Decoloniality and Contemporary Regionalism in ALBA

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Colonial domination, which spread globally from the 15th century onwards, was ubiquitous, reaching the most diverse spaces of human experience. The imposition of the ideal of modernity in the 'New World' limited in great measure the epistemological and practical possibilities of social liberation. In Latin America, the independence processes carried out throughout the 19th century put a formal end to the colonization exercised by European states. However, even with the end of political colonialism, coloniality has not been exhausted and still functions as the ordering axis not only of diverse aspects of the economic, political, and social areas of societies but also of the intersubjective relations between the citizens that compose them (Quijano 2005; Mignolo 2011). Broadening this perspective, international relations is also shaped by the logic of coloniality. From this, it becomes important to understand the configuration of this coloniality and how the struggle for the inclusion of other *saberes* (worldviews) in knowledge production at the global, regional, and sub-regional levels is constituted. Due to the epistemic silencing historically imposed by Western knowledge and science, it is important to differentiate *saberes* – the set of conceptions of different historically subordinate groups, which understand reality in a more inclusive way, constantly evoking an ideal of justice (Márquez Duarte 2021) – from Western knowledge.

From the 1950s onwards, the materialization of regional integration initiatives in Latin America were referenced in the European model, whose liberal capitalist prescription resulted in even deeper levels of dependency in the international insertion of Latin American states. In the first regionalist movement that began with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) structuralist approach, states promoted integrationist initiatives with the intention of creating a protected regional market (Dos Santos 1968, Cardoso and Faletto 1979). From the late 1970s onwards, when Latin American countries implemented a set of structural adjustments in the macroeconomic field in response to the conditionalities imposed by the consolidating financial system, there was a redirection of the countries' strategies towards a regionalism focused on the liberalized global economy. It was in this political context that, in 1991, the United States formulated the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as a strategy to expand state economic influence on the continent. This period marked the consolidation of neoliberalism in the region, presenting little growth, but still achieving some economic stability (ECLAC 1999).

In the early 2000s, Latin America experienced the so-called progressive cycle, with the rise of left-wing governments that were generally opposed to the FTAA proposal (de La Rosa 2011; Nieto Roa et al 2017). The third wave of regionalism was marked by criticism of US practices in Latin America, coupled with economic gains from the commodities boom that provided the conditions for Latin American states to obtain a greater degree of political autonomy from their traditional influence (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012). In this context, an alternative project of regional integration was structured, based on ideals of cooperativism and solidarity that aimed, above all, at human development. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) sought to promote the unification of the Latin American region and simultaneously break away from colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal ties.

Based on the notion of a plurality of *saberes*, the zenith of decolonial thought developed by scholars since the late 1990s, this chapter analyzes the extent to which the ALBA project can be understood as a counter-hegemonic and decolonial movement in Latin America (Al-Kassimi 2018; Seabra and Gimenez 2015). For this, it seeks to point out

its challenges and contributions to the process of regional integration, and its contributions to regionalism studies. ALBA does represent a decolonial project of regional integration, as it has not only admitted the existence of coloniality but has also sought ways to break with it through the inclusion of perspectives historically excluded from the mainstream. However, decoloniality is a project under constant construction; and the regional integration in the molds proposed by ALBA should overcome not only the existing asymmetries between the different countries that make up the region, but the current relationship between individuals, nature, and capital.

Decoloniality and Regional Integration

The origin of the term decolonial thought dates back to the creation of the modernity/coloniality group, a transdisciplinary space that was formed at the end of the 1990s from meetings, conferences and publications among different Latin American thinkers. From the perspective of decolonial thought developed in the academic field, modernity was born in 1492, the year in which Europe *discovered* the Caribbean and confronted the Other. This encounter occurred through the exclusion and silencing of this non-European Other who, according to modern logic, found themselves in a backward stage of evolution *vis-à-vis* cultural progress, until then achieved by Europeans. The suffering of this conquered, colonized, or underdeveloped Other was held as a necessary stage for them to reach the modern and developed stage. Modernity, therefore, 'appears when Europe asserts itself as the "center" of a World History that it inaugurates, and therefore the "periphery" is part of its own definition' (Dussel 2004, 65).

