A Political Economy of Arab-Latin American Relations:
Notes and Theoretical Reflections from within the “American Social Science” of IR

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FLACSO-ISA Joint International Conference
July 23-25, 2014
Buenos Aires

Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of predominantly Latin American scholars have started to analyze the history and present state of Arab-Latin American relations. Yet within what Stanley Hoffman famously referred to as the “American social science” of International Relations (IR), there is little recognition of this growing body of scholarship or of the increasing importance of South-South relations more generally. In addition to interrogating mainstream, Global North IR’s problematic relationship with the Global South, this paper attempts to break this silence by presenting a general overview of the existing literature on Arab-Latin American relations. By delineating what is (and is not) known about these relations from extant sources, I hope to contribute to the decolonization of the field. In addition, my analysis suggests several lacunae within this literature. These include a prevailing commitment to state-centrism and an overwhelming empirical, as opposed to theoretical, focus. Based on my own research, which has entailed conducting in-depth interviews with Latin American capitalist elites who have economic interests in the Arab world, I thus present a political economy-inspired account of Arab-Latin American relations that A) captures the role of both public and private actors and B) contributes to theoretical debates within global political economy concerning our understanding of class and the formation of a transnational or at least trans-regional consciousness among globalizing elites.

Keywords: South-South relations; political economy; Arab-Latin American relations
Introduction

Within what Stanley Hoffman (1977) famously referred to as the “American social science” of mainstream International Relations (IR), to the extent the Global South is mentioned at all, it exists primarily as a site for the exercise of Northern power. The idea that Southern actors not only have agency, but may interact among themselves in meaningful ways, is largely beyond the pale. This paper exposes and breaks IR’s silence concerning South-South relations by turning to a particular example that has mostly been overlooked by Northern scholars: Latin America’s booming relations with the Arab world.

Such has been the substantive increase in these relations that the two regions are said to be creating “a new world economic geography” (Karam 2007, 174). Yet this current rise is linked to what the former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva refers to as a “reencounter” between two civilizations with a history of linkages (Karam 2007, 174). These include Arab migration, the flow of petrodollars to Latin America in the 1970s, and the oft-ignored broader history of South-South relations through institutions such as the Non-Aligned Movement. This paper follows Lula’s lead by utilizing existing literature to recover this overlooked history of Arab-Latin American relations, thus historicizing the field’s marginalization of South-South relations. By analyzing the history and present status of these relations, this paper hopes to contribute to the decolonization of IR and the establishment of a more globally inclusive field.

In addition to analyzing its marginalized position within the field, this paper also seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on Arab-Latin American relations, which has been produced almost entirely by Southern scholars. Here, I identify two main gaps in the literature that I attempt to address. First, the literature on Arab-Latin American relations is overly state-centric and devotes insufficient attention to how other actors are also involved in promoting these ties. As such, this paper
focuses on the undertheorized web of public and private economic actors – including business networks (such as the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce), economic bureaucracies (e.g. export-promotion agencies), and international business organizations (for example, the Gulf Latin America Leaders Council) – and how they, as globalizing elites, play a fundamental role as agents in facilitating inter-regional economic exchange.

Secondly, while this literature is overwhelmingly empirical, this paper presents a brief discussion of my own efforts to utilize Arab-Latin American relations to contribute to broader theoretical debates within the field of global political economy. Particularly within the past decade and a half, numerous scholars have theorized the rise of the “transnational capitalist class” (Carroll 2010; Robinson 2004; Sklair 2001). What distinguishes this would-be class ideationally is that its members do not identify with “any real or imagined nation-state” (Sklair 2001, 295). Instead, they share an “identity in the global system” based on their common transnational class (Robinson 2004, 47-48). Thus, they form an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006) of transnational capitalists.

With the aim of subverting the IR convention of foregrounding the experiences of the North, this paper uses Arab-Latin American relations to analyze the extent to which the would-be transnational capitalist class forms such an imagined community. Based on dozens of in-depth interviews with Latin American economic elites who have business ties with the Arab world, this paper presents a brief overview of my interpretive analysis of their class consciousness. My research suggests that the rhetoric surrounding “transnational” classes is overblown as these actors think primarily in national terms. In addition to finding few hints of a transnational capitalist class consciousness, this paper argues that there is little to suggest that a growing trans-regional Arab-Latin American consciousness links the regions. Further, my analysis demonstrates the need to expand conventional definitions of the capitalist class in the field of global political economy to account for the role of merchant capitalists.
The Global North Discipline of IR and the Specter of South-South Relations

With few exceptions, mainstream Global North IR ignores or denies the reality or possibility of South-South relations, or Southern agency more generally. Given that Global South actors “are takers, instead of makers, of international policy” – as Robert Keohane (quoted in Carranza 2006, 814) once noted about Latin America – there is little reason to pay attention to them.1 This marginalization is based, in part, on the perceived ontological threat that Southern agency poses to Northern domination of the global system (Krasner 1985). In other words, the South is ignored precisely because it threatens the idea of Northern hegemony; what makes South-South relations dangerous, in turn, is that they call into question the notion that the North is always central in questions of international politics and economics.

This is unfortunate, for the study of South-South relations could shed light on research topics that are of perennial interest in mainstream IR. For example, scholars concerned with war and peace should be intrigued by South America’s “external-peace-and-internal-violence paradox”: that is, that despite the region’s extreme internal violence, it has seen fewer major interstate wars “than any other peripheral area in the world” (Martín 2009, 143). Thus, while the famed IR theorist Kenneth Waltz (1979, 72) once wrote that “It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor firms in a sector of an economy,” one might conclude the opposite: it would be ridiculous not to.

At the very least, the South demands our attention given that it is home to the vast majority of the world’s population. The South and Southern people’s lived experiences in international politics are

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1 Even if Keohane is right, this does not necessarily mean we should ignore the South. For example, in disciplines such as anthropology it is entirely normal for scholars to lend their voices to those lacking in power and agency.
thus essential for any attempts at global understanding. In turn, the idea that it is exclusively European history that is foundational to the field – and a sanitized version of it, which downplays the experiences and legacies of imperialism, colonialism, racism, and slavery – occludes the many histories of international relations that exist around the globe. Even if we grant that “Europe set the pattern for the organization of and interaction among nation-states that persists to the present day,” per a recent textbook, it simply does not follow, as the authors argue, that “Any examination of how world politics came to attain its present form must therefore begin in Europe” (Spiegel et al. 2012, 61). Rather than likening a focus on the South to studying oligopolies through the actions of “minor firms,” what Waltz’s position really boils down to, to take another political-economy example, is that we can somehow understand capitalism without theorizing from the perspective of the working class.

