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Published on H-Diplo (May, 2016)

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Alan L. McPherson and Yannick Wehrli’s *Beyond Geopolitics: New Histories of Latin America at the League of Nations* is a welcome new collection that challenges the notion that the League of Nations was, as it has long been regarded, an exclusively European organization, relevant only to those who study a European metropole and its colonies. While scholarship on the League has seen tremendous growth in recent years, Latin America has remained, as the editors emphasize, very much on the margins of this new work. This volume seeks to move Latin America from those margins: after all, as Wehrli points out, “only Latin American participation allowed [the League] to truly claim its status as a world organization” (p. 6). The presence of Latin American representatives, then, allowed the League to live up to its claims of universality, to being a global organization and not just a European one. Indeed, more than a third of members in the early years of the League were Latin American nation-states. And yet this presence has long been ignored, even as the history of the League has been broadened beyond the work of the Secretariat, and transnationalized beyond Geneva.[1] The essays in this collection, however, successfully illuminate the role that Latin American diplomats, economists, and labor leaders played within the organization, through participation in debates around security, labor, intellectual and scientific cooperation, and economic and social issues.

The authors of this collection set out, laudably, to demonstrate that “participation in the [League of Nations] had a real impact on Latin American politics and societies” (p. 3). In this endeavor, the collection succeeds, demonstrating that although there was sustained skepticism throughout the region about both the utility and the efficacy of the organization, the League provided an important forum for international cooperation and debate on questions of diplomacy, economics, culture, and science. But what of the reverse of this formulation, of the impact of the Latin Americans on the League itself—and on the many surviving and subsequent multilateral organizations that emerged from the League’s ashes? Can we ask not just how the League mattered for Latin America, but also how Latin America mattered for the League and its successors? Doing so allows us to move away from a long-standing scholarly assumption of a one-way transfer of power-knowledge, from the core to the periphery, toward a more multidirectional transnational exchange of ideas and policies. Here, the essays in the volume offer some intriguing insights, and demonstrate that there is much room for further research.
There are, of course, some areas in which skepticism about the impact of Latin America on the League itself is warranted. For instance, Alan McPherson’s contributions to the volume demonstrate the many failures of Latin American efforts to press their interests within the organization, including a detailed examination of the failure of the League to address US imperial interventions in Central America and the Caribbean in the organization’s early years. This disappointment should perhaps not be surprising, as it has been on questions of collective security where the failures of the League have long been most apparent. McPherson details how, in the context of Woodrow Wilson’s insertion of Article 21 into the League Covenant, which protected the validity of the Monroe Doctrine, representatives from Haiti and the Dominican Republic tried in vain to secure protection of their right to self-determination from the League. The fear that, as a Haitian representative to the League put it in 1935, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean could very easily become “the Ethiopia of someone” spoke to the hope that many small member states held that the League might reinforce the protection of small state sovereignty (p. 33). But without US participation in the organization, McPherson argues, League enforcement of collective security for the small countries of the Western Hemisphere was not forthcoming, and the Latin Americans would have to find other fora, particularly within the Inter-American system, for resolving their disputes.

In other aspects of the collective security question, the chapters paint a more complicated story, and there are seemingly contradictory conclusions drawn by, on the one hand, Yanick Wehrli’s and Fabián Herrera Leon’s discussions of the region’s less-than-enthusiastic defense of Ethiopia in the face of Italian aggression, and, on the other, Abdiel Oñate’s analysis of Mexico’s vociferous advocacy of League action to protect Republican Spain while continuing to defend the principles of self-determination and nonintervention. While the reader is left to weigh Herrera Leon’s pessimistic conclusions against the perhaps more celebratory judgments of Oñate, it is clear that, in both cases, Mexico mounted a vigorous defense of the principles of the League Covenant, often in the face of their actual application by the League itself. But these Mexican interventions appear to be the exception. In most cases, the Latin American desire to maintain trade relations in Europe and not be drawn into overseas conflicts overrode promises of cooperation on collective security—and this in turn led to efforts to reform the League Covenant itself, in order to protect Latin American interests (though these are not examined at length, and certainly merit further study). But as McPherson writes in the conclusion, “Practically every attempt by Latin Americans to get a resolution passed or even obtain an audience was met with rebuffs from Europeans, other Latin Americans, or the United States, which was not even a member” (p. 262). Indeed, many Latin American countries chose to withdraw from the League rather than continue to be subject to collective security frameworks that might draw them into increasingly likely European conflicts, as Wehrli notes in his chapter. But what was the impact of these failed efforts at reform and subsequent withdrawals within the League? And how did these episodes serve as lessons for the various multilateral agencies that would come later, in the aftermath of the Second World War? These questions would remain unasked in a framework that imagines a unidirectional flow of influence from a powerful European center to a region of only peripheral importance.