Modernity presents only one of its faces: that of salvation, through the rhetoric of development and progress. However, coloniality is intrinsic to it. While colonialism is the definition of one nation's sovereignty grounded in the power of another nation, coloniality refers to patterns of power that were established during colonialism and that currently define culture, intersubjective relations, and conceptual production at the world level. Coloniality does not end with the end of colonialism, but 'endures throughout history rooted in cultural schemas and social power relations, shaping the socio-spatial organization of countries and regions' (Porto-Gonçalves and Quental 2012, 15).

Decoloniality can be understood as the energy that has existed since the early colonial era that seeks to break with the logic of coloniality, not necessarily expressed in the form of books, articles and texts. Decolonial thinking takes the form of epistemic disobedience and demands an openness to other ways of thinking and knowing that are not circumscribed to Eurocentric/Western-centric epistemology. Although the genealogy of decolonial thinking is unknown to the genealogy of European thinking, 'the force and energy of decolonial thinking has always been there, in the exteriority, in the negated by imperial/colonial thinking' (Mignolo 2011, 62).

Border thinking represents an instrument of intellectual, political, and economic decoloniality. It is a reflexive exercise carried out within colonial subalternity that, although it cannot ignore modern epistemology, does not subjugate itself to it. Decolonial thinking, through this border approach, does not reject but rather seeks to redefine concepts such as human rights, humanity, citizenship, democracy, and development. These other perspectives redefine the progressive and developmental rhetoric of modernity, fostering the decolonial liberation struggle 'for a world beyond Euro-centered modernity' (Grosfoguel 2011, 26).

To bring the decolonial perspective to regionalism studies is to understand that the theoretical tools developed for the study of regional integration in Europe, although constructive and important, are limited when the challenge is to outline the necessary paths for a regional integration that is congruent with the Latin American reality. The region, despite presenting heterogeneous and multiple realities, shares an idiosyncratic historical, political, and social structure. Therefore, specific analytical instruments and regional integration mechanisms designed for the Latin American context are necessary.

The region now called Latin America was known by the original peoples by other names such as Abya-Yala (Guna people), Tawantinsuyu (Inca Empire) and Cem Anahuac (Mexica Empire). The attribution of the name *America* to the region was one of the first acts of power of the Europeans in the confrontation with the Other. According to Porto-Gonçalves and Quental (2012, 3), 'the concept of America – and, later, Latin America – is a semantic construction with political, economic, epistemic, and ethical implications that emerged and imposed itself at the expense of conceptualizations and denominations originating from this same continent.'

For the entire Latin American region, making use of the regionas an object of study has been one of the most determinant characteristics for the evolution of its thinking about the international. That is, the region can only be understood when incorporated into the world processes initiated with modernity. The colonial formation of the region – later named Latin America – from the 15th century to the end of the 19th century was essential to the concerns of the nation-states that were experiencing moments of independence in the region. Although political practices have been different since then, there is a nascent political intelligentsia that shares an identity about forms of resistance for the newly formed Latin American states against the colonial yoke. In this sense, it is argued here that thinking about the region has been akin to thinking about the autonomy necessary for them to prosper (Deciancio 2016, 95–96). The regionalist ideas produced in the continent are, therefore, an inseparable part of the states' understanding of the world and their form of international insertion that constitutes the capitalist, modern, colonial global order.

The colonial condition and formation shared within the region was the impetus for a first rapprochement between the newly independent nation-states being formed throughout the 19th century. From the moment they became integrated into the system in the formal condition of sovereignty, it became evident that their capacities for progress were circumscribed *a priori* to their positions in the expanding capitalist system. Since they operated in analogous positions in the global relations of production and circulation (as a bloc), Latin American states would enhance their possibilities of empirically achieving their independence if they acted collectively. Achieving autonomy from the condition of coloniality has, since then, been linked to the idea of obtaining better conditions to develop their domestic structures via regional projection. In practice, it was only in the post-World War II period that a series of regional integration initiatives became experiments towards improving the models of international insertion for the countries in the region.

Since the first independence movements in the Latin American region, the idea of regional unity has been raised by figures such as Simón Bolívar and has been present throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries through thinkers like José Martí, Manuel Ugarte, Salvador Mendieta, among others. Bolívar, a Latin American icon of the struggle against colonization, wrote, in 1815, his Letter from Jamaica. In it, he declared the goal of creating a Hispanic-American confederation that would stand up to the centers of power, represented at the time by the European states and the United States. The leader pointed out that the regions previously colonized by the Spanish Empire had a common past, with similar institutions, religion, and language. However, as Ruiz and Lombaerde (2018) state, these thinkers did not develop explanatory theories, 'but contributed with a "knowledge"' that still reverberates in contemporary Latin America'.