If the South is largely invisible in mainstream IR and associated disciplines, then the idea of South-South relations suffers from a double marginalization. To summarize the implicit argument: if the South lacks agency, as is commonly presumed, then Southern regions are incapable of interacting with one another in meaningful ways. Thus, while the South does appear with some regularity in mainstream scholarship as an agency-less site for the exercise of Northern power, the issue of South-South relations is ignored with virtual unanimity. Relations between Latin America and the Arab world are of course no exception to this trend.

There is by now a relatively voluminous body of literature that focuses on – or at least makes substantive mention of – Arab-Latin American relations and how these two seemingly disparate regions came to “meet” one another. However, virtually all of this scholarly production has taken place in Western academia’s periphery. This is true literally, as the vast majority of specialists in this area are

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2 Indeed, IR “traces its modern origins without embarrassment to a place and moment at the heart and height of imperialism” (Gruffydd Jones 2006, 2). As Brian Schmidt and others have documented, IR in fact was born as the would-be science of “colonial administration” (Long and Schmidt 2005).

3 An exception here is the case of China and particularly its relations with Africa and Latin America, a topic that has caused much hand-wringing in the West.
Latin Americans who are based at Latin American universities. Beyond the level of individual scholars, several of the region’s universities also feature academic units dedicated to the study of the Arab world and its relations with Latin America. These include: Universidad de Chile (Centro de Estudios Árabes; Center for Arab Studies); Universidade de São Paulo (Centro de Estudos Árabes; Center for Arab Studies); and, Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (CEMOAN – Centro de Estudios de Medio Oriente y el Norte de África; Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies). As a result of the resources, visibility, and community-building afforded by these academic units there is thus limited but significant institutional infrastructure in Latin America for the study of relations with the Arab world.

Other scholarly and lay organizations – again, predominantly within Latin America – also contribute to the production of knowledge on the intersections between the two regions. Most prominent among them are: BibliASPA, the Biblioteca e Centro de Pesquisa América do Sul-Países Árabes (Arab and South American Library and Research Center), located in São Paulo, which also administers its own publishing house, Edições BibliASPA; RIMAAL, the Red de Investigación Interdisciplinaria sobre el Mundo Árabe y América Latina (Network for Interdisciplinary Research on the Arab World and Latin America), an online community for Latin American and other scholars conducting research in this area; and the Centro de Estudios del Medio Oriente Contemporáneo (CEMOC; Center for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies) in Córdoba, Argentina. Both CEMOAN and CEMOC publish academic journals on the Arab world and Arab-Latin American relations – entitled, respectively, Revista Al-Kubri and ANMO: África del Norte y Medio Oriente. The Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce also publishes its own magazine and administers the online Brazil-Arab News Agency, both of which contribute substantially to the diffusion of news and analysis concerning these relations.

4 There is at least one counterpart in the Arab world: the Latin American Studies and Cultures Center at The Holy Spirit University of Kaslik in Lebanon.
To summarize, Arab-Latin American relations have ceased to be an unknown phenomenon if one knows where to look. Yet virtually all of the knowledge-production concerning these relations has occurred within Latin America. Given that mainstream IR – as is by now well known – is so parochial and North-centric that it is largely unwilling or unable to see, assimilate, or valorize Southern scholarship, these Latin American and other efforts have almost all been for naught from a disciplinary perspective in that they have had little to no resonance in the field's mainstream. This scholarship is also thus peripheral intellectually.

That is, even though an enterprising group of mostly Latin American scholars has amassed a significant body of work on Arab-Latin American relations, with few exceptions it has not been debated or cited – or even, presumably, read – by their Northern counterparts. Hence the narrower question raised by Evelyn Hu-DeHart (2009): “where are the turcos [i.e. Arab-descendant Latin Americans]” in Latin American Studies? This, again, is symptomatic of a larger malady affecting IR: the disjuncture between the idea of IR as a global discipline and its reality as an “American social science.” To extend the analysis of dependency theory into the realm of intellectual production, just as much of Latin America is stuck in the hamster wheel of commodity exports, so is its academic position cemented as a recipient of ideas from abroad rather than a producer of them (Dorfman and Mattelart 1991; Mignolo 2005).

The problem is less individual than structural. It is of course too much to ask that each scholar – Northern or otherwise – be familiar with literally every potential topic of interest in international politics and economics (or be capable of reading articles in Spanish and Portuguese). Yet at a collective level, the fact that virtually no Northern scholars study these relations, or at least consider them relevant enough to mention in even a cursory manner, is highly problematic.
In addition to serving as yet another indication of the myopia of Western IR, this ignorance of Arab-Latin American relations is also troubling both intellectually and politically. In regards to the former, insofar as we desire to know more rather than less about the world, there must be some recognition of the fact that this is a growing axis of relations that attracts a significant amount of attention from the involved actors. If the collectivity of IR scholars intends to progressively accumulate knowledge about the world, then surely someone among us should start listening. As is, it appears that many Latin Americans care about these relations, but mainstream IR does not.

As for the latter, the silence concerning Arab-Latin American relations has real political consequences. To demonstrate, let us take the slightly broader but related issue of Latin American-Middle Eastern relations (thus including Iran in the equation), which, perhaps for the first time ever, have risen from obscurity to become a major topic of concern for numerous political elites in Washington. Central here are accusations that Latin America – and particularly, the “Triple Frontier” area where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet – is a hive of activity for Middle-Eastern “terrorist” groups, which could use the region as a base from which to attack U.S. interests.

This idea has indeed become an article of faith among the hawkish wing of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, as the following examples demonstrate. During a 2011 Republican Party presidential primary debate on national security and foreign policy, Mitt Romney echoed the concerns of the other candidates in asserting that the would-be actions of Hezbollah and similar groups in the Triple Frontier and other parts of Latin America “pose[] a very significant and imminent threat to the United States” (CNN 2011). Addressing a question about “using the United States military,” Texas Governor Rick Perry called for “a 21st century Monroe Doctrine” to counter the machinations of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran in the region (CNN 2011). Not to be outdone, in response to the question, “What national security issue do you worry about that nobody is asking about[?],” former Senator Rick
Santorum commented: “I've spent a lot of time and concern [sic]... [thinking] about what's going on in Central and South America. I'm very concerned about the militant socialists and the radical Islamists joining together, bonding together” (CNN 2011).

To summarize, major U.S. political figures with significant bases of influence and aspirations for the country’s highest offices are so concerned about this facet of Latin American-Middle Eastern relations that they are apparently willing to countenance the use of military force. And yet neither the U.S. government nor anyone else has provided serious evidence to support the notion that the Triple Frontier is a significant staging ground for terrorist groups (Karam 2011). Instead, concerned reporters, analysts, and politicians constantly cite each other in a “closed loop of self-references,” culminating in unconfirmed but oft-repeated allegations that Osama bin Laden spent time in the Triple Frontier and – as incorrectly speculated by CNN – that a picture of the nearby Iguaçu Falls had been found in Afghanistan at one of al-Qaeda’s training camps (Karam 2011, 263).

