



Revista Brasileira de  
Política Internacional

ISSN 1983-3121

<http://www.scielo.br/rbpi>

### Alexandre Moreli

Universidade de São Paulo, Institute of  
International Relations, São Paulo - SP,  
Brazil ([alexandre.moreli@usp.br](mailto:alexandre.moreli@usp.br))



ORCID ID:  
[orcid.org/0000-0002-7215-8566](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7215-8566)

#### Copyright:

- This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.
- Este é um artigo publicado em acesso aberto e distribuído sob os termos da Licença de Atribuição Creative Commons, que permite uso irrestrito, distribuição e reprodução em qualquer meio, desde que o autor e a fonte originais sejam creditados.



# Thinking about complexity: the displacement of power along time and through space

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201800209>

EDITORIAL

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 61(2): e009, 2018

Received: September 9, 2018

Accepted: October 2, 2018

Is there any notion of *power* left in what we call international relations if one rules out nation-states and political and strategic dynamics? The articles in this special issue give readers a good panorama of the multiple aspects of this interrogation, allowing them to question even what seems unquestionable, its “International” dimension. Covering historical process from the twentieth century, they paradoxically permit a positive answer to be flirted with, while clearly reminding us that the nation-state and its core mechanisms have not disappeared despite being strongly challenged.

Society and social forces are the main focus of the narratives about the past published in this special issue. They were captured building transnational interactions and relations, challenging ethnocentrism as frequently seen in the literature in the past few years<sup>1</sup>. However, even when the analysis tackles classic inter-state dynamics, with actors advancing “posture[s] of Gladiators,” to quote Hobbes<sup>2</sup>, those societal forces were remarkably acknowledged and scrutinized. At the same time, since “capacities” and “results” were also taken into account, these articles take us to the very core of the dialectical relationship between powerful and powerless entities

<sup>1</sup> For some edited volumes on the topic published in Brazil in the last few years see, for instance: the dossier “Brazil in the Global Context, 1870-1945” (*História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, vol. 21 no. 1, Rio de Janeiro Jan./Mar. 2014), the dossier “Brazil in Global History” (*Revista Brasileira de História*, vol. 34 no. 68, São Paulo July/Dec. 2014) and the dossier “Global and Transnational Approaches” (*Estudos Históricos*, vol. 60, no. 60, Jan./Apr. 2017). For other studies recently published in Latin America or about Latin America and Global History, see: MARQUESE, Rafael, PIMENTA, João Paulo. “Tradições de história global na América Latina e no Caribe”, *História da Historiografia*, n. 17, 2015, p. 30-49 and SCHULZE, Frederik, FISCHER, Georg. “Brazilian History as Global History”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 2018, p. 1-15 and the issue 69, July 2018, of *Historia Critica*.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter XIII of his *Leviathan*.

or dynamics in international relations, making possible a new understanding of what Bertrand Badie once called “the powerlessness of power” (Badie 2004).

The different works presented here focus on the materialization and the exercise of *power* in particular times and spaces. All the texts share two main concerns. First, the critical analysis of situations of rivalry of *powers* projected or inserted in space, in territories, regardless of their scales (local, regional, national, continental or intercontinental). Second, a different critical analysis, that of representations or immaterial vectors of these rivalries and clashes while inserted in minds, imaginaries, and ideologies. This second approach, despite its ambition, also takes into account the game of scales and is interested, therefore, in clashes or cooperation between *powers* internal and external to a nation-state, or between political entities that disregard the state or even the nation. In fact, this set of considerations demonstrates the potential and the limit of the nationalization of International Relations as a discipline, exploring various forms of human interaction, such as economic, political and cultural. By relying on new geographically and methodologically non confined fields of historical research and by taking as premise the profound historical nature of what is often called the “international system,” these scholars revisit history allowing the emergence of international and transnational dynamics frequently overlooked by academia.

