BRICS AND THE CHALLENGES OF A MULTICULTURAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The BRICS group has exhibited increasing international relevance, surpassing the G7 in GDP/PPP and attracting new members. Despite diverse political and cultural backgrounds, BRICS shares a critical stance towards the neoliberal global order. However, some challenges persist, particularly in countering Western cultural imperialism. Even though BRICS countries made notable progress in politics and economic articulation, culture remains a weak point of the BRICS. Without addressing these obstacles, achieving a more diverse and inclusive global order remains uncertain. The paper underscores BRICS' evolving role and the imperative of addressing cultural barriers to international cooperation.

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"BRICS' Aspiration to Dethrone the G7 is Fanciful".[1]

T he title of a piece published by Forbes is symptomatic of a general attitude of disdain that has characterized much of the Western approach to BRICS since its inception in 2009. Ladwig called the BRICS "an artificial bloc built on a catchphrase".[2]

Writing in 2013, Pant called the BRICS group "a fallacy," which "has begun to lose much of its sheen".[3] Sparks also derided the importance of BRICS. According to him, BRICS have two main weaknesses as a group: 1) It is too diverse in terms of models of political organization, culture, and social structures; 2) it is too dependent on China, which he perceives as the only real economic power in the group, much larger than the other members of the group.[4]

In the countercurrent of these negative evaluations and predictions, the BRICS' international relevance increased significantly in the 15 years following its inception. If we consider the World Bank's data referring to GDP/PPP, the five members of the original BRICS group already surpassed the seven members of the G7 (52 trillion dollars versus 49 trillion dollars). Even more important, many countries have shown interest in joining the BRICS group. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates joined in 2024, and another round of expansion is predicted for the following year. It does not support the idea that BRICS is a mirage, as those Western authors proposed. At the same time, they lost sight of evidence suggesting that the G7 countries have lost much of their international prestige in the last 15 years.

Naturally, this does not mean that BRICS will replace G7 as the leading group in the world. It will not happen because – as the critics above correctly observe – BRICS countries lack political, economic, and cultural unity, allowing them to set civilizational standards for the rest of the world. However, this will not happen mainly because replacing the G7's "civilizational leadership" is not the primary goal of animating BRICS members. The notion that exercising international power necessarily means setting normative rules to be followed by other societies cannot be taken for granted. It reflects expectations deeply entrenched in an imperialistic mind. Western nations have imposed their will and subjugated other societies in successive waves since the 16th century. The last of these waves was the neoliberal globalization process, which began in the 1980s/90s and provided the context for the rise of the G7 group.

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1) Harry G. Broadman, "BRICS' Aspiration to Dethrone the G7 is Fanciful," *Forbes*, 31 January 2024. https://www.forbes.com/sites/harrybroadman/2024/01/31/brics-aspiration-to-dethrone-the-g7-is-fanciful/?sh=8333af16c038

2) William Ladwig, "An Artificial Bloc Built on a Catchphrase," *New York Times*, 26 March 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/27/opinion/an-artificial-bloc-built-on-a-catchphrase.html?_r=0

3) Harsh V. Pant, "The BRICS Fallacy," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2013): p. 91.

4) Colin Sparks, "Deconstructing the BRICS," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8 (2014): p. 392-418.

The idea that the BRICS countries would attempt to impose a different civilizational model on the world makes no sense. This is because these countries are very different from each other in terms of their political models, social structures, cultural values, and traditions. Instead, what unites the BRICS countries is their typical negative attitude concerning the global order founded upon the neoliberal principles of the Washington Consensus.[5] Therefore, what unites these countries is a shared struggle for recognition in the world. Their manifest purpose is to establish the basis of a more diverse, multipolar world instead of replacing one unipolar order for another.

The recent interest demonstrated by numerous countries in joining BRICS has less to do with their willingness to adhere to a model supposedly represented by the group than with the simple fact that it offers them an alternative to the Western-centered global order. Some reckless attitudes recently adopted by Western countries have stimulated other countries to join the BRICS. A concrete example refers to the weaponization of the U.S.-controlled global financial system as a resource for punishing Russia in response to its military intervention in Ukraine. Regardless of their position with respect to Russia, many countries perceive that they can also fall victim to similar sanctions in the future.

The BRICS group has been more successful in certain areas than in others. Concerning economics, BRICS has advanced in promoting mechanisms allowing its members to exchange goods in their currencies instead of the dollar; it created its investment bank, an alternative to the (largely U.S.-dominated) World Bank and IMF. They also have made progress in forging more stable political ties among its members, although they are still far from forming a coherent bloc. Cultural exchange is one of the less developed aspects of the BRICS building process. Why does this happen? What are the main challenges faced by the BRICS group in this regard? What problems result from this?

We contend that the United States (seconded by other Western countries) still exerts a unipolar form of control concerning cultural affairs, which derives from cultural imperialistic policies developed since the end of World War 2. These policies gained new breath in the 1980/90s due to neoliberal globalization.

