

**TOWARDS A SOUTH-SOUTH PERSPECTIVE FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE  
IN BRAZIL: AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIANA BALLESTRIN**

***POR UMA PERSPECTIVA SUL-SUL PARA A CIÊNCIA POLÍTICA NO BRASIL:  
ENTREVISTA COM LUCIANA BALLESTRIN***

***POR UNA PERSPECTIVA SUR-SUR PARA LA CIENCIA POLÍTICA EN  
BRASIL: ENTREVISTA CON LUCIANA BALLESTRIN***



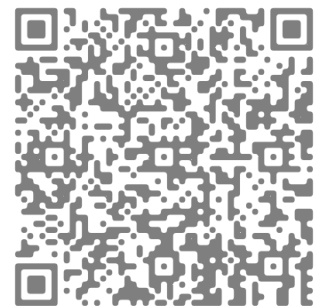
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The critique of social and political relations and scientific thought within the context of colonial, subaltern, and the Global South is an essential contribution from perspectives known as *post-coloniality* and *decoloniality*.

While these perspectives may seem well-established in the humanities, their adoption varies within the Social Sciences in Brazil and has been incorporated into Political Science through emerging debates in recent years.

To discuss this field of epistemological reflection and how it applies, develops, and questions Brazilian Political Science, we interviewed Dr. Luciana Ballestrin, a professor at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel). Luciana is an associate professor of Political Science in the International Relations program and the Graduate Program in Political Science (PPGCPol) at the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology, and Politics (IFISP) at UFPel, where she is also the program coordinator. She served on the national board of the Brazilian Political Science Association (ABCP) from 2018 to 2020, coordinates the Working Group "Democracies in Decline: Theoretical, Political, and Analytical Challenges" in the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences (ANPOCS), and the Thematic Area of Political Theory in ABCP. Luciana Ballestrin has made significant contributions to the still-emerging field of decolonial studies at the intersection of Political Science and International Relations, as well as analyses of the functioning of democracies, both nationally and internationally. Among her recent works, two articles published in 2022 stand out: "*Postcolonial and Decolonial Subaltern Feminisms*", published in *Postcolonial Studies*, and "*The Uncertain Future of Brazilian Democracy*", published in the *Brazilian Research and Studies Journal*.

Now, let's explore the results of this thought-provoking conversation about the paths and horizons of Political Science in Brazil.

**The terms *post-coloniality* and *decoloniality* are sometimes used interchangeably. Are they synonymous? Can we currently use them interchangeably?**

They are not synonymous as they reflect two distinct yet interrelated sets of discussions. This perception is grounded in the contexts of the emergence of these perspectives and the institutional and academic aspects involved in the debate. *Post-colonialism*, in general, is a field of study and an area that emerged or was named first. It was developed as a discipline mainly in the 1980s in renowned universities in the United States and England when the term gained popularity. This emergence occurred in the context of increasing globalization,

multiculturalism, and neoliberalism, while post-structuralism shaped new intellectual agendas. Therefore, post-colonialism was heavily influenced by a post-structural and post-foundational philosophical substrate. From this perspective, there is a focus on reintroducing anti-colonial critique through a post-structuralist approach. Unsurprisingly, the academic centers and departments that embraced this perspective are associated with cultural studies, literary studies, and literary criticism. Thus, post-colonialism primarily deals with the issue of identity representations in linguistic, cultural, artistic, and psychoanalytic terms, adopting a perspective of subjects and groups that have been subalternized or marginalized by the colonial and imperial processes.

This privileged approach to cultural and discursive representations has faced strong criticisms, initially from perspectives more closely related to Marxism and other theoretical currents. Some of these criticisms pointed out that "*post-colonialism*" carried ambiguities and inaccuracies regarding the prefix "post". This is because, unlike post-structuralism, the term "post-colonialism" could suggest the end of colonialism, which is precisely the opposite of the objective of post-colonial studies. Furthermore, the post-colonial perspective has been accused of presenting a certain exaggerated culturalism, as expressed by Aijaz Ahmad (2002), and of being "ahistorical".