To be sure, the Triple Frontier has long been a haven for smuggling and unmonitored economic exchanges. It would to some extent be surprising if there were not at least individuals in the region who contribute financially and perhaps in other ways to groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas (as may have occurred with the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy and the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israeliite Mutual Association, both in Buenos Aires). Yet we know little about what actually occurs around the Triple Frontier. Instead, policy debates are being informed by wild speculation rather than honest, fact-based analysis. The collective ignorance in mainstream IR concerning Arab-Latin American relations (real or imagined) thus does not exist in a vacuum – rather, the lack of studies on this topic allows unsubstantiated claims to become authoritative knowledge, as there are virtually no Northern academics to debunk them. As noted in a recent article, in regards to the Triple Frontier: “the study of this purported crime-terror nexus provides a valuable opportunity for academic researchers to question
the assumptions and assertions of policy-makers and pundits, push for transparency of information on the reality of the region and even help understand the problem better” (Costa and Schulmeister 2007). To repeat: there are political consequences, and potentially dangerous ones, for our lack of understanding of these relations.

Again, the issue is not precisely that there is no literature on Arab-Latin American relations. A significant number of sources exist, many of high quality. However, given that South-South relations are seen as unimportant, and that the scholars who engage with these topics are largely from IR’s marginalized periphery and often write in languages other than English, they are rarely cited by Northern scholars or practitioners. That is, these works are about international relations but are in effect excluded from the field of International Relations. IR is thus characterized by a spirit of “parochialism,” as U.S. concerns, U.S. graduate programs, and U.S.-based journals dominate the field (Tickner and Blaney 2012, 5). As Arlene Tickner and David Blaney (2012, 5) note: “The sheer muscle of the academic community in U.S. IR, as measured in numbers of scholars, Ph.D. programs, conferences and publications is palpable.”

Bridging the academic North-South divide is essential for “decolonizing” the field and making IR into a truly “global” discipline (Gruffydd Jones 2006). Here, to the greatest possible extent, I attempt to provide a comprehensive literature review concerning historical and contemporary interactions between Latin America and the Arab world. This survey is inclusive of literature that has been published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese (and predominantly in the latter two). The aim is not to delve into the intricacies of individual sources, but to provide a broad overview of what is – and is not – known based on existing literature, isolate recurring themes, and identify areas in need of improvement. I seek

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6 For Arab sources on these relations, focusing on cultural issues, see: ALECSO (2004).
to delineate what is “out there” in this scholarship so as to both recover this knowledge for the sake of mainstream IR and contextualize and guide future research on this topic, including my own.

How Latin America Met the Arab World

In very broad strokes, the existing literature on Arab-Latin American relations can be divided into two thematic categories. They are: first, immigration and diaspora, which focuses on the experiences of Arab immigrants and their descendants in Latin America, as well as the cultural history produced by interactions between these populations; and second, foreign policy and commercial relations, which deals mainly with Latin America’s current policies toward and trade with the Arab world, its posture concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the aforementioned “terrorism” issue surrounding the Triple Frontier. Two caveats are in order: this is of course a simplistic rendering and there is overlap between the categories. Nonetheless, this categorization scheme provides a useful general sketch of the central topics of concern in this literature and gives an overall impression of what is known about these relations based on the sum of scholarly production.7

Immigration and Diaspora

The first – and largest – group of literature tells the stories of the waves of Arab immigrants who have arrived to Latin America and how they and their descendants have navigated, shaped, and been shaped by the Latin American political, economic, and cultural terrain. Arab-Latin Americans form a relatively small minority group throughout the region, though one of disproportionate political and economic significance. This makes it all the more surprising – per Hu-DeHart’s question – that Northern scholars have largely overlooked their role.

7 For a detailed listing of sources on these and other topics, see: http://rimaal.org/category/bibliographies/.
Indeed, Ecuador, Argentina, Honduras, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador have all had presidents of Arab ancestry, while Brazil’s current vice president, Michel Temer, is of Lebanese ancestry. Numerous members of Latin America’s economic, cultural, intellectual, and athletic elites can also trace their origins back to the Arab world, including: Carlos Slim, a Mexican business magnate of Lebanese descent and currently the world’s second-richest person; the Mexican actress Salma Hayek, partially of Lebanese ancestry; the global pop phenom Shakira, whose paternal grandparents also hail from Lebanon; the famed Chilean director and novelist Miguel Littín, of Palestinian and Greek heritage, whose daring secret return to Chile from exile in 1984 in order to capture the brutal reality of life under the Pinochet regime was immortalized in the late Gabriel García Márquez’s (1986) *La aventura de Miguel Littín clandestino en Chile* (*Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littín*); and the two-time Olympic gold medalist in tennis Nicolás Massú, from Chile, whose father’s side of the family is Palestinian and whose Jewish maternal grandparents were survivors of the Nazi Holocaust.

Arab-Latin Americans are also present in works of popular and high Latin American culture, ranging from: the Arab merchants of García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) (1967), or the subject, Santiago Nasar, of his *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*) (1981); the hit Brazilian soap opera *O Clone* (*The Clone*), which featured a Muslim Moroccan-Brazilian family; and the kindly elderly gentleman Farid Assad from the Chilean television drama *Los 80* (*The 80s*), who displayed a small Palestinian flag in his clothing store in downtown Santiago. Difference facets of the Arab-Latin American experience are also on display in the region through recurring events such as the South American Festival of Arab Culture and the LatinArab Film Festival. Social institutions such as the ritzy Club Palestino of Santiago de Chile also have a hand in organizing cultural and other events.
The Latin American country with the largest Arab-descendant population is Brazil, where it is estimated, probably with some exaggeration, at up to 10 million (though it is not uncommon to hear even higher figures) (Karam 2007, 10). Not surprisingly, much literature focuses on the Brazilian case (Hilu da Rocha Pinto 2010; Karam 2007; Lesser 2013; Morrison 2005). Most of the Arab-Brazilian population is of Lebanese, and to a lesser extent Syrian, ancestry, with the bulk having arrived in the early twentieth century with passports from the Ottoman Empire – hence the enduring nickname, also used in Spanish-speaking countries, *turcos* (Karam 2007, 10). As is frequently noted, Brazil is said to have “more citizens of Syrian origin than Damascus, and more inhabitants of Lebanese origin than all of Lebanon” (Luxner 2005).  