Benjamin Cowan (University of California San Diego), for instance, presents an inspiring work in this sense, especially in a time of fragmentation and pluralization of political cultures. For him, there was a displacement of *power*, of influence, and control capacities, moving away from the state towards organized movements in civil society interested in transnational and international relations in the second half of the twentieth century. His main argument is built on the perception of organizations such as *Tradição, Família e Propriedade* and *International Policy Forum* that state *power* had begun to fade during this period and, consequently, that their strategy should also evolve, leaving the state arena behind, in order for their own *power* to endure. The transnational New Right analyzed by Cowan founded its agenda on a “combination of renewed economic liberalism; resistance to social welfare and egalitarianism; anticommunism, nationalism, and reaction against the cultural pluralism and the (real and perceived) modernization of the 1960s.” Through this topic, he explores the foundational role played by Brazil and its Christian conservatives in the expansion of conservatism beyond borders. His work calls our attention to many others innovative studies indicating the “ways in which new forms of politicized Christianity redefined the contours of Brazil’s Right in the aftermath of dictatorship.”

The transnational approach advocated by Cowan can be understood in relation to three motives: first, the sharing, by the movements analyzed, of an ideology in disregard of any national perspective (for them, there was no government, but rather God given rights), second, the sharing of common enemies such as Marxism, moral dissolution, and modernism, and third, due to their developments in a connected process within the *International Policy Forum*, a clear dialogue with the works of Matthew Connelly (Connelly 2008) or of Luc van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin, and Giles Scott-Smith (van Dongen et al. 2014). Interestingly, local and national dimensions are not

disregarded. Despite having an enemy considered to be contaminating societies around the globe, the Christian conservatives studied by Cowan believed the more intense combats would occur within the national arenas. In the end, that meant a national fight, motivated by a transnational imperative in a global process.

Also dialoguing with the challenging of an international state based analysis is the paper by Albert Manke (Universität Bielefeld). However, instead of looking for the decline of national political *power* during the second half of the twentieth century, Manke prefers to study a case of its rise (in Maoist China) combined with Chinese migratory movements towards Latin America in the 1950's. One of his main arguments concerns the impact of China's Communist Revolution on Cuba's Chinese community (and Cuban society) in the early Cold War. Dealing with a combination of challenges, such as the non-use of the category of classes to understand Cuban society on the eve of the 1959 Revolution, the scholar tries to understand "how the dynamics of the Cuban Revolution and the Chinese Revolution converged to effect a change of powers in the Chinese quarter of Havana, the nucleus of power of the Chinese community in Cuba."

Manke discovers, for instance, the different dynamics of this immigrant community, part of which was composed of former landlords who had left China after 1949, and who strongly feared the evolution of the Cuban political crisis in the late 1950's, while another part created brigades to actually take part in the 1959 radicalization. These characteristics, strongly marked by their former experiences in China, lead us to question whether we can reduce trans-border migratory movements to a transnational phenomenon just because they occur outside the state machine. What Manke shows us is that, despite being the result of a non-state sponsored process, immigrant communities still preserved their national identity, even if experimenting a more direct dialogue with a different one. Despite living in a different territory from their origin, these communities still create "inter"-national processes abroad. In this Latin American case, one can see combined in the same space different social process attached to similar or different times (such as the one from the Chinese Revolution, the one from the Cuban Revolution, or even the one from the Cold War).

In any case, this paper raises several provocations for those willing to bring an innovative historical approach into their research. Indeed, the fact that communism is considered in both an international and transnational perspective brings additional complexity to the analysis. As the author stated, "many of these conveyors of transpacific communist ideas were part of a network of global leftist revolutionaries (and/or intellectuals and artists) like Ernesto 'Che' Guevara who disseminated and connected different interpretations of leftist ideologies and inspired thousands of followers." Manke struggles to master this complexity by opposing a diplomatic, state-to-state, level of analysis with others focusing on society, or on a people-to-people level. The complex game of scales ends by questioning the existence of a single definition or source of *power*. In a clear dialogue with the works of Matthew Rothwell (Rothwell 2013), this study certainly opens a hugely potential research agenda for transpacific historical research during the Cold War.