Another critique emerges in the early 1990s in pioneering articles in this academic debate, which offer a critical reading of post-colonialism, bringing the Latin American context to the forefront of the discussion. This approach adopts a counter-colonial perspective, seeking to reinterpret, recover, and revise post-colonialism as an institutionalized academic field. From this critical discussion, the *decoloniality* concept arises as an outgrowth of this Latin American intervention in the global post-colonialism debate.

What this critique emphasizes and claims, then, is the existence of an imperial difference (not just colonial) between the processes of colonization experienced by Latin America, including Brazil, and those to which many diasporic migrants refer when discussing the topic of *post-colonialism* in universities of "developed" countries. Postcolonial authors refer to a process related to 19th-century imperialism in the pre-World War I context, while in Latin America, we are dealing with the first colonial experience in Europe. The colonialism experienced by Latin America and Brazil, in particular, was historically different and preceded the colonial and imperial processes in other regions.

This perspective also claims the relevance of critical figures in Latin American political thought, such as activists, writers, intellectuals, and researchers, who have already developed a

crucial reflection on the region. Interestingly, Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano introduced the notion of "coloniality of power" in his article "*Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad*", published in 1992. However, it was only after the "decolonial turn" that the concept gained wider circulation and significant impact.

When we look at the number of citations of Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo's works in search engines like *Google Scholar*, we can perceive the growth and dissemination of these concepts. It is essential to highlight that the 1990s was a period of reception of post-colonial studies in Latin America. Notably, the decolonial turn originated in the United States, with the dissolution of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, inspired by the Indian *Subaltern Studies* group. This also requires a translation of subaltern subjects in relation to the Indian context and the creation of *Subaltern Studies*. Subsequently, following the dissolution of this group, the decolonial turn advanced with a group of researchers who brought decoloniality as a response, update, resistance, and confrontation to the logic of coloniality.

In summary, these terms are interchangeable as they critique colonialism. However, this critique takes different forms about Latin America. We must never forget the tradition of reflection and criticism of colonialism that dates back to the 19th century, even if it is not necessarily labeled as post-colonial, anti-colonial, or decolonial. We must be cautious in labeling or framing these perspectives without considering what has been produced before, even if it has not necessarily been given these names.

### **Can we say that Brazilian Social Sciences have similarly incorporated this reflection? How do you see the debate on decoloniality within Brazilian Political Science?**

Notably, the debate around post-colonial and decolonial perspectives arrived late in Brazilian Social Sciences. This is partly due to the dynamics of academic dependence and the geopolitics of knowledge since such criticisms were always mediated or authorized by the global North. Although there have been decolonial studies with thinkers from the region since the 1960s and 1970s, within discussions on dependence, liberation, and with references to Dussel, Quijano, and a more Marxist record of the time, this perspective only gained visibility from some meetings held in the global North. For example, Argentine Walter D. Mignolo, one of the exponents of the decolonial philosophy, made his entire career in the United States and projected his thinking within this field from *Duke University*. Although there is debate among Latin American exponents, the material conditions for knowledge production occurred in the global North. When Arif Dirlik was asked in the early 90s when postcolonialism began, he

replied ironically: “When third-world intellectuals arrived at first-world universities”. Thus, post-colonial and decolonial criticism face a paradox of origin, and it is necessary to deal with this contradiction recurrently”.

On the other hand, although the debate around post-colonial and decolonial perspectives arrived late in Brazilian Social Sciences, as I mentioned earlier, the central themes of these perspectives were already addressed by some disciplines and areas, even without claiming the term. Anthropology, for example, deals with issues related to post-colonialism and decolonial criticism when addressing different groups, post-colonial/colonized identities, and the marginalization of these populations. Sociology has been entirely engaged in this debate in the last two decades, updating the agenda of “third-world sociology” and the discussions on theoretical and intellectual autonomy raised by it through theories and epistemologies of the South. These debates were frequent in the 1950s and 1960s when there was much discussion about independence, dependence, and theorization issues. Brazilian social thought brings essential contributions to thinking about these issues without necessarily framing them within the “decolonial” label. Since the late 2000s, researchers from Sociology and Anthropology have been engaging with this critical agenda of knowledge construction in Social Sciences, as can be seen in the works of Paulo Henrique Martins, Marcelo Rosa, João Marcelo Maia, Adélia Miglievich, Eloísa Martín, and Cláudio Costa Pinheiro.