Other Latin American countries with particularly sizable Arab-descendant populations include: Argentina (Brégain 2011; Civantos 2006; Hyland, Jr. 2011), Mexico (Alfaro-Velcamp 2007), Chile (Bray 1962; Elsey 2011), Colombia (Vargas and Suaza 2007), and Honduras (Amaya Banegas 1997; González 1993; Gutiérrez Rivera 2014; Luxner 2001). For example, estimates range up to several million for the Arab-Argentine population while there are said to be between 500,000-1 million Arab-Chileans (though in both cases, again, the real figures are probably somewhat lower). Syrian-Lebanese ancestry tends to predominate in most countries, including Argentina; however, in countries such as Chile and Honduras, Palestinians form the largest group (indeed, outside of the Middle East, Chile is home to the world’s largest Palestinian diaspora population). Smaller populations also exist throughout the region. In addition to the country-specific literature cited above, a number of works have sought to analyze Arab-
Latin Americans – together, in some cases, with other Latin Americans of Middle Eastern and/or Jewish ancestry – in a multi-country or regional context (Alsultany and Shohat 2013; Karam 2013b; Klich and Lesser 1998; Raheb 2012). As discussed below, common themes within this literature include identity, elite formation, and Latin American Orientalism vis-à-vis the Arab “Other.”

Though Arab-descendant Latin Americans as a group now occupy a privileged location within their countries’ social, political, and economic hierarchies, the circumstances of the arrival of the first waves of immigrants were often less than glamorous. While the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the continued colonial presence in the region would later send Arabs to Latin America in larger numbers, the first such immigrants arrived in a trickle, and, in many cases, unintentionally. In the words of a businessman belonging to Honduras’ large Palestinian-descendant community:

Many of our fathers and grandfathers in Palestine were saving their money to go to America…They bought third-class tickets, which were all they could afford. They weren’t too smart geographically. The first stop was either the Caribbean or Central America. They didn’t speak English, and they didn’t speak Spanish. So they came without any papers, and without a penny in their pockets, and were admitted to a country that really opened its arms to them. (Luxner 2001)

Similarly, according to Helmi Nasr, then-director of the Universidade de São Paulo’s Center for Arab Studies: “Many of these immigrants came to Brazil without really wanting to…They had purchased steamship tickets to America, thinking they were heading for North America. After quickly recovering from the initial shock of discovering they had arrived in South America, they started to make the best of it” (Washington Times 2005). Most of these immigrants belonged to Christian families; in recent decades Muslims have comprised an increasing percentage of Arab immigration to Latin America, which has declined sharply but not ceased entirely.11

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10 At least two special issues of journals have also sought to analyze similar themes: “Together Yet Apart: Arabs and Jews in Latin America” in Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies (2011, volume 6, issue 2) and “Arab Women in Latin America” in the Lebanese journal Al-Raida (spring-summer 2011, issue 133-134).

11 On Islam in Latin America, see the forthcoming edited volume: Crescent of Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA (Austin: University of Texas Press).
Arab immigrants in the region quickly established themselves as merchants, comprising, to give one example, an astonishing 90 percent of “peddlers” in the 1893 São Paulo city almanac, concentrated around the city’s Rua 25 de Março (Karam 2007, 25). Rio de Janeiro’s Saara district would form an additional locus of activity for Arab-Brazilian merchants (Luxner 2005). As Brazil industrialized under the protectionist policies of Getúlio Vargas, Arab-Brazilians came to play a significant role in the country’s textile industry; subsequently facing intense competition from Asia, they diversified into other sectors, such as real estate and imports, while later generations in particular would increasingly join the ranks of the professional class (as doctors, lawyers, politicians, and so forth), and now run some of Brazil’s largest businesses (Karam 2007, 27-33; Morrison 2005, 432-434). The anthropologist John Tofik Karam (2007, 2) explains the current status of Arab-Brazilians in no uncertain terms:

Nearly a half-century after the last major waves of immigration, Middle Easterners have attained an unprecedented kind of privilege throughout Brazil. They oversee multimillion-dollar business ventures, constitute an estimated 10 percent of both the City Council in São Paulo and the federal congress in Brasília, own advertising and television enterprises, star in the top-rated soap opera O Clone (The Clone), and run some of the most envied country clubs among national elites.

The history and evolution of other Arab-Latin American communities appear to follow a broadly similar trajectory, with initial waves of immigrants concentrated in commerce and light industry, in some cases also concentrated in specific neighborhoods, such as Patronato in Santiago de Chile (on the Chilean case, see: Bray 1962). In turn, subsequent generations have branched out into positions of broader political and economic power in their respective societies.

As this literature suggests, Arab-Latin Americans have come to occupy a distinct space within the imaginaries of their respective countries. Based in part on this story of economic mobility, but also drawing from a longer history of Arab stereotypes, the general Latin American population has often associated turco ethnicity and identity with shrewdness, thriftiness, and a pathological propensity for commerce. In her account of the politics of soccer in modern Chile, which included the formation of
Arab-Chilean immigrant clubs, the historian Brenda Elsey (2011, 156) notes that: “Sports magazines, newspapers, and comic strips depicted Arab Chileans as parasitic. They caricatured Arab business leaders as voracious social climbers who built empires by exploiting Chilean workers and consumers.” These clubs were founded as a response to (and to counteract) discrimination, and to facilitate integration and “create a space for their community within popular culture” (Elsey 2011, 149-164). They were also an avenue for political involvement, as the Arab-Chilean community recognized that it “continued to lack social prestige corresponding to its economic status” (Elsey 2011, 160). As opposed to other immigrant groups in Chile, such as the Spanish and Italians, Arab-Chileans were seen as “permanently foreign,” and unable to fully incorporate themselves into the national imaginary of “Chilean mestizaje” (Elsey 2011, 162-163).

In other words, Latin American Orientalism was the lens through which “local” majority groups often interpreted the exotic, foreign and conniving Arab “Other” (Camayd-Freixas 2013). Indeed, traits such as business acumen have often been attributed to these groups to such an extreme extent that Arab-Latin Americans are viewed as “pariahs” whose sense of belonging to the larger national community is in doubt (Karam 2007). Karam (2007, ix), himself of Lebanese-Brazilian descent, recounts being told that: “You don’t have the face of a Brazilian” and “You’re turco!” by an exasperated Brazilian vendor who had tired of his haggling, and who subsequently called him a “cheapskate.” They are also seen as being prone to corruption. Thus, the massive corruption scandal involving Paulo Maluf – the Lebanese-Brazilian former mayor of São Paulo – has often been portrayed through an ethnicized lens (Karam 2007). Going back to earlier times, “Arabs were…assumed to use their innate business acumen for personal enrichment at the expense of the agriculturally imagined Brazilian nation,” more interested

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12 For example, Palestinian immigrants in Chile founded what is now a first-division soccer team, called Club Deportivo Palestino. The club still maintains ties to the Palestinian-Chilean population, for example through uniforms that use the colors of the Palestinian flag (green, red, black and white). In a recent controversy, the Chilean football authorities banned the team from wearing “anti-Israel” jerseys in which the number “1” had been replaced with the image of historic Palestine.
in peddling their wares and accumulating wealth than in contributing to the country’s economic prowess, then based on agriculture (Karam 2007, 26). As the famed Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (2000, 317-318) noted, in a passage worth quoting at length:

The Arabs have been the most successful immigrants, quickly becoming integrated into Brazilian life and attaining positions in the government. They have even forgotten where they came from and their miserable life in the countries of their origin. They are blind to the fact that their success can be explained to a large degree by the casual attitude they have in addressing and working with the local society: armed with prejudices and incapable of any solidarity, detached from any loyalty and family or social obligations. All of this allows them to concentrate their entire effort on getting rich.