Traditional Integration Processes in Latin America and their Limitations

In historiographical terms, Latin American regionalism can be described as occurring in four waves, depending on the role attributed to the region in the interests of the Latin American states and the practical consequences of these perceptions on the integration models. What can be extracted from the continuity of this process is the mix of elements specific to the region that makes it a research unit. There is also a dimension that refers to a level of analysis capable of elucidating the paths of agency and models of international insertion of Latin American countries in favor of both national and regional development.

The foundation of thought on Latin American regionalism emerged from the structuralist ideas of Raul Prebisch, within the ECLAC. In this context, the continental space was understood as a fundamental level for a more efficient economic development process, which would meet the demands of industrialization. This model of regionalism is linked to the promotion of an integrationist policy for the development of economic capacity and the creation of a regional market for the production and circulation of goods. In this way, the idea of altering the most appropriate international insertion in the face of the diagnosis of an unequal economic structure in the global economy was constituted as the center of the argument: the region became the economic unit through which the 'closed regionalism' that emerged as a proposal from the 1950s onwards was understood and justified (Briceño and Lombaerde 2018, 263–268; Deciancio 2016). This phase, understood as the first wave of Latin American regionalism, marks the beginning of a tradition of knowledge specifically from the region, for the region. The realization of the center/periphery configuration marked this first phase.

The limits of this political-economic conception, anchored in an instrumental interpretation of the region, became evident in the 1960s, given the infeasibility of sustaining national industrialist processes and their pretensions of market complementarity. With the weakening of the nationalist projects in the 1970s and the indebtedness of many countries in the region stemming from the need to maintain their development plans, little room was left for strategies that privileged regional dynamics. It is in the context of these obstacles that the Washington Consensus marked a fundamental turning point in relation to what was understood, until then, as the role of the region for the political economy of Latin America. As a result, integration projects were anchored in a 'New Regionalism', of open characteristics in economic terms, which became the primary conception of the notion of regional space for the formulation of foreign policy by Latin American states.

Thus, the moment characterized as the second wave of regionalism was marked by the inextricable incorporation of Latin America into an increasingly flexible and deregulated global market (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012). This was the apex of foreign neoliberal influence on the countries of the region – even if its absorption did not proceed in an analogous way in all countries. Based on the new integrationist trends, a new regionalism was taking shape – including in academic trends – as a pragmatic option given the need for financial and trade liberalization imposed by the emergence of the post-Cold War order.

The limits of the legitimacy of this new configuration under a supposed US liberal-democratic hegemony presented themselves concomitantly with the emergence of progressive projects in the countries of the region at the end of the 1990s. The post-Cold War development models and their economic and political effects in the Global South continued developing underdevelopment (Al-Kassimi 2018). On one hand, the turning point stemming from the economic crises at the turn of the millennium in Latin America was marked by the rise of center-left governments in the region. From this, national political strategies revalued the dimensions of collective social welfare, based on the questioning of the ills resulting from market and labor flexibilization. On the other hand, the reorientation of the United States in the international scene, due to transnational security agendas, added to its regional weakening, opened space for the emergence of a new balance of regional power, which was redistributed among diverse regional integration initiatives.

The end of the 20th century imposed on the states of the region a context of economic crises as a result of state deregulation, as well as the social consequences resulting from the precarization of labor. Starting in the early 2000s, the upward movement of progressive governments, from a more left-oriented political spectrum, known as the 'Pink Tide', was considered fundamental to the counter-hegemonic ascent in recent Latin American history (Nieto Roa et al 2017). The proposal to create a continental economic space that would operationalize the dominance and consolidation of a regional balance favorable to global power was supplanted by the initiative of several Latin American countries.

This moment marks the emergence of the third wave of regionalism in Latin America as a proposal to deconstruct the classical notion of the region as a strategic space into an idea of an independent political arena. What Latin American academics have called *post-regionalisms* is part of a research agenda that sought to reconstruct developmentalist ideas. Now, as active subjects in the processes of building a regional identity, the region's states outline a strategy of autonomation that shields them from foreign influences within spaces of cooperation that reach beyond traditional economic dynamics (Deciancio 2016, 103–105).