Political Science, in turn, is the discipline that arrives latest in this debate, especially when compared to the area of International Relations (IR). In the case of IR, it is vital to highlight the international influence of England and the United States. Again, global North centers need to authorize or mediate the entry of these studies into contexts most affected by inequality and academic dependence. As a result, IR is an area/discipline with more post-colonial and decolonial discussions than Political Science. Even the *boom* in “Latin American constitutionalism” studies occurred via Law. This can be observed in groups, congresses, and seminars. Political Science arrives later in this debate due to its objects of research and its conception of disciplined politics enclosed within an institutional register and, in a way, presentist. This has a lot to do with the formation of the field in Brazil.

### **In light of this, what are the challenges for a Political Science from the South?**

It is crucial to consider the term “decolonial” not as an adjective or a school of its own and not to understand it in the singular, as several derivations and meanings are disputed about what decolonization is today. There is no single meaning or reading for this; it will depend on what we understand by “decolonial” in different senses and directions.

Another fundamental point is to be critical of the totalizing way decolonial criticism has circulated, generating conceptual hypertrophy. Care must be taken not to create a perspective of colonial totality that can be complicated, where everything is colonized, and everything is colonial. This does not help to understand the specificities of colonial power and its remnants. Not all relations of power, domination, and oppression originate from colonialism, but colonialism implies relations of domination, oppression, violence, and control. It is necessary to know where politics is crossed by colonialism.

I agree that there is a particular abuse of this language, where what does not fit into a decolonial Political Science would, therefore, be a colonizer’s Political Science. It is essential to recognize that there are imported agendas and theoretical perspectives that do not consider our specificities. At the same time, we are a community that seeks to build itself institutionally from this (semi)peripheral condition. Although our Political Science is heavily influenced by the United States, where Political Science is opening to specific perspectives, ours does not always incorporate them similarly. It seems that we open up with mediation, permission or with an influence from other contexts that become more porous. Significantly, Gayatri C. Spivak was the keynote speaker at the *International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congress* in 2021.

We can think about the constitution of Political Science from the South, considering the decomposition of its sub-disciplines and areas. Some are more fruitful for thinking about interlocutions, collaboration, and proximity with Latin America, the Caribbean, and Central America, which is fundamental and exciting to broaden this dialogue. ALACIP (Latin American Political Science Association) is a place where this encounter has been taking place. Associations have an important role in promoting this approach and enabling breakthroughs.

We are not able to swim against the current alone. It is essential to realize that many spaces must be built to work on specific issues. South-South dialogues are not yet ready and, in some cases, are not even in place. There is still a long way to go to be constituted.

**Reflections on subalternity and decoloniality heavily mark the gender debate. How can these criticisms help problematize Political Science towards an epistemology of the South? Is it possible to think about the contradictions of the social sciences perspective and scientific practice in Latin America?**

Feminism has not been immune to the influence of post-colonialism and the decolonial perspective. There is an entire field known as post-colonial feminism and decolonial feminism. In the South-North or vice versa sense, the first global-level debate is the decolonization of feminism, especially about representation, identities, and power relations within feminist movements. There was a moment when Nancy Fraser was questioned in this sense and acknowledged that these are internal discussions of feminism. However, this internal debate transcended the boundaries of the movement itself, reaching the decoloniality of gender and its relationship with the State.

It is interesting to note that, from a political and social point of view, Latin American feminism has its agenda, including criticisms of neoliberalism and issues related to poverty and material deprivation since the 1970s. The history of Latin American feminism is rich and decolonial feminism, which developed especially after 2005, brought some specificities. In political practice, it also built different repertoires, moving a field that is far from being harmonious but that grows and has essential reference thinkers with consolidated trajectories, such as Rita Laura Segato and María Lugones. This accumulation of reflections, debates, political action, and practical experience of feminism can be a reference for thinking about a political science from the South.