The attitude of these immigrants is frequently one of disdain and incomprehension. Their tendency is to consider poor Brazilians responsible for their own poverty and to view the racial factor as what sinks the descendants of Indians and blacks into misery. They even state that the Catholic religion and the Portuguese language have contributed to Brazil’s underdevelopment. They ignore the fact that they arrived here as a result of crises that rendered them superfluous, discarded from the workforce in their homelands, and that here they found a huge country already opened, with fixed frontiers, autonomously governing its destiny.

Of course, Arab-Brazilians are used here as a convenient foil vis-à-vis other Brazilian elites, who apparently have evinced greater levels of “solidarity” with and “loyalty” towards the general population, and never blamed the poor for their lot in life, or attributed the “misery” of “Indians and blacks” to “the racial factor.” Thus, Ribeiro’s narrative suggests that, Arab-Brazilians aside, there has indeed been something of a “racial democracy” in Brazil; however, it has been corroded by the rise of Arab-Brazilians, who, in his account, do not share the traditional non-Arab elite’s supposedly enlightened views towards the country’s masses. It is in this sense that Arab-Brazilians have been considered “pariahs,” occupying a space in the Brazilian imaginary which is reminiscent of anti-Jewish stereotypes in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Yet, as Karam (2007) argues, perceptions of Arab-Brazilian ethnic identity have shifted in recent years, coinciding with neoliberal economic reforms and the country’s increasing insertion into the global economy. Once seen as pariahs, (some) Arab-Brazilians have now become partners of the Brazilian state and business community, as each seeks to expand its footprint in the Arab world (Karam 2007, 23). That is, with the Brazilian government and economic elite searching for allies and export markets, they have
turned to Brazil’s own Arab-descendant population to serve as intermediaries; the presumption is that they (and only they) have the cultural capital that is needed in order to reach economic and political agreements with other Arabs, and that they are able “to negotiate and barter the way only Arabs do” (Karam 2007, 41). While their supposed capitalist proclivities are still the target of suspicion in other contexts, when it comes to serving the imperatives of Brazil as “the export nation,” Arab-Brazilians, and this particular understanding of Arab-Brazilian identity, are to be valorized, not disparaged. Whether for this or less cynical reasons, the Brazilian state has on occasion presented a more sanguine reading of the history of Arab immigration to Brazil. Accordingly, at the opening of the first Summit of South American and Arab Countries, held in Brasília in 2005, Lula noted that “[T]here are few countries that have the quantity of Arabs and Arab descendants who live in this country...[T]hese people helped to build this country” (Karam 2007, 174). Here, the literature on immigration and diaspora leads us to our second category: foreign policy and commercial relations.

**Foreign Policy and Commercial Relations**

As noted, Karam (2007) argues that Arab-Brazilian economic elites – including high-level groups such as the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce – have been able to insert themselves into the national imaginary by offering their ethnic and cultural capital to the Brazilian state as it seeks to reach out to the Arab and Muslim worlds. Thus, his account demonstrates how private actors participate in the construction of economic, political, and cultural ties between these two regions. Most of the literature in this area, however, focuses on state actors in Latin America, and particularly, how they have engaged with the Arab world in terms of overall foreign policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As noted, there is also a smaller body of literature concerning U.S. accusations of Middle Eastern “terrorist” groups operating in Latin America (Costa and Schulmeister 2007; Karam 2011).
The general foreign policy literature on Arab-Latin American relations is mostly a recent phenomenon. This reflects moves by numerous Latin American governments since the end of the Cold War to diversify their political and economic partners beyond the typical cast of characters – that is, primarily the U.S. and Europe – and reach out to Global South regions to which, with some exceptions, they had previously paid relatively little attention. For some, this has been motivated by a deliberate strategy of fomenting a more multipolar world order in which Northern countries are no longer the central node through which all linkages must pass. As noted by Celso Amorim – who served as Lula’s Foreign Affairs minister, and is the current Defense Minister under president Dilma Rousseff – these actors are creating a world in which “to get from Brazil to Cairo, you won’t need to pass through Washington and Paris” (Karam 2007, 174).

One manifestation of the region’s turn toward the Arab world is the 2005 initiation of regular summits between the Arab League and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), a landmark in the institutionalization of these relations. As Amorim (2011, 52) commented, the Summits of South American and Arab Countries (ASPA, per the Spanish and Portuguese acronym) represent the “first time” that “these two parts of the developing world were brought together.” Such has been the substantive increase in these political ties that, as Amorim (2011, 48-49) noted, the Middle East has come to occupy “the center of our diplomatic radar.” Lula himself became the first-ever Brazilian head of state to make official visits to the Arab world, traveling to some 10 countries, and opening embassies throughout the region (Amorim 2011, 50-51).

Numerous works have contemplated this new era in Arab-Latin American relations. These tend to either focus on the foreign policies of the big, more internationally active Latin American states – such as Brazil (Amorim 2011; Brun 2011; FUNAG 2001; Haffner and Holand 2012), Mexico (Tawil 2013), Chile (Baeza and Brun 2012), and Venezuela (Herrera Navarro 2008) – or analyze these relations from a pan-
Latin American perspective (Botta 2012; DeShazo and Mendelson Forman 2010; Moya Mena 2011; SELA 2012). There is broad agreement here that contemporary Arab-Latin American relations are of unprecedented breadth and scope (Moya Mena 2011), though Brazil stands head and shoulders above its neighbors in these regards. Other countries, such as Chile, are only in the “initial stage” of building these ties (Baeza and Brun 2012, 63). We must add the further caveat that Rousseff is notoriously less interested in international affairs than her predecessor Lula; at most, Brazil’s posture is now to consolidate the gains made by Lula in building relations with the Arab world as opposed to making more dramatic advances.

Meanwhile, commercial exchange between the regions has soared, with South American-Arab trade more than tripling in the past several years (Al Jazeera 2009; MercoPress 2012). Indeed, the Arab world is now a larger export market than Western Europe for Brazilian agricultural products (dos Santos Guimarães 2012). Recent years have also borne witness to the establishment of non-stop flights linking these regions. Summarizing the novelty and potentially transformative nature of these growing ties, Amorim declares that the two regions are ushering in “a new world economic geography” (Karam 2007, 174).

