

Interview - Carlos Escudé

Written by E-International Relations

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Carlos Escudé is an Argentinian political scientist whose research focuses on peripheral realism and neo-modernism. He is currently senior tenured researcher at the Argentinean Council of Scientific Research (CONICET). He received his Ph.D in political science from Yale, worked as a visiting fellow at, among others: Oxford University, John Hopkins University and served as a visiting professor at Harvard University's Department of Government. He also worked as an advisor to Argentina's foreign minister Guido Di Tella in the early nineties. His most recent article is: Peripheral Realism Revisited.

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

Harvard's Department of Government. Not only has it been a powerhouse for the development of IR Theory in the last few decades, but it has also been a place where an open mind has been kept regarding theoretical approaches from the global periphery that have not always been favored by U.S. scholars. It is one of a small minority of such places.

As Arlene B. Tickner noted asymmetrical core-periphery relations are at work not only in international politics, but also in terms of the intellectual division of labor that impinges upon knowledge-building internationally. In my experience, Harvard has been relatively immune to a generalized discriminatory pattern whereby ingenious ideas generated at the center of world academic structures tend to eclipse similar ideas generated at the periphery.

A case in point is my proto-constructivist work on the "Anthropomorphic Fallacy in International Relations Discourse" published in 1994. This was the cornerstone of my peripheral realism, and was published again as Chapter 2 of my 1997 book *Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina*. Several pieces on the subject were also published in Spanish.

Notwithstanding, my work was totally ignored by Alexander Wendt when he published his 2004 paper on "The State as Person in International Theory." Characteristically, he stated that his work was "unchartered territory in IR." This was a full decade after my paper was first published by Harvard.

For me it has been obvious for many years that the services of qualified scholars who live and work in the periphery are sought principally to supply core scholars with data about our home countries and regions. In the international division of labor, core scholars reserve for themselves the "superior" function of forging theory and writing grander, overarching essays. As Tickner understands it, there is a neo-imperialist structure in the transnational IR discipline, whereby peripheral nodes do not operate independently but are rather part of a global intellectual division of labor. If one attempts to generate theory from the periphery independently, one faces great disadvantages. Indeed, I even face difficulties being accepted at the ISA annual conventions.

Contrariwise to this pattern, Harvard has continued to encourage ambitious theoretical work in the periphery. This is most noticeable in the efforts of Jorge I. Domínguez, who coordinated (and at times edited) recent Routledge Handbooks on Latin America that carry theoretical chapters by authors from the periphery. My papers "Realism in the Periphery" and "Who Commands, Who Obeys and Who Rebels" saw the light of day through these initiatives. Similar attitudes are found at times in other non-peripheral centers of study (such as, recently in my experience, the

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Hebrew University of Jerusalem), but they are the exception, not the rule.

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

In my opinion, the most momentous events of the 21st Century so far have been the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Concomitantly, the most astonishing social science contribution was Samuel P. Huntington's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* paper, "The Clash of Civilizations?," which predicted *something* like the events of 9/11, eight years before they took place.

Even though I had done a little work with Huntington in 1997, I was only summoned to think and write about what had happened at the World Trade Center by an institution of the European periphery: the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

This, of course, was a blessing that offered a way out for what could playfully be called the "Tickner curse:" peripheral scholars are kept out of core issues. It eventually made it possible for me to advance modestly in the coining of what I call "neomodernist" philosophy, which is a defense of modernism vis-à-vis postmodernism and multiculturalism, akin to contributions from Jürgen Habermas and Agnes Heller.

Indeed, in my writings on the subject, my understanding of what ails the world moved slightly beyond Huntington, inasmuch as I came to the conclusion that what we confront is not so much a clash of civilizations, but a clash of *Weltanschauungen*, or "world views". The two are not the same. Osama bin Laden's *Weltanschauung* was not so different from that of King Richard the Lionheart, a Western hero.

But in the West (including its periphery) that Medieval *Weltanschauung* was almost extinguished with the Enlightenment. Instead, two opposing Western *Weltanschauungen* now compete, engendering a dilemma that the West does not want to face.

