

“Regional Governance and the Complexities of Hegemony: The Case of the Americas”

Abstract:

The 1990s witnessed a very significant expansion of regional institutions and important changes in the ambition, scope and density of regional governance in the Americas. In part this expansion was a product of the creation and dynamism of regional economic integration, as in cases of NAFTA and Mercosur and in the on-going process of negotiation for a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). All of these involve 'deep integration', involving detailed regulation of a wide range of issues that goes well beyond the traditional trade agenda. In part it involved changes in the political arena, with a revitalization of the efforts of the Organization of American States (OAS) to protect democracy and to promote 'soft security'. The agendas of successive Summits of the Americas (Miami 1994, Santiago 1998, Quebec 2001) reveal a wide range of issues, many of which would have been very hard to imagine as legitimate topics for inter-American debate, let alone action, even a few years before - such as corruption, money laundering, or civil-military relations. In terms of aspiration and ambition, but also in many cases actual achievement, these changes have gone further than in any other region of the world apart from Europe. But -- and this is the crucial point -- in sharp contrast to the European case, they have taken place against the backdrop of striking power asymmetry. The involvement of the United States in these developments opens us an important analytical puzzle given: (a) the standard realist expectation that the more powerful a state is, the less likely it is to be attracted to multilateralism and to restricting its freedom of manoeuvre within institutions; and (b) the long tradition of ambivalence on the part of the US towards international law and institutions, both generally and, especially, in relation to this region.

The Western Hemisphere therefore represents a fascinating vantage point from which to explore the relationship between hegemonic power and regional institutions, and the complex ways in which logics of regional governance interact with the logics of hegemonic power. This paper seeks to unpack some of the conceptual issues involved and to examine the major categories of explanation. It is divided into four sections. The first briefly surveys the changes that have taken place in the institutional landscape and argues that the normative structure of the region began to move in the 1990s in the direction of a solidarist regional society of states, together with significant elements of transnational governance. In other words there have been significant institutional developments that stand in need of explanation. The second section looks at three liberal explanatory logics - of interdependence, of democratization, and of domestic pluralism. It argues, first, that these liberal logics apply strongly to North America and the Great Caribbean region but, second, that they have far less force further south. Indeed it is significant that they have continued to have some purchase within North America despite the unilateralist tendencies of the current administration. The third section unpacks and illustrates the range of power-related interests that shape the policies of both strong and

weak states. In terms of weak states it considers the range of institutional strategies that can be used to tame/fend off/manage the power of the regional hegemon, and also the difficulties and dilemmas involved. In the case of the dominant state it considers the use of institutions both to legitimize power and to project and to stabilize power; the ways in which the United States has sought to avoid formal inter-state institutions in favour of various modes of indirect governance (for example via the extraterritorial application of US domestic law or transnational regulatory governance); and the complexity and instability of US power. These power-related factors have been crucial in explaining institutional patterns in the Western Hemisphere.