Predating the current boom in Arab-Latin American relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been – and continues to be – of particular interest for Latin American foreign policies (Sharif 1977). Indeed, Latin America has for years been a diplomatic battleground for Israeli and Palestinian influence (Glick 1959). As a Peruvian scholar observed even several decades ago, “Latin America’s interest in the Palestinian Question has grown considerably, up to the point of being one of the few issues invariably included in most conversations and studies about global affairs” (Abugattas 1982, 117). Just as

\footnote{Translation is my own.}

\footnote{The carrier Emirates launched daily flights between São Paulo and Dubai in 2007. Subsequently, Qatar Airways initiated flights from São Paulo to Doha in 2010, while direct service with Etihad Airways to Abu Dhabi began in 2013, followed by flights to Casablanca on Royal Air Maroc. Beyond São Paulo, Emirates has extended service to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, while Qatar Airways has also added the Argentine capital to its route network.}
generations of left-wing Latin American leaders and thinkers have openly sympathized with the
Palestinian cause, inspired by a shared anti-colonial and -imperial narrative, Latin American
conservatives have often sided with Israel. During the 1970s and 1980s, when much of Latin America
was ruled by far-right military regimes, Israeli arms dealers were a frequent sight in the region (Bahbah
1986). Military-to-military ties continue to be tight, particularly between Israel and Colombia. In turn,
Arab-descendant and Jewish populations in Latin America have to varying extents over time mobilized
around and lobbied their governments about the conflict (Baeza 2014). Latin America would also be
drawn into the conflict in other ways. In the wake of the Six-Day War in 1967, which resulted in Israel’s
occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, the Israeli government “consolidated” and to
some extent carried out “a plan for promoting Arab emigration from the occupied territories to South
America” (Karam 2013a, 756).

More recently, Latin American states – led by Lula’s Brazil – have become increasingly active in
criticizing U.S. ownership over diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict (Burton 2013). After Venezuela
recognized Palestine as a state in 2009, it was Brazil’s move to do so in December 2010 that spurred
nine other South American states – all except Colombia – to do the same in the following two months.
Whatever the effect on Palestine’s longstanding statehood bid, the symbolic message of these
declarations was clearly to assert the ability to operate independently from the U.S. Accordingly,
Argentine Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman explained his country’s decision as part of a foreign policy
approach to the Middle East that is independent of U.S. “hegemonic interferences” (Forero and Zacharia
2011). In leaked diplomatic cables, the then-U.S. ambassador to Brazil is quoted as remarking that
“Brazil does not understand Middle East affairs, it's only joining the 'anti-Israel' choir”; Brazil later
rejected U.S. calls to discuss its policies towards the region, with the then-Foreign Minister replying that
“Brazil does not need US permission to conduct its foreign policy” (MercoPress 2011). In Lula’s words,
there is “a growing tendency in Latin American states to break out of the ghetto of U.S. diplomacy”
(Gomez 2005). The general tenor of this literature is thus highly normative, implying that as opposed to Washington’s gross favoritism toward Israel’s maximalist claims, Latin American states – particularly the current governments of the “left turn” – could play a more productive role in addressing the conflict. Because of this and the aforementioned migratory ties between the regions, it should come as no surprise, as the BBC recently noted, that “Latin America is a region that is well known – and loved – by the Palestinians.”

Toward a Political Economy of Arab-Latin American Relations

There is, then, a substantial body of literature on Arab-Latin American relations. By quantity of production, one can happily observe that much has changed since the early 1980s, when, as one scholar noted, while “Arab-Latin American relations have grown in the last few years to an unprecedented level[,]...[t]his expansion in political and economic exchange has not received adequate attention in academic institutions or research centers and remains largely unexplored” (Saddy 1983, xi). Yet to the extent that this literature has not permeated IR’s traditional bastions, this observation continues to resonate: for these relations have indeed been “explored,” though mostly not in the “academic institutions or research centers” that matter.

Leaving this critique of Northern IR aside, there are also deficiencies, lacunae, and unexplored areas within the mostly Southern literature on this topic. First, this literature is insufficiently historical, at least in regards to interstate relations. There is a long history of “Third-Worldism” through which Latin American and Arab countries interacted, including institutions such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the New International Economic Order (NIEO), and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (Prashad 2007; 2013). Few works have seriously explored these linkages (for an

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exception focusing on Brazil, see: Karam 2012). Secondly, it largely overlooks past episodes of economic exchange, limited as they may have been, such as the flow of Arab petrodollars into Latin America in the 1970s (Howe 1974). Again, there is a need here to historicize contemporary relations. Third, beyond the aforementioned phenomenon of transnational diaspora politics, there is an openly state-centric bent to this literature. With some exceptions (for example: Karam 2007), there is little substantive discussion of the role of non-state actors – such as corporations and non-governmental organizations – in promoting Arab-Latin American ties. Finally, it is mostly descriptive and empirical in nature. That is, as a whole this literature does little to theorize Arab-Latin American relations or to utilize these relations to contribute to broader theoretical bodies of thought in IR and related disciplines. For better or worse, this is symptomatic of a larger issue with Latin American IR: it is “subservien[t] to state cues” and thus focuses on practical instead of theoretical matters (Tickner 2008, 745).

As I intend to more fully historicize Arab-Latin American relations in future works, here I address the latter two critiques. Without losing sight of the state, I construct an account of these relations that focuses on the indispensable role of private and public economic actors. And secondly, I utilize the empirics of these relations – based on my own fieldwork in Latin America, and drawing from much of the work cited above – to pursue broader theoretical questions within the field of global political economy. The overall goal is to analyze the regional political economy of Arab-South American relations – focusing on actors based in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, the three South American countries with the most economic exchange with the Arab world – and in so doing to contribute to both our empirical knowledge of these relations as well as theoretical debates within the social sciences.

*The Merchant Capitalist Class*

Class is a notoriously tricky concept to define. For example, in his discussion of the “new transnational bourgeoisie,” the sociologist William Robinson (2004, 47) argues that this class
encompasses “the owners of transnational capital, that is, the group that owns the leading worldwide means of production as embodied principally in the TNCs [transnational corporations] and private financial institutions.” The focus on corporate and financial capital represents a straightforwardly Marxist definition of capitalists, as suggested by Robinson’s mention of the owners of the “means of production.”

This is only one position among many. For his part, the sociologist Leslie Sklair (2001, 17) divides the transnational capitalist class into four principal fractions: corporate (comprised of “TNC executives and their local affiliates”); state (“globalizing bureaucrats and politicians”); technical (“globalizing professionals”); and, consumerist (“merchants and media”). These latter three groups are “supporting members” of the transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2001, 17). As he rightfully notes, while “Some Marxist scholars may object that only those who actually own the means of production can properly be called capitalists[,]” the reality is that “the globalization of capitalism can only be adequately understood when ownership of money capital is augmented with ownership and control of other types of capital, notably political, organizational, cultural, and knowledge capital” (Sklair 2001, 17). That is, members of the corporate fraction “cannot achieve their ends alone” – rather, they “require help” from the other groups in order to pursue their economic agenda (Sklair 2001, 295). Further complicating efforts to focus solely on the owners of financial and industrial capital, it is also the case that while these groups are “analytically distinct,” there is significant overlap between them (Sklair 2001, 17). Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that the corporate fraction comprises the “dominant group” of transnational capitalists (Sklair 2001, 17).