The new adjectivizations elaborated by this school of thought had the purpose of elucidating the moment of rediscovery of the region as a space for those who demarcated a supposed collective counter-hegemony in face of the old patterns of Anglo-Saxon politics that prevailed until the end of the 20th century. More than seeking a more advantageous international insertion, Latin American states – through movements of re-signification and innovation in integration structures – sought to assume roles in global decision-making by strengthening and renewing their perspectives on the meaning of the region. The complementarity between the so-called post-hegemonic regionalism and post-liberal regionalism represented a moment of optimism in regional politics, in a world context that was economically and politically favorable to the rise of the periphery, but which soon presented a series of empirical weaknesses.

The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the ALBA-TCP (Peoples' Trade Treaty) are the main examples of manifestation of the importance of Latin American countries assuming not only the management of macroeconomic issues concerning the states in the subcontinent, but also in the new roles developed by the region's social agents – both state and non-state (Mariano, Romero and Ribeiro 2015; Nieto Roa et al 2017). This group of countries represents an opposition to traditional US neoliberal hegemony as applied to this region; a 'post-hegemonic' moment (Tussie and Riggirozzi 2015), which has resulted in a regional optimism with the goal of reaching a new stage of development from the renewal or creation of new regional blocs.

The so-called post-regionalisms (post-hegemonic or post-liberal) complement each other since their perspectives comprise the overcoming of a long period that includes the liberal hegemony of the United States in Latin America, which began in the 19th century and was consolidated during the 20th century. This new perspective also points to the transformation of the role played by the state in regional processes. As active subjects in the process of building regional identity – something considered feasible given the proximity of policy projects among some states in the region – Latin American states can seek their autonomy by curbing some foreign influences by creating rules and cooperative practices in spaces beyond the economic and/or the security sphere (Deciancio 2016, 103–105).

This movement of constant resignification and geolocalized understanding of Latin and South American politics have motivated the existence of theories coming from below since the early days of Latin American IR fields. As Acharya highlights, 'regionalism is an important form of agency for non-Western actors' (Acharya 2016, 7). These approaches position themselves critically in relation to the asymmetries between states in world politics and, to some extent, propose alternatives to mitigate the peripheral situation within the system (Bologna 1987).

Late 1990s: FTAA vs. Latin America

For a long time, the United States was opposed to free trade agreements and customs unions since both hinder the construction of a free and extensive multilateral system. As a result of the Cold War and the consequent need to contain the Soviets in various parts of the globe, the United States accepted the 1957 Treaty of Rome, constituting the European Common Market, which by then had six members (West Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg).

Throughout the Uruguay Round, launched in 1986 within the framework of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), the United States distanced itself from the idea of unconditional defense of multilateralism when they realized that, in certain cases, progress is faster when there is a smaller number of participants who share affinities and interests (Ramina 2010). In 1988, the U.S. and Canada signed a free trade agreement. In 1994, the U.S., Canada, and Mexico signed the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). The new bloc went on to sign other bilateral agreements, culminating in the launch of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in December 1994.

The idea of a free trade area in the Americas was born through the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI) proposal in 1990 by former U.S. President George Bush. The central objective was to create a free trade area that would stretch from Canada to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. According to The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the initiative had three components: the development of free trade agreements (including NAFTA), a $1.5 billion endowment fund for the implementation of investment reform programs, and an official debt relief program (USAID 2014).

It fell to the next president, Bill Clinton, to revitalize the EAI at the first Summit of the Americas, held in Miami in December 1994. Clinton called on the heads of government of the American republics to unite behind the formation of the free trade area. The heads of state and government of 34 countries of the Americas opted to conclude the FTAA negotiations by 2005. According to ECLAC, 'the FTAA [represented] the most important regional integration agreement signed between developed and undeveloped countries that aims to establish the free flow of trade between their economies' (ECLAC 1999, online).

