, current students should focus on what technology, such as AI, cannot do or cannot do well. We all see its tremendous uses but also its limitations and weaknesses. Therefore, I believe governments and universities will still need well-trained humans for some time. Technology always kills jobs and creates others; this is another lesson of history we should not forget, even when what is appearing now may give us vertigo.