While the point here is not to wade too deeply into this debate, the Arab-Latin American case does suggest the need to carefully consider the consumerist/merchant fraction, which Sklair mentions but does not discuss in any detail. The overall argument here is that to understand capitalism we must
comprehend the role of the merchant or trading class as capitalist actors, and in turn that commerce is a
distinct sphere of capitalism that is worthy of analysis – and inclusion (see, for example: Hozic 2006).
While merchants of course tend to be private actors, their activities in turn depend fundamentally on
the state and certain other private actors who also do not fit the conventional definition of “capitalists.”
These include (public) export-promotion agencies and (private) business organizations (such as
chambers of commerce). While they are not “owners” of capital, they play an essential role in the
promotion of commerce. As such, they grease the wheels of global capitalism.

Let us take the example of Brazil’s booming trade relations with the Arab world, which have
increased several times over in the past decade. This has been the result of a concerted effort by both
public and private groups. In regards to the former, Apex-Brasil – the state-run Brazilian Trade and
Investment Promotion Agency – was founded in 2003, and in that same year opened business support
and distribution centers in Dubai to further its “mission and vision” of “send[ing] Brazilian companies
[to] the global market.” The importance of Dubai is that it is seen as a “logistics hub” through which
Brazilian and other exporters are able to “reach some 1.5 billion potential customers around the Arabian
Gulf and surrounding nations” (WAM 2011). More generally, the Brazilian state – with its emphasis on
South-South relations – has been instrumental in fomenting these ties. “Businessmen are very attentive
to the signals conveyed by governments,” as noted by Amorim (2011, 52). “Often leaders wave the flag
and businessmen follow suit.”

On the private side are actors such as the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, which
describes itself as “the quickest and safest way for [Brazilian capitalists] to find new markets and to do

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18 This is in a sense the opposite of the standard Marxist argument concerning the state: “The executive of the
modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx 1888, 475). In
Robinson’s (2004) updated iteration, the state has been refashioned to promote the interests of transnational
capital.
business with the Arab countries.” Among other activities, the Chamber “issues ‘certificates of origin’ for Brazilian exports to the Middle East, plans commercial missions for Brazilian state and business elites to the Arab world, represents Brazil in Arab-sponsored international fairs, and organizes seminars that train Brazilian elites in how to do business with Arab countries” (Karam 2007, 36-37). A similar case is presented by the now-dormant Chilean-Arab Business Council, which referred to itself as “a group of visionary Chilean businesspeople of Arab descent, with the objective of bringing Chile and the Arab countries closer together in terms of commercial exchange and investment opportunities.” Fittingly, it billed itself as the “natural bridge between Chile and the Arab countries.”

Neither of these sets of public and private groups is “capitalist” in the traditional sense. But they are precisely the on-the-ground enablers that make economic exchange happen by facilitating and carrying out the management and movement of capital and goods. They are the midwives of the global capitalist system and are crucial to the establishment and consolidation of Arab-Latin American relations. Indeed, their role is so fundamental that they cannot be excluded from consideration as part of the would-be transnational capitalist class. Investigating their role in Arab-Latin American relations thus allows us to go beyond the state-centrism of much of this literature as well as to contribute to broader theoretical understandings of capitalism and class.

*Capitalists of the World, Unite? Locating an Imagined Community of Transnational Capitalists in Latin America’s Booming Relations with the Arab World*

Accordingly, in addition to and beyond the level of the state, another lens for viewing Arab-Latin American relations shows the web of public and private actors who enable commercial flows between the regions. Based on my research, the most central nodes within this network include: government export agencies (such as Apex-Brasil, Argentina’s Chamber of Exporters and Fundación ExportAr, and

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ProChile) and economic ministries (for example, Chile’s General Directorate of International Economic Relations [DIRECON]); international business organizations (for example, the Gulf Latin America Leaders Council, based in Buenos Aires); and business networks, both sector-wide (such as Chile’s Federation of Industry [SOFOFA]) and those based on particular country or regional relationships (most prominently, the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce and the Arab-Argentine Chamber of Commerce, but also many smaller organizations such as the Argentine-Lebanese Chamber of Commerce and the Brazilian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce). As I have identified, these are the main actors in the Latin American merchant capitalist class who are responsible for promoting commerce with the Arab world.

Over the past year, I have conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with protagonists from these organizations. These interviews are motivated by two main goals. First, I seek to uncover how they, as globalizing elites, play a fundamental role in fomenting these ties. As noted above, this suggests the importance of moving beyond state-centrism and considering the role of merchant capitalists in studies of global political economy. Second, by interrogating the ways that these actors project themselves vis-à-vis the Arab world, this paper also seeks to determine if there is indeed a growing “transnational consciousness” linking these two regions, and capitalists across the world more generally. Here, I utilize Arab-Latin American relations to speak to a broader theoretical debate in global political economy concerning the process of identity formation among globalizing elites.

For years, thinkers from across the political spectrum – ranging from the conservative political scientist Samuel P. Huntington to critical, Marxist-inspired political economists like the widely-cited sociologist William I. Robinson and other members of the “global capitalism school” – have argued that there is a rising transnational class of capitalists who do not identity with any particular country. To take perhaps the most famous and enduring formulation of this idea, Huntington coined the pejorative term “Davos Man,” referring to elite attendees of the yearly meetings of the World Economic Forum, fittingly
held in a heavily fortified ski resort in the Swiss Alps. According to the strongest statements of this position, this transnational capitalist class embodies the dominant “fraction” among the capitalist class.

At the most basic level, two characteristics capture the essence of transnational capitalists. First, they are the protagonists in a transnationally organized capitalist system that supersedes and is rendering obsolete the demarcation of space based on state borders. They exist materially through transnational spaces such as globally organized production and accumulation chains. This is their “objective class existence” (Robinson 2004, 47-48). In this sense, to invoke Marx, they exist as a “class-in-itself.” That is, they “objectively share a similar position in the economic structure of society independent of the degree to which they are aware of their collective condition or to which they consciously act on the basis of this condition” (Robinson 2004, 38).

The second characteristic is that transnational capitalists do not identify with “any real or imagined nation-state” (Skilair 2001, 295) or feel “national loyalty” (Huntington 2004). Instead, they share an “identity in the global system” based on their common transnational class status (Robinson 2004, 47-48). They identify not with the state, but with their (transnational) class. On a subjective level, they perceive themselves as transnational capitalists. Per Marx, they are also then a “class-for-itself” – a class whose “members are conscious of constituting a particular group with shared interests and would be expected to act collectively in pursuit of those interests” (Robinson 2004, 38). In other words – to borrow from Benedict Anderson’s (2006, 6-7) classic phrase – they form an “imagined community” of transnational capitalists: “imagined” in that most of its members will never meet, but nevertheless a “community” in that “a deep, horizontal comradeship” exists among them. While for Marx’s bourgeoisie “there is no implication that national affinities, identities and forms of capitalist

21 In turn, Robinson (2004, 43; italics in original) argues that the “transnational working class” is “increasingly a reality” as a class-in-itself, but “is not yet a class-for-itself.” Elsewhere, he notes that “subordinate classes” are also “transnationalizing” and that “Capital and labor increasingly confront each other as global classes” (Robinson 2008, 29).