This dilemma is embodied in what I wrote in 2002 for *The Times Literary Supplement*, where I argued that if all cultures are morally equivalent, then all human individuals are not endowed with the same human rights, because some cultures award some men more rights than are allotted to other men and women. If, on the other hand, all men and women are endowed with the same human rights, then all cultures are not morally equivalent, because cultures that acknowledge that 'all men are created equal' are to be regarded as 'superior,' or 'more advanced' in terms of their civil ethics than those that do not. My brand of neomodernism contends with politically-correct intellectuals who prefer to opt for the easy way out, asserting both that we all have the same human rights and that all cultures have the same moral stature.

You pioneered the use and adaption of realist precepts for countries in the global periphery. Could you describe what peripheral realism is?

As Canadian scholar David Close brilliantly put it in 2010, peripheral realism simply attempts to make realism more realistic.

Indeed, RP (as I will call it, after the Spanish "*realismo periférico*") is inspired by a Thucydidean awareness of the consequences of asymmetrical power relationships between states. It draws from the IR version of political realism and from the Raúl Prebisch-ECLA center-periphery perspective. It contests the neorealist idea that the structure of the international system is "anarchic" (as in Hedley Bull, Kenneth Waltz, etc.), contending instead that it is an imperfect and incipient "hierarchy".

RP did not come out of the blue. It is the explicatory emanation of historiographical studies undertaken in the late 1970s and 1980s on the relations between Argentina, Britain and the United States, based on declassified documents that revealed the massive U.S. boycott of the Argentine economy and the destabilization of its political system, as a consequence of Buenos Aires' refusal to abandon its neutrality during World War II. Indeed, my 1981

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Yale Ph.D. dissertation, which delved on the international factor in Argentina's post World War II decline, is the basis from which RP sprang a decade later. The costs of defying the hegemon were unexpectedly high both for the Argentines as a people and for Argentina as a state.

These empirical data led to theoretical reflections about the incipiently hierarchical nature of the interstate system, as well as to parallel normative thinking regarding a state's duty to serve the welfare of its citizens rather than the pride of its leaders. One crucial normative lesson was that, if a peripheral state is to avoid great costs to its people, its margin for confrontation is small and should be invested in the defense of its economic interests, not in challenging the strategic dimension of world order, which it does not have the power to change. The state is not the anthropomorphic entity with which it is often confused, but rather a public institutional apparatus that should be at the service of its citizens.

I "discovered" the anthropomorphic fallacy when, toward 1986, I was interviewed by a journalist on a minister's decree that Argentina was "on its knees" vis-à-vis the IMF. I replied that that was impossible, because a country has no knees. Thus, in an instant, Bull's "domestic analogy" was unraveled: the state *is not* to the interstate system what the individual is to the state. To reason, as did Waltz, that like the individual, the state seeks "freedom," is tantamount to justifying tyranny.

Indeed, RP combined the international and domestic realms in a "formula" which is perhaps one of its most interesting theoretical findings. Because resources are never infinite, and because extreme foreign policy autonomy also compromises human resources, limitless autonomy necessarily leads to dictatorship and poverty even in the case of a superpower. For this reason, total state 'freedom' is the equivalent of absolute domestic tyranny. Or:

TOTAL STATE 'FREEDOM' = ABSOLUTE DOMESTIC TYRANNY

Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, Stephen Krasner, etc., were still reasoning as in the times of Emer de Vattel, blatantly ignoring the obvious incompatibility between total state "freedom" and a liberal democratic domestic order. Thus, they unwittingly justified tyrants.

What is most interesting about my formula, however, is that it lays bare the fact that the weaker a state is, the lower the threshold beyond which an increase in "state freedom" generates a decrease in democracy and civil liberties. My "theorem" is valid for all countries, but before "total state freedom" is translated into a deterioration of civil rights and liberties, the American superpower would have to engage in a major invasion of a remote region, using vast human and material resources. For example, it would have to reenact the Vietnam War, violating today's draft limitations, or mobilize the eleven million soldiers that were drafted in World War II.