Moving towards articles encompassing more international state-based analysis, but also proposing innovative historical research, we have the papers by James Cameron (King's College London) and Carlo Patti (Universidade Federal de Goiás). Drawing on approaches in dialogue with the propositions of Bruce Mazlish (Mazlish 1993, Mazlish and Buultjens 2006) and Itty Abraham (Abraham 2004), their contributions deal with global nuclear history and with cooperation in the nuclear field through innovative lenses: breaking with the premise of a monolithic and consensual origin of national nuclear policy and strategy for international action, in the case of Cameron, and looking at different and formerly overlooked spaces of nuclear relations, for Patti.

As in the work of Tony Smith (Smith 2000), Cameron takes into account a Pericentric Framework to demonstrate not just that the local impacts the global, but also that the local appropriates and explores the global for its own benefits. All through an intricate research question: at the heart of a dictatorship in Brazil, how to identify and analyze contradictions and negotiations among the Executive, the Legislature, and Civil Society around the debate on nuclear policy and strategy for foreign action?

Cameron highlights some unknown aspects of the political debate related to the 1975 Brazil-West German nuclear deal – particularly, the analysis of Lysâneas Maciel's attempt to include an amendment to the nuclear agreement with the aim of “boxing the Brazilian regime into a corner.” The research presents us not just with the evolutions and involutions of Brazilian attempts to master the nuclear fuel cycle, but also how fragile the building of an international regime was due to these many local challenges to compromise with. For Cameron, “this story therefore adds further depth to our understanding of the role of non-state actors in challenging the Brazilian dictatorship's portrayal of the dimensions and aims of the country's nuclear program.” He also stresses how relevant the Brazilian case is to a richer and more balanced writing of a global nuclear history: “the Brazilian story is of a different nature, thereby underlining the importance of a truly global perspective when evaluating the dimensions of nuclear protest. Instead of seeking the rollback of nuclear power, scientists and in particular politicians criticized the military regime for not being assertive enough in its quest for Brazil's independence in this field.”

In Patti's work, in addition to also producing an innovative study in line with a Pericentric Framework (through the examination of South Africa–Brazil nuclear relations at the turn of the 1970s), the article presents a dense empirical study. Taking into account an imperative global horizon for the evolution of the mastering and use of nuclear technology, the author demonstrates how actors mistakenly taken as marginal could shape the international regime. When analyzing the impact on the Third World and the repercussions from their perspective of the 1964 Chinese explosion of a nuclear device, Patti also stresses that a national approach tells only part of the story. The evolution of South African talks with Brazil then appear not just as relevant for a global history narrative, but also critical to understanding what could appear an odd behavior when compared with the evolution of Soviet-American relations on the topic. As Patti reminds

us, “Pretoria and Brasilia strongly opposed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), had ambitious atomic programs, received cooperation from West Germany, had large reserves of uranium, and were targets of the nuclear non-proliferation policies of the United States.” However, despite these parallels (*i.e.*, forces that could bring these actors together and generate a projection of power or solidarity when threatened), Patti’s discoveries surprisingly show the reasons why a collaboration plan was refused, particularly because of Brazilian opposition connected to political and technological reasons.

Going further into the past, more closely to the turn of the twentieth century, the papers from Patrick Cohrs (University of Florence), José Antonio Sanchez-Roman (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), and Juan Pablo Scarfi (Universidad Nacional de San Martín) deeply enrich the special issue by reevaluating the time and the processes mostly known for boosting state *power*. They demonstrate not just that classic narratives centered on the rise of the United States deserve to be continually challenged, but that the axiom of American superpower is a loose one, especially if one takes into account historical processes occurring from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Cohrs creates an ambitious narrative. As in Arne Westad’s works (Westad 2005), he considers the globe as a unified platform where the reorganization of different societies takes place, in a common process and shared time. Targeting the Anglo-American tradition of International History, he evokes a transnational approach in order to question a certain idea of national methodological exceptionalism in the writing of History (Cohrs 2009).