**Another issue we wanted to address is what we can call the “divorce between empiricism and theory” that we have observed in Political Science and leads research toward a very instrumentalist perspective. It is as if Political Science were reduced to methods and employability, and theory was discarded as an element, as well as qualitative methodologies, more interpretive ones, when they are not subsumed into the positivist model of Science. What do you think about this divorce and about what Brazilian Political Science has produced in relation to it? In light of this, how can we think about the present and future of our discipline?**

This is an excellent question because it involves the neo-liberalization of Science. Neoliberal rationality has influenced scientific thinking in various aspects, including unreflective and socially uncommitted productivism and the disrepute of what is not operational or utilitarian. Although concerns with methodologies may be valid, considering that they can be diverse and reinforce the social importance of Science, the discipline is guided by the extent

of metrics, measurement, causal explanations, and impacts. Combined with neo-liberalization, this trend transforms political theory almost into an automatic dissidence from Political Science.

In this logic, more theoretical studies are lowering, which may involve erudition and a deeper dive into social, political, and linguistic structures. The time required for theoretical production does not keep up with the speed of current academic scientific production, marginalizing and discrediting theory as a place for people who are not methodologically oriented.

This is serious, especially considering the democratic crisis we have faced worldwide in recent years. It is accompanied by a problem of theory, persecuted for not bringing immediate return or being applicable and for the critical place it occupies in the thinking of the human sciences.

This is an intrinsic criticism of our field and is directed toward the need for theoretical reflection that has been compromised. Debates about issues surrounding us as human beings, our conditions of existence, and inequalities are left aside. This can be felt when teaching theory disciplines, such as in an International Relations course. Depending on the approach, political theory can generate disinterest in students. Recently, I had a positive experience with a contemporary political theory discipline, where the class was engaged and participatory, and I was able to bring feminist and post-colonial perspectives. Ultimately, the students could relate theory to reality and see themselves in discussions about identity, representation, and sexuality. However, reading some themes and authors can be challenging and theoretical learning requires permanent reading.

**The process of democratizing the university brought research agendas that are very atypical of Political Science, some themes that have been historically under-theorized, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and politics aimed at the LGBTQIA+ population, among others. How can this renewed interest in these themes coexist or collaborate with what we consider *mainstream* in Political Science?**

The democratization of public universities, the expansion of courses and programs, the renewal of faculty and students, and their recruitment have contributed to renewing the agendas and the university itself. This occurred because the university was questioned about its internal elitism and began to come into contact with different Brazilian social and cultural realities, including a significant portion that had been excluded from public universities for many years. This expansion and democratization resulted from a government that engaged in dialogue with different groups, was receptive to pressure, and recognized social mobilizations from diverse



origins. Additionally, in the first decade of the 2000s, there was a progressive cycle in South America as a whole, which was necessary for this transformation despite its limitations and problems.

The democratic crisis we face is a reaction to the inclusion of new actors and the advancement of more egalitarian agendas. The 21st century has been marked by dramatic moments of democratic rupture with the election of authoritarian leaders. However, there were also moments of popular extension and activation with the growth of specific national and international agendas. These agendas have become more sensitive to racial inequalities, gender, the LGBTQIA+ population, and indigenous communities. This happened outside the Marxist context or the left associated with the world of labor and class, which dominated much of the 20th century. This is one of the issues debated in the field of the left in general, revolving around *identity politics*.

### **What do you consider to be the emerging themes of Latin American Political Science, then? How have they been driving our field?**

The magnitude of the multiple crises is crucial when discussing transformations and emerging themes. I am referring to the political democratic turmoil of recent years and the environmental crisis, which has been ongoing for a long time. We have the epistemic crisis and the pandemic crisis. Obviously, this context of multiple situations has affected various areas, but they have directly impacted our discipline. Even those who studied public policy and state bureaucracy could not avoid dealing with the damage caused by the Bolsonaro government to essential parts of the Brazilian state. In international relations as well, including the current issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This event of great magnitude deeply affects Europe and will have consequences for us here, creating a cascading effect, such as the supply crisis that will arise. In short, there are several themes that are advancing in Brazilian and Latin American Political Science and its established areas.

Considering its two strong explanatory paradigms - institutionalism and political culture -we see the theme of the quality of democracy, which, from a more contemporary perspective, brings the dimension of gender and state responses. If we think about it, the Argentine political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell had concerns about inequalities in his political theory. Towards the end of his career, he also focused on the quality of democracy.