In contrast, present-day Argentina could not withstand a week-long shooting war against neighboring Paraguay without subjecting its own population to authoritarian rule. Resources would be exhausted very rapidly, and the extraction of additional material and human resources from civil society would have to be authoritarian.

Thus, this equivalence helps to unmask interstate hierarchy. A state that can mobilize whole fleets from one ocean to another without falling itself into dictatorship has a de facto "right" to rule over those who cannot. That is the theoretically valid reason why such states are awarded de jure veto power in the UN Security Council.

No one likes it. But it is better to abide by the de facto hierarchy. Not doing so carries grave dangers for the world, and great costs for the citizens of weaker states that rebel.

What is your take on the current Venezuelan crisis? How could the Venezuelan government have benefited from a more peripheral realist approach?

Venezuela's predicament is typical of a country whose leadership understood itself as the anthropomorphic bearer of its nation's identity, and opposed U.S. hegemony in Latin America with the Waltzian illusion that countries like the United States and its Caribbean counterpart are "like units," none being entitled to command and none being

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required to obey.

Although more detailed descriptions of the interstate order can be sketched, basically there are three types of functionally-differentiated states: rule-makers, rule-takers and rebels. In RP terminology the vast majority of states, including most advanced industrial democracies, are essentially rule-takers. Only states with world-destroying capacities, which have de facto veto powers vis-à-vis rules established by other states, can be true rule-makers in the geostrategic and security realms.

Rebel states usually lose much more than they gain through their rebellion. More importantly, it is their people who suffer most. Their leaders often get away with their lofty defiance for a long time, while their people suffer the consequences of covert and overt sanctions, and sometimes war and destruction.

Notwithstanding, it must be clear that abiding by the wishes of rule-makers does not guarantee the success of a peripheral state. But extreme political confrontation with a major rule-maker is almost always counterproductive. Applied RP is no more (and no less) than damage control.

This is especially clear in the case of Venezuela. It is hard to contest that despite its short-term achievements reducing poverty levels, the regime established by Hugo Chávez eroded the very foundations of the Venezuelan people's long-term welfare.

The outcome was predictable without the aid of sophisticated theoretical tools, if we consider that the USA is still Venezuela's most important trading partner. As much as 27% of its total exports go to the United States, while 18% of its total imports come from that country.

Venezuela's structural dependence cannot be broken by defying the hegemon. Anthropomorphic bravado such as "Venezuela refused to continue on its knees vis-à-vis the pretensions of the U.S. government", or "Venezuela will not watch cross-armed as the forces of imperialism (do this or that)," fall on the realm of Latin American magical realism. These anthropomorphic metaphors arouse emotions and move people into action, but as a basis for policy they are a deadly trap.

Yet such follies can come naturally if we take seriously Keohane and Nye's anthropomorphic remark that "poor, weak states" can sometimes impose their policies on stronger ones because they "may be more willing to suffer". States do not suffer. They have no nervous system. It is people who suffer from a statesman's misguided policies.

Indeed, flawed anthropomorphic thinking, common to individuals as diverse as Hugo Chávez and Joseph Nye, sometimes leads to grossly ill-conceived policies. David and Goliath metaphors are dangerous when applied to states. They can make self-destructive brinkmanship popular, as in the case of the 1982 Falkland or Malvinas War, in which Argentina invaded a territory occupied since 1833 by the UK, a major rule-making power.

In this, RP converges with Hans Morgenthau's good, old-fashioned advice: "The individual may say for himself *fiat Justitia, pereat mundus*' ['Let justice be done, though the world perish']... but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care."

Recently there was a marked shift in government in Argentina, from Kirchner to Macri. What has this meant for Argentinean foreign policy? What is your opinion on Argentina's position in the world?

Argentina is a state that, ever since the Falkland Islands War of 1982, lost the capacity to defend itself vis-à-vis its peripheral neighbors. The local military establishment lost its domestic capacity to lobby for its own budget, while the economic crises that followed the war further crippled the country's armed forces.