With the aim of proposing a new interpretation for the “Pax Americana” of the early Cold War, he revisits the shaping of US post-war strategies and attempts to build a new and lasting international system. Cohrs then puts forward a new approach to this process by evoking a learning process perspective over several generations. For him, in this case, *power* relied on the necessity and the opportunity to lead, but also on how to create an American leadership recognized as legitimate even if American self-perception as an exceptional society was also part of the process. Cohrs then struggles to create a different interpretation from those which stressed the neo-imperialist or empire by invitation models.

The result is a new chapter for the literature that follows classic orthodox-revisionist-post-revisionist tradition, with the last group including the famous Leffler-Gaddis battles of the 1980’s (Gaddis 1983, Leffler 1984). The direct dialogue with Sanchez-Roman’s piece and recent historiography comes from the observation that there was no unilateralism and that New Deal policies or the long-term trends of American foreign policy were strongly inspired by experiences taking place in many parts of the world (Patel 2016, Hopkins 2018). In that sense, one of the most original aspects of Cohrs’ research is his concern with comparing and differentiating US relations with Europe and the Third World. The simultaneous reading of Sanchez-Roman gives the reader a deep understanding of the repercussions and interactions of the US agenda with the world, in addition to several elements to understand to what extent that interaction was genuinely a collaborative effort. In addition to dialogue and



alignment, it is interesting to see how Sanchez-Roman and Scarfi challenge Cohrs' paper. While Cohrs helps us to comprehend the reasons why US model could not be reproduced in East Asia, where the United States preferred bilateral structures rather than multilateral ones, Sanchez-Roman questions his argument that the model also failed in Latin America because US policymakers opted for authoritarian allies, whereas Scarfi challenges Woodrow Wilson's pioneering role when proposing a supposed ground-breaking liberal multilateralism in the aftermath of the Great War.

Sanchez-Roman, in fact, goes much further beyond this debate. A transnational approach, for him, should not necessarily be a matter of space, but of networks. He is concerned with how ideas are generated, emitted, circulated, received and appropriated, in a state-of-the-art approach in the discipline. The fact that the definition or the perception of what an idea means can change, in this case the dissemination of the New Deal outside the US, poses the question of *power* not as given or predefined object, but as result of every relation established in history and scrutinized by the international relations historian. This is the main mission of those interested in studying how relations among different societies and cultures are built and how they evolve through time. The challenge is not to assume these dynamics happen in a similar space and time for each of the components of the connection created. Actually, that would be the precise moment when perceptions and misperceptions emerge and cause impacts, when coexist multiple socio-cultural realities creating the most varied interactions and dynamics, as Serge Gruzinski has shown in his recent writings (Gruzinski 2014). In Sanchez-Roman's article, he calls attention, for instance, to how the Mexican government of Cardenas used the label "Mexican New Deal" to envelope a series of administrative measures aiming at social reform including the actual expropriation of US assets in the country!

Another of his arguments is aligned with those of Scarfi, namely that Inter-American experiments and thinking (for Scarfi from the nineteenth century, for Jose from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s) were crucial in the foundation and reform of the multilateral system implemented in 1919 and 1945. Here the reader is also confronted with a transnational approach advocating ideas being circulated and appropriated. At the same time, by working with networks of legal experts in Latin America and with their impact on the international system, the piece advocates a new place in Global History for the development of the regional legal field. What Scarfi brings to light are networks of legal experts shaping the international order and provincializing the European place in the reconfiguration of the post-WWI international system and the rise of the US as a global hegemonic power, disclosing a mostly unknown Inter-American legal tradition and thought. As he stressed in his conclusions, "Latin American jurists and diplomats not only contributed to globalizing a series of norms and legal principles associated with the identity of the region, but also forged a global and normative identity that was elusive since its inception within the new international legal order."