Political theory is another strategic area for the issues we discuss, as it has historically been a more undisciplined field. This is because it relates to political philosophy,

psychoanalysis, and psychology. Political theory is a very democratic area and, I would say, the most open field to work with new questions. In the *Revista Sul-Americana de Ciência Política*, we have tried to give a little more emphasis to theory in recent years, but this has been somewhat challenging. This is because Brazil has its centers of excellent production, and the pressure to produce for particular qualified "A1" and "A2" journals makes this type of initiative lose potential contributors and interlocutors.

**The debate on gender and racial inequality, for example, has not been confined to our objectives alone. They have occupied an important place in the discussion within the field itself, with debates on disparities between women and men in Brazilian Political Science, the impact of motherhood on careers, the concentration of scholarships among male researchers, and the concentration of university management activities in the hands of women, among others. How do you perceive this?**

I consider the issue of women's participation in Political Science and gender disparities to be extremely important. This topic has gained relevance and visibility in recent years, being addressed in research and representations within the field. I recall the project and book promoted by the Brazilian Political Science Association (ABCP) during the presidency of Flávia Biroli (2018-2020), which explored the presence of women in this field and included interviews with influential female political scientists from across Brazil. My concern has always been to promote an opening toward a more equitable area and to seek progress, as has already been witnessed by some international associations. Furthermore, this type of reflection - which has a political nature and discusses the need for more excellent representation and participation of different groups and perspectives - reflects social movements and representative groups and has also entered the scientific realm. Political Science is traditionally a discipline with a predominantly male presence, just like International Relations. It is important to emphasize that when gender minority groups start participating, issues of inequality in positions and access are raised to highlight the existing disparities. The idea is to occupy spaces so that, at some point, this debate is no longer necessary.

Pursuing greater equality and representation is fundamental for various feminisms, women's groups, and feminist movements. Motherhood within networks of women scientists is of utmost importance as it relates to the intersection of productive and reproductive work and their visibility in the public sphere. In other words, the dimension of domestic work itself and the sexual division of labor are present when it comes to intellectual and academic work.

I view this movement in the field with optimism and believe we are progressing and advancing in this concern. This applies not only in a general sense but also in achieving equitable representation in thematic areas, seeking more gender and regional symmetry. We must not forget the need for discussions on race as well.

It is essential to highlight the context of a significant crisis. This is paradoxical. On the one hand, we observe some advances that indicate institutions have been maturing, absorbing, and actively seeking this positive development for some time amid a scenario that paradoxically presents several democratic setbacks. We have experienced and are still suffering from the effects of an extremely hostile political environment for experienced researchers and young scientists. This new generation, recently obtaining their doctoral degrees or nearing completion, has done so in a still hostile climate, with significant discouragement to pursue further research. We can now rebuild and reconstruct some of what has been destroyed.

This crisis challenges us to rethink objects, methods, and our profession and field. It is a great challenge, but we can find paths to promising horizons if we remain attentive.

**What would be your suggestions for those interested in learning more about decoloniality, post-coloniality, horizons, and emerging themes in Political Science? Where should one start?**

It is interesting to note that the question you are asking me now was one I asked myself ten years ago. It is important to mention that in Political Science, we still have a limited number of works on this topic. We find more traces of this discussion in related themes, such as the debate on race and politics, gender and politics, but we are still in the early stages. Therefore, we need to explore areas of intersection and interdisciplinary approaches to establish a solid foundation. It is necessary to indicate connection points for this debate, whether with Sociology, Anthropology, International Relations, or Law. We should conduct more research, produce dossiers on these topics, and create spaces for discussion.

In 2013, I recall that we established a network called "Colonialities and International Politics" due to a seminar organized by the Institute of International Relations at PUC-Rio that year. Some of the discussions from that event were published in the book "Perspectivas pós-coloniais e decoloniais em Relações Internacionais" (Postcolonial and Decolonial Perspectives in International Relations), released in 2021 by EDUFBA and available online for free. Furthermore, the same publisher will soon terminate a book on social theory and postcolonialism, which emerged from a course taught during the pandemic. In recent years,

interest in these topics has grown considerably, and I believe this requires an explanation. A quick search in the CNPq Groups Directory reveals several initiatives from different areas and disciplines across the country guided by postcolonial and decolonial critiques.

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