From a practical viewpoint this matters little, because Argentina will not be attacked. But a peripheral state that has abdicated from its self-defense is less of a state than one that has not. This differentiation must be made if we refine RP's understanding of the structure of the interstate system.

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In the Latin American context, Chile is now a Class A rule-taker, while Argentina is a Class B rule-taker. The Macri administration will probably prevent further degradation, but Argentina's former position in Latin America (not to say the world) will not be recovered in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, populism will be controlled, and the deterioration of Argentina's infrastructure will probably be reversed. The country will cease to go the Venezuelan way.

Does a peripheral realist approach preclude genuine change in the international system? Is it not better to explicitly question the entire hierarchy of power underlying the international system rather than simply accommodate it?

"Questioning" the hierarchy has no consequences for the hierarchy. It will not change the world. In contrast, what does change the world is to seriously bet on economic development. In 1945 West Germany was an occupied peripheral state with far less power than Argentina. It adopted RP policies vis-à-vis the United States (as did East Germany vis-à-vis the USSR). It staunchly defended its economic interests, but always accommodated to Western strategic interests. Now Germany is the financial master of Europe and, in the economic realm, has become a rule-maker. Although to a lesser degree, something similar has happened with Japan.

World order is not frozen. It evolves. The winners are states like South Korea. The losers are states like Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Dependency theory is often noted as a prime Latin-American contribution to international political theory. Does the theory in your opinion hold continuing relevance, particularly for IR theory?

Dependency theory is not IR theory, but rather a theory of development. Like RP, it is rooted in the Prebisch-ECLA center-periphery paradigm. It has made important contributions to the understanding of why many states remain less developed.

However, most dependency theory seems to imply that, due to structural reasons, the fully satisfactory development of dependent countries is almost impossible. F.H. Cardoso and E. Faletto, for example, claimed that even when "dependent development" takes place, it comes together with distorted social structures.

This shows that their empirical point of departure is flawed. As I have noted in my writings of the early '80s, dependency theory fails to explain why fully dependent countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand made it into the "first world" without the problems that mire Latin American states. It also fails to consider that, until 1940, Argentina and Uruguay were no less developed than these Anglophone countries.

Indeed, in his 1940 book *The Economics of 1960*, British-Australian economist Colin Clark, one of the founders of econometrics, predicted that by that year Argentina would have the fourth highest per capita income in the world. Yet by 1960, Argentina found itself well on its way to the Third World. In order to understand why and how this happened, one must look beyond dependency theory.

In recent years there has been some prominent work done on non-western IR theory, for example from China. What is your opinion on this? What do you think Latin-American thinking can contribute to a non-western-centric conception of IR?

The problem with IR theory is not that it is Western-centric, but that it is state-centric. By dealing with states as if they were anthropomorphic entities equivalent to the human individual in domestic orders, it has misled non-Western statesmen and polities into thinking that, even if they differ enormously in terms of their capabilities, states are equally sovereign. This is clearly a misconception. Not only are great powers rule-makers: they can also afford to be rule-breakers. Not to utter this obvious truth is to engage in diplomacy, not scholarship.

What Latin American thinking is doing, through RP, is to look at the world from the viewpoint of weak states,

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conscious of the enormous consequences of the asymmetries between the weak and the strong. Sadly, it is as Thucydides put it 2500 years ago: “the strong do what they can; the weak suffer what they must.” His is the only anthropomorphism we should tolerate!

On the other hand, I am pleased with Chinese work on IR theory, most especially when it focuses on RP. I have been able to verify this on some occasions, as in Sun Ruoyan’s 2003 paper and Xu Shicheng’s Chapter 22 of his 2010 book, *Trends in the Modern Latin American Thought* (written in Mandarin). Some Chinese scholars think RP has traits in common with the thought of Deng Xiao Ping.

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

Do not confuse scholarship with diplomacy. I think the main reason why the myth of interstate anarchy was coined is that is played up to the myth of total state sovereignty, which pleases statesmen from countries weak and strong. You can be diplomatic in your scholarship or pursue a diplomatic career, but do not think for a moment that scholarly complicities with diplomacy are “social science.”

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This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.