22 van der Pijl (1998) also utilizes the concept of the “imagined community” to theorize this class.
organization fall away in the process,” this is precisely the argument of the global capitalism school (Carroll 2010, 1).

As acknowledged by the sociologist William K. Carroll (2010, 37), who is to some extent a supporter of the transnational capitalist class hypothesis, “From all sides of the current debate [over the existence of this class] it is agreed that more direct evidence is needed.” This is especially true in regards to the argument that the transnational capitalist class comprises a class-for-itself, as no existing studies have seriously interrogated this claim. This is precisely the issue that I have sought to address through these interviews with one segment of the would-be Latin American transnational capitalist class: whether Latin American merchant capitalists whose activities center around promoting commerce with the Arab world have a transnational consciousness or at least a trans-regional one based on these increasing Arab-Latin American linkages. Thus, again, I utilize Arab-Latin American relations to contribute to an important ongoing debate in the field of global political economy.

For the notion of a transnational capitalist class-for-itself to hold water, these interviews should reveal a cosmopolitan identity that supersedes local, regional, or state-based subjective moorings. It should be an identity that does not boil down to mere profit-seeking – the structurally determined hallmark of every capitalist – but hints of belonging to an imagined community of transnational capitalists whose interests are in the functioning, maintenance, and spread of the global capitalist system, instead of the national economies of their states of birth or residence. Not Marx’s bourgeoisie, but one that eschews territorial-based accumulation in favor of that which is truly transnational. To borrow from the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, a transnational capitalist should be a “citizen of the [transnational capitalist] world.”

The interviews uncovered little evidence of this. Based on my research, much of the rhetoric surrounding transnational classes is overblown. At the level of an “objective class existence,” the
business operations of these actors are indeed to some extent transnationally organized. Yet subjectively, they still think primarily in national terms. That is, while there are hints of a nascent transnational consciousness among these elites, they mostly retain an identity linked to their home countries. They may comprise a transnational class-in-itself but not a transnational class-for-itself – in that they evince few signs of sharing an “identity in the global system.”

While many Latin American merchant capitalists involved with these relations are of Arab descent, and in some cases retain cultural practices from their ancestral homelands – including speaking Arabic, eating regional foods, and listing to Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian music – their Arabness is mostly filtered through their Latin American, state-based identity. That is, they identify as Lebanese/Syrian/Palestinian/Arab-Argentines, -Chileans, or -Brazilians, and thus have the same sorts of “hyphenated” senses of self that are often used to describe the diverse U.S. population. But ultimately, the imaginary that motivates their economic activities is decidedly national, even though their Arabness at least: A) to some extent inspires them to seek economic opportunities in the Arab world; and B) provides them with the necessary cultural capital in order to do so.

This is important, for it suggests that while our world is becoming more global in terms of economic and political relations, elite identities – at least in Latin America – appear to continue to revolve around a nation-state paradigm that is often argued to be increasingly obsolete (Sklair 2001). Nationalism is far stickier than those who see an all-encompassing capitalist globalization would allow – from liberal apologists such as Thomas Friedman (2005; 2012) to the Marxist-inspired literature on the transnational capitalist class. In regards to the latter, I find few reasons to disagree with Anderson (2006, 3; italics in original), who comments that “nationalism has proved an uncomfortable anomaly for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted.”
However, this should not be taken to mean that arguments for a class-for-itself of transnational capitalists are without merit. Though the process of transnational identity formation is not nearly as advanced as suggested, there still appears to be a nascent trend in this direction. In other words, while this class is far from being *transnational*, it is still *transnationalizing*. My argument thus validates the globalization luminary Saskia Sassen’s (2007, 164) suspicion that instead of speaking of the transnational capitalist class as a *fait accompli*, in reality what we have are “emergent” and “partially denationalized” global classes. In broad strokes, this is also suggestive of what Carroll (2012) refers to as “the need for nuance in theorizing global capitalism.” This also more or less coincides with Carroll’s (2010, 233) argument that, “As a class-for-itself, the transnational capitalist class is in the making, but not (yet) made.” This body of literature thus points to an important – if exaggerated – trend. Based on the Latin American case, I argue that we should more fruitfully refer to an “embedded” or “rooted” transnationalism that is indeed rising but still has its feet firmly planted within the national imaginary.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, this paper has pursued three principal and complementary goals. First, I have sought to analyze the “American social science” of IR’s unwillingness and/or inability to engage with the South and South-South relations. Within this framework of intellectual production, Southern scholarship is also overlooked – as evidenced by the field’s icy reception and frequent mischaracterizations of dependency theory (Blaney and Tickner 2013, 7-9). While there are hopeful signs in these regards – such as an increasing number of IR works that attempt to make the field global,23 and the fact that the organizing theme of the 2015 annual convention of the International Studies Association is precisely “to

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23 See, for example, the Routledge series *Worlding Beyond the West*. 
chart a course towards a truly inclusive discipline” and “a Global IR”\textsuperscript{24} – more work is clearly needed to decolonize the field.

Second, I review the mostly Latin American literature on Arab-Latin American relations and attempt to delineate its overall contributions to our collective understanding of this topic. These can be roughly categorized into studies of: A) immigration and diaspora, and B) foreign policy and commercial relations. The fact that mainstream IR knows so little about these relations is not because there is no literature that explores them – on the contrary, there is a fairly robust and voluminous body of mostly Latin American scholarship on this very topic. Rather, it is precisely because most of this scholarship comes from the South, and concerns a Southern topic, that it has been largely overlooked.

Finally, I identify several areas in need of improvement within the literature on Arab-Latin American relations, including too much state-centrism and too little theoretical work. These lacunae motivate my own research, which analyzes networks of public and private actors and seeks to contribute to broader theoretical debates in global political economy. Based on the interviews that I have conducted with Latin American economic elites who have business interests in the Arab world, I argue that the class consciousness of the region’s capitalist actors is still largely filtered through the imagined community of the state. Thus, while this globalizing elite has hints of a nascent transnational identity, it would be an exaggeration to attribute to it a truly transnational capitalist class consciousness, or even a trans-regional one. It is instead defined by an “embedded” or “rooted” transnationalism that, while rising, has yet to supplant the national imaginary.

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\textsuperscript{24} See: \url{http://www.isanet.org/Conferences/NewOrleans2015/Call.aspx}. 