Finally, we have the paper by Felipe Loureiro, Hamilton C. Gomes Junior and Rebeca G. A. Braga (Universidade de São Paulo) directly evoking and properly employing Tony Smith's

already mentioned Pericentric Framework in order to study inter-American conflicts surrounding potential Cuban membership in LAFTA in 1961 and 1962. They then reveal an additional piece of the puzzle for a real global understanding of the Cold War, with the advantage of highlighting an apparently odd regional agency from a space that remains overlooked by Cold War literature. Indeed, according to their conclusion, “this story is highly significant because Cuba’s failed attempt to join LAFTA was determined more by the attitudes of Latin American countries than those of the United States.”

Another distinction of the article is the choice of not jumping from Global to Transnational and then to International History (or to another fashionable label one can find in the literature at the moment) in a careless way. Rather, the authors demonstrate that deep and important historical research can be developed without imprudently overstating the supposed use of a global approach in every paragraph. Actually, as the reader will be able to verify her/himself, all scholars publishing in this special issue adopt different definitions of Global History. The overall substantial contribution, in fact, comes from considerable empirical research and from the common concern of identifying and analysing how different societies connect and establish relations that evolve through time. For those willing to learn more about the epistemological debate, Loureiro, Gomes Junior and Braga go actually further, accepting the task of debating with and challenging what they call a “rising star” in historical studies. Additionally, they build a significant argument putting into perspective the nature and the extent of *power* Washington and Moscow held in the shaping of the Cold War. While defying those taking foreign policy as existing regardless of national politics, the authors demonstrate the variable influence of a transnational anti-communism, both across the region and within Brazil and its impact on dealing with the Cuban agenda in the early 1960s.

To return to the initial question, historians cannot ignore either the place of states or the political and strategical dimensions of their relations. The articles published here, however, have developed a much broader critical and historical analysis of the elements and fallouts of *power*. At the same time, by not understanding transnational dynamics as those happening outside or in disregard of the state, but actually bypassing the very idea of nation as a source and shaping of agency, they allow us to perceive a much more complex and rich arena where relations among societies, cultures, and economies are born, endure, and fade.

What the articles indicate is that *power* is not a given and particular situation nor categorical data that can be determined in advance, but the result of a specific relationship established in a particular time and space. Then they move to the search for the sources of *power*. Nation-state is thus no longer a normative frame of reference to understand either the origins of *power* or its manifestations. That does not mean the nation-state is dead. Scholars should actually pay attention now to a complex scenario of analysis. The works published here reveal this richness of current research, suggesting interesting paths for future investigations, both in what we could call classic topics but also in absolutely new frontiers.

## References

- Abraham, I. "Notes toward a Global Nuclear History." *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 46/47 (2004): 4997–5005.
- Badie, B. *L'impuissance de la puissance. Essai sur les nouvelles relations internationales*. Paris: Fayard, 2004.
- Cohrs, P. "Pax Americana." In *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, edited by Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier. p. 815 - 821 London: Palgrave, 2009.
- Connelly, M. *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- van Dongen, L., S. Roulin, and G. Scott-Smith. *Transnational Anti-communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, Networks*. New York: Palgrave, 2014.
- Gaddis, J. L. "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Thesis on the Origins of the Cold War", *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 171-90. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.1983.tb00389.x.
- Gruzinski, S. *The Eagle and the Dragon: Globalization and European Dreams of Conquest in China and America in the Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.
- Hopkins, A. G. *American Empire: A Global History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Leffler, M. P. "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of Cold War, 1945-48." *American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (1984): 346-81.
- Mazlish, B., and R. Buultjens, (Eds.). *Conceptualizing Global History*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
- Mazlish, B. *The New Global History*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Patel, K. *The New Deal: A Global History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Rothwell, M. *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Smith, T. "New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 567-91. doi: 10.1111/0145-2096.00237.
- Westad, A. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.