It is important to point out that the 1980s were marked by the failure of neoliberalism in Latin American countries and

that, since then, an environment critical of neoliberalism has emerged in the region. The proposal of neoliberal measures as a solution to structural problems related to underdevelopment in Latin America, especially at the time of the Washington Consensus, began to be viewed with great suspicion. In this sense, the FTAA has been understood as having more complex objectives than simple economic integration: it was also one of the United States' strategies to amplify its economic dominance over Latin American countries.

In light of global changes – especially the transformations in the perspective of international security caused by the redirection of international focus toward transnational terrorism – the United States lost strength with the failure of the FTAA project at the Mar del Plata Summit (2005) (de La Rosa 2011). This opened up space for the emergence of a new regional balance of power, which was distributed among the various integration initiatives. Processes such as UNASUR (Union of Southern Nations), ALBA and a new MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) have posed new challenges for regional rapprochement.

ALBA as a Project of Resistance to Traditional Models

The idea of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was conceived in an environment critical of the economic neoliberalism that had been taking shape since the late 1980s in the Latin American region. It is in the context of the progressive cycle of the early 2000s that the ALBA emerges as a counterforce not only to the FTAA project, but also to previous initiatives of regional integration in Latin America and to US plans for the region. In addition to standing up to the FTAA, the main motivations for the creation of the ALBA-TCP were, according to Hernández and Chaudary (2015): (i) the negative impact that liberal and neoliberal policies had on Latin America; (ii) the threat of the market's globalizing transculturation to Latin American identity, devaluing and silencing traditional and original knowledge and cultures; (iii) South-South cooperation, which broke with the paradigms of North-South cooperation; (iv) the so-called *ola rosada* (pink tide), that is, the rise of leftist leaders in the region; v) the assured possibility of using Venezuelan oil as an instrument to promote a regional integration that was not market-oriented; and vi) the need to build a space for dialogue and consensus aimed at proposing solutions to the problems historically faced by the region, without foreign interference from continental hegemonic powers.

The Bolivarian ideal of the 19th century was recovered during the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013), who had, since 1999, defended the idea that Latin American integration should go beyond the economic and social stages. Chávez included in his speeches the idea of a Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean States and delivered them in successive international forums. According to Manzur and García (2007), the presentation of this idea was not included in the final conclusions of these forums during 1999, 2000, 2001, and early 2002, and, therefore, was not recognized within the regional scene. However, it gained strength between 2004–2006.

The 2002 coup against Chávez was a fundamental precedent in the conformation of the ALBA. From this moment on, the Bolivarian proposal emerged with even more force as an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-U.S. project. Concomitant with the gradual rejection of US regionalism through the FTAA and the Free Trade Agreements, Venezuela moved closer and closer to Cuba. On 14 December 2004, the presidents of both countries, Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro, signed the 'Agreement between the president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the President of the Council of State of the Republic of Cuba for the implementation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas'. At the same time, the presidents presented some of the problems involved in the FTAA project and the premises of the liberal regionalism applied until then in the region:

We wish to draw attention to the fact that the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is the most blatant expression yet of a hunger to dominate the region and, were it to come into effect, it would mark an intensification of neoliberalism and create unprecedented levels of dependence and subordination. We have made an historical analysis of the integration process in Latin America and the Caribbean, and we find that – far from responding to aspirations of independent development and regional economic complementarity – it has acted as a mechanism to increase dependence and foreign domination (Cuban Government 2004).

In 2005, Venezuela and Cuba signed the Strategic Plan, creating the ALBA. The alliance was born, therefore, as a

proposal to rethink regional integration agreements in order to achieve an 'endogenous national and regional development that eradicates poverty, corrects inequalities and ensures the quality of life of its peoples' (Hernández and Chaudary 2015, 7). A second agreement was signed in 2006, in the same format as the 2004 agreement, but now including Bolivia. From 2007 onwards, the ALBA-TCP went into expansion: starting in 2007, the countries Nicaragua (2007), Dominica (2008), Antigua and Barbuda (2009), Ecuador (2009), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (2009) and Saint Lucia (2013) were incorporated into the agreement. In the position of Special Guest Countries, Syria (2010), Haiti (2012), and Suriname (2012) were included.