The chapters that deal with the so-called technical aspects of the League’s mission—those focusing on intellectual, scientific, and economic cooperation, where League activities are judged to have been more successful than in questions of collective security—are less bound by a diffusionist narrative, perhaps because Latin American influence in areas like labor cooperation is more obvious.[2] Examining the International Labor Organization (ILO), Veronique Plata-Stenger describes the organization as initially using its regional conferences to act as a “conveyor belt for the social models it promoted,” but after hearing the demands of representatives from the Americas, coming to a series of compromises on, for example, the importance of social insurance (p. 106). Another essay, by Patricio Herrera González, demonstrates how important the advocacy of the Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano was to this effort, even before Mexico became an official member of the ILO. This “back-and-forth” between the ILO and the Latin American representatives, writes Plata-Stenger, “reoriented ILO activities toward new fields of research” (p. 108). The incorporation of the particular perspectives of Latin American workers, then, served to make the “universal” concerns of the International Labor Organization all the more universal. Similarly, in a fascinating essay on the efforts of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation to write a multivolume history of the Americas, Corinne A. Pernet argues that “the contributions of the Latin American intellectuals to these initiatives are too frequently glossed over in accounts that suggest that the League was a vector of worldwide diffusion of Euro-
pean ideas and politics” (p. 137). Letícia Pumar reaches a similar conclusion in her essay on the work of the Brazilian physiologist Miguel Ozório de Almeida, who himself argued for a “two-way movement” of scientific ideas between Latin America and Europe (p. 181).

This kind of advocacy was not always successful, however: José Antonio Sánchez Román’s treatment of the attempts by Argentine economist Salvador Oria to force the Provisional Financial and Economic Committee to recognize the special needs of the debtor countries—rather than simply those of European lenders and the corporate interests to which they were tied—is a study in a particularly instructive frustration. But Sánchez Román concludes by arguing that future research should ask not just how participation in these international forums shaped Latin American economic ideas, but also “to what extent were Latin Americans able to shape others’ views on global economics through their participation in those organizations?” (p. 218). This question frames an exciting research agenda, not just about the League, but about the various international institutions that would follow its demise. As Amelia Kiddle concludes in her essay on the 1938 Latin American tour undertaken by League undersecretary general Luis Podestá Costa: “a new world order was about to be born, one in which Latin America would be poised to contribute on a deep and meaningful level” (p. 253). Indeed, the internationalist advocacy of Latin American diplomats, economists, and jurists played a significant role in the founding and governance of many of the postwar multilateral institutions that would soon be established.

The question of Latin American internationalism is fraught with the tension between the regional and the universal, and this volume valuably demonstrates the many conflicts that arise over, as McPherson puts it, “whether Latin American countries should identify first as a continent or as members of the international community” (p. 261). But this way of describing this tension, embodied in the sometimes overlapping and/or conflicting agendas of, for example, the Pan-American Union and the various bodies of the League, serves to deny that the regional frame is, in fact, already international. Wehrli, for instance, argues that the League was “Latin America’s first encounter with multilateralism” (p. 1); this is a questionable chronology given the Latin American campaigning to reform the statutes of the Pan-American Union that had begun in 1914 and would be taken up in earnest at the 1923 meeting at Santiago. It was, I would argue, the parallel international experiences of the Pan-American Union and the League, in fact, that shaped the internationalist outlook of so many of the Latin American representatives examined in these essays. The long history of conflict and contestation within the Pan-American Union in the first half of the twentieth century (a history that is glossed over by conventional wisdoms about the organization’s role as a mere multilateral fig-leaf for US pretensions to power) was at least as instructive as the League for Latin American actors—and, perhaps more importantly, even more so for North American ones. It is striking that even those of us who study Latin America continue to insist on discounting multilateral cooperation in the Western Hemisphere and reducing the character of the Pan-American Union to somehow less than international. The essays contained in this vital new collection, however, urge us not only to put the history of Latin American internationalism in conversation with, for example, a dominantly European historiography of international institutions, but also to begin to think more critically about how Latin American cooperation and contestation within the Western Hemisphere itself actively shaped the terrain of internationalist thought and practice in the twentieth century.

Notes


[2]. This has been the area of greatest growth of League scholarship, as noted by Susan Pedersen, “Back to the League of Nations,” The American Historical Review 112, no. 4 (2007): 1091–1117.

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