In 2005, Bolivian President Evo Morales, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage met in Bolivia. On that occasion, the leaders ratified the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the Peoples Trade Treaty (TCP), the latter proposed by Morales. In this way, the acronym TCP (People's Trade Treaty) was added to the acronym ALBA, forming an alternative to the FTAs (Free Trade Agreements). The TCP sought to establish fair commercial relations through the principles of South-South cooperation, economic complementarity, and solidarity. It is important to point out that ALBA began as the *Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*, but in 2009 the word *Alternativa* was changed to *Alianza*, which in the language of international diplomacy suggests a political – and even military – pact, rather than a trading organization (Adams and Gunsan 2015, 34).

There are 12 principles that underpin the ALBA-TCP: trade and investment should not be ends in themselves; special and differentiated treatment according to the level of development of the countries; economic complementarity and cooperation; cooperation and solidarity; creation of a Social Emergency Fund; integral development of communications and transportation; sustainability of development; energy integration; promotion of investments of Latin American capital in the region; defense of Latin American and Caribbean identity and culture; respect for intellectual property; and agreement on multilateral positions and in negotiations with countries and blocs in other regions.

The ALBA-TCP rejects strictly commercial regional integration and prioritizes its political and social aspects, rescaling the state's role in economic activity (Hernández and Chaudary 2015). Therefore, it developed its project based on an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and counter-hegemonic model of integration, underpinned by the principles of complementarity, cooperation, collaboration, solidarity, improvement of the quality of life of citizens, and direct participation of social movements. This model is reflected in the deliberative structure of the alliance, currently made up of the Presidential Council (the highest instance of deliberation, decision, and political orientation) and by the Political, Social, Economic, and Social Movements Councils. This last Council was created to expand the discourse between social movements in member and non-member countries. In this sense, social movements are key actors in the regional integration process developed by ALBA-TCP.

One of the central aspects of the mode of regional integration pursued within the ALBA-TCP framework is the approximation between its regional social policies and *Buen Vivir* (Spanish term for living well), or *Vivir Bien* – the latter being used more commonly in Bolivia (Ruiz 2018). The term is inspired by the expressions*sumak kawsay* and *sumaq qamaña*, of the Kichwa and Aymara Indigenous groups living in Ecuador and Bolivia (Arteaga-Cruz 2017). *Buen Vivir* represents a set of critical ideas, worldviews, and *saberes* that has been constructed by social movements, Indigenous groups, and academics who study the Indigenous issue. Given the plurality of Andean Indigenous Peoples, the understandings of this term are multiple.

Therefore, the potential of the ALBA-TCP is also related to the countless natural riches present in the Latin American region, not in terms of exporting and strengthening foreign trade, but in the sense of harnessing these riches – which belong to the Latin American peoples, but are not enjoyed by them – in favor of the quality of life, of *Buen Vivir*, of the peoples who reside in the territory. According to Seabra and Gimenez (2015, 3), the ALBA-TCP not only rediscovers Latin American anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, but 'builds an alternative based on the refusal of the pattern of capital accumulation on a regional scale'.

Regarding the developmental aspect of regional integration, ALBA-TCP is not limited to strictly following the rules of international law or traditional international trade, nor does it have trade liberalization as its overarching goal. It seeks

to achieve the integral and collective development of the region through compensatory policies. Economic complementarity should be achieved through a balanced and symmetrical commercial exchange. Although regional integration, in this project, comprises extensive trade among member countries, it is not reduced to it.

One of the greatest challenges to be faced by the alliance is the need to overcome the profound asymmetries that exist between its member countries. In terms of economic activity, there is a significant disparity. For example, according to World Bank data, while Venezuela's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is US$482.359 million, Bolivia's is US$40.895 million, and Dominica's is US$582 thousand. In this sense, the asymmetries between countries should be overcome through compensated trade modalities and/or mechanisms that favor the most vulnerable countries. Between Cuba and Venezuela, for instance, these mechanisms work through what is called cooperative advantage. Venezuelan oil is supplied to Cubans at special prices and payment modalities, and part of the payment is made through Cuban medical, educational, and agricultural services in Venezuelan social programs, or through scholarships provided to Venezuelans who wish to study in Cuba.

The Bank of Alba, created in January 2008, proposes a new financial architecture, seeking to overcome the dependence on foreign currency and international financial institutions. Its main function is to finance programs and projects in the areas of economic development (job creation, innovation, invention, development of production chains, etc.), social development (health, education, social security, social economy, promotion and strengthening of participatory democracy, etc.), expansion and connection of the infrastructure among countries, creation of bi-national or grand-national companies, development and promotion of fair trade practices for goods and services, among others.

The consolidation process of the ALBA-TCP regional integration model is still ongoing. It is under constant construction. Since its founding in 2004, the alliance has undergone several changes and is no longer just a counterpoint to the US model of regional integration, but represents a more concrete proposal structured by medical-hospital agreements, literacy programs, new financial and monetary systems, infrastructure development, and energy integration (Seabra and Gimenez 2015).

However, some authors point out that a greater theoretical foundation that specifies the model of integration that the ALBA-TCP project wishes to achieve is necessary. By this logic, precisely because it is proposed as an alternative to the current integration models, the alliance should not be based merely on the rejection of hegemonic models, but also on a theoretical orientation. It is possible that, in this way, the initiative could contribute to regionalism studies to a greater extent.

For Ruiz (2014), the ALBA-TCP project represents an anti-systemic axis of existing regional integration processes in Latin America. Its integration model does not adapt to the models traditionally known in the academic literature on regional integration, nor does it manifest this intent. This might be the reason behind the lack of consensus on the integration model advocated by the alliance.

Besides its characterization as anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic, the ALBA-TCP project can also be understood as decolonial. As mentioned above, decolonial thinking assumes a form of epistemic disobedience and openness to other forms of thinking and knowing that are not circumscribed to the Eurocentric/Western-centric epistemology. The ALBA-TCP was structured through a border dialoguethat developed a project of regional integration and developed from the standpoint of global subalternity. Although it could not ignore the modern epistemology that concerns regionalism, global subalternity did not subjugate itself to it.

The decolonial and counter-hegemonic project set in motion by the alliance inscribed the legacies of decolonial thought (especially that cultivated by the Andean Indigenous population) in its organizational structure. It was, therefore, a moment of 'opening and the freedom from the thinking and the forms of living (economies-other, political theories-other)' (Mignolo 2011, 48). The ALBA-TCP – by understanding economy, politics, and society as intricate parts of the same reality – transcends the notion of regional integration as a strictly economic-commercial process.

Conclusion

The FTAA vs. the ALBA dilemma seems to be one more chapter in the history of political projects that are in constant dispute in the Latin American region. Within the post-Cold War neoliberal context, in which trade liberalization and separation between state and economy seemed to be a necessary phase for progress and development, the ALBA-TCP represents a decolonial project of regional development that has sought and continues to seek to re-signify the principles of regional integration.

In addition to being decolonial and counter-hegemonic, the project set forth in this study is also the representation of a democratic-participatory project. This is because regional integration, in the molds proposed by the ALBA-TCP, would not happen only through the action of states, but also through the participation of social movements. In this sense, the alliance represents a space of contestation of the political spaces produced and dominated by capitalism and modernity. The exercise of collectively thinking ways to manage common existence through a border dialogue that involves different social groups, especially the subaltern ones, expands the borders of democracy.

However, like all projects, the decolonial project of regional integration idealized by ALBA-TCP is currently under construction. Since decolonial movements tend to go against state-centrism, there is some controversy in ALBA-TCP, which is a state-centric initiative. Furthermore, as we have seen, for the alliance to effectively put into practice an integration process that transforms the lives of millions of Latin American citizens, it is necessary to overcome the existing social, political, economic, and cultural divisions between member countries. This becomes even more important at a moment in which Latin American governments present significant ideological divergences, quite different from the context existing at the beginning of the 2000s. It seems that the neoliberal project once again prevails in Latin America, and this affects the regional integration processes.

The purpose of this chapter was to analyze the idea proposed by the ALBA-TCP and to what extent it represents a decolonial project. Neoliberalism did not provide sufficient solutions to the crises of the integration model throughout the 1980s and does not seem to do so at the present time. Although there is a weakening of the alliance in the region, it is possible and urgent to reflect on new ways to promote regional integration in Latin America. As a result, emancipatory approaches are gradually gaining space in knowledge production.

The process of conformation and development of the ALBA-TCP contributes in great measure to the discussion on regionalism, in the sense that it highlights the need for an opening to other forms of knowledge that can contribute to the formulation of a method of regional integration that corresponds to Latin American reality – including community and collective perspectives, born and cultivated by original peoples and social movements. In this way, it becomes ever more possible to overcome the coloniality that persists.

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