Cultural Imperialism

Simply put, imperialism refers to the capacity of certain countries to explore others for their benefit. Imperialism can assume different forms. Imperialistic countries can expropriate other societies from their natural resources, explore cheap labor, build a captive market for their products, exert political control over these societies,

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5) Sarah Babb, "The Washington Consensus as Transnational Policy Paradigm: Its Origins, Trajectory and Likely Successor," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2013): p. 268-297.

establish military bases on their territories, etc. To obtain such advantages, imperialist countries may sometimes resort to intimidation and violence. In most cases, however, imperialistic relationships operate through softer means, as some fractions of the societies that have submitted to imperialism naturalize and even justify it. Why does this happen? Here, the concept of cultural imperialism provides a useful analytical tool.

Cultural imperialism refers to the structures and entrenched behavior patterns allowing certain countries to impose their worldviews, values, and cultural tastes on others. Cultural imperialism works at two levels: intellectual imperialism and media imperialism. Intellectual imperialism refers to efforts targeting elites of other countries, as media imperialism aims to touch the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Although the term "imperialism" has been usually associated with the Western European colonizing process initiated in the 16th century, "cultural imperialism" typically refers to the United States' efforts to become the hegemonic power in the world after World War 2. Under the standard label of cultural imperialism, Intellectual and media imperialism have become the subjects of different bodies of literature.

Intellectual Imperialism

After the end of World War 2, the United States took advantage of the difficult situation of Western European countries in assuming a protagonist intellectual role worldwide. Naturally, this did not happen overnight. In the context of the Cold War, the United States assumed the role of leader of the "Free World" in opposition to the Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union. In the wake of the process of decolonization that happened in the 1960s, many new countries emerged. Both blocs engaged in a dispute to exert influence on their models of social and political organization.

In opposition to the Communist model, the United States presented its Modernization model, championed by authors such as Lerner[6] and Rostow[7], as "the right kind of revolution". The U.S. efforts also targeted other countries, such as Latin America (especially after the Cuban revolution in 1959) and even Western Europe. Lundestadt[8] referred to the influence on this region as an "Empire by invitation." The U.S. universities apparatus and the so-called philanthropic foundations were central pieces of this effort, as they invested much money to exert intellectual influence on the national elites of these countries.[9]

6) Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

7) Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

8) Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1986): p. 263-277. doi:10.1177/002234338602300305

9) Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the*

A second wave of U.S. influence on the global intellectual debate happened in the wake of neoliberal globalization in the 1980s-'90s. Now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the uncontested leader of a unipolar global order, in alliance with global-reaching institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This position allowed the United States to establish the basis of a new, U.S.-centered global academic system structured around a global ranking system. This system has a strong bias towards the United States, as institutions based in the United States or controlled by U.S. scholars (universities and academic journals, among others) are overrepresented and occupy the top positions in these rankings. They also dominate the peer-review system in the more prestigious journals. This situation confers the U.S. scholars with the power of working as gatekeepers of the world academic milieu, defining what perspectives are worth attention to and what perspectives are not.

Media Imperialism

Media imperialism refers to the instrumentalization of media by certain countries to exert cultural domination over others. Still, during World War 2, the United States began to use the media to exert political influence abroad by exporting the "American Way of Life." The earlier efforts targeted Latin American countries as a part of the U.S. effort to contain the threat presented by Nazi Germany in the region. In the following decades, the United States systematically employed the media as a resource for selling its modernization model to a worldwide audience.

Beginning in the 1960s, these efforts became the subject of growing criticism from the part of intellectuals, who denounced them as part of a project of cultural imperialism. According to critics, the massive export of U.S. media content to other countries threatened world cultural diversity. Latin American scholars were especially vocal in presenting the case against media imperialism. Drawing on the economy's dependency theory, they argued that the U.S. media exports fostered cultural dependency in other countries, particularly those outside the West. The export volume of U.S.-made media content was not the sole element of media imperialism. Other two important aspects are the use of entertainment to legitimize U.S. worldviews and institutions (especially the military) and the pressure exerted on other countries to raise barriers aiming to contain the excessive import of U.S. cultural products.

The criticism against media imperialism had concrete consequences: it inspired UNESCO to publish a document denouncing that the "free flow of information" model advocated by the United States poses a threat to the sovereignty and cultural diversity of the world. It led to the proposal to establish the New World Order of

Rise of American Power (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Information and Communication (NWICO).[10] The United States reacted to this initiative by withdrawing from UNESCO in 1983.[11]

However, the impact of the UNESCO document was quite limited. It happened for two reasons. First, the rise of the new U.S.-centered scholarship model, discussed in the previous section, contributed to marginalizing non-Anglophone voices. In this scenario, the media imperialism paradigm lost ground to other perspectives that justified the emergent hegemonic role performed by the United States in the world. Examples include "globalization"[12], "soft power"[13], and the use of Keohane and Nye's[14] international relations concept of "asymmetrical interdependence" to describe the global flow of media content.[15]

The second reason has to do with the rise of the digital media. The Internet, originating from a military project led by the United States and established by American entities such as ICANN, utilizes the Domain Name System (DNS) to translate domain names into IP addresses. When centralized in the USA, this system implies that its physical infrastructure, servers, and associated operations are within U.S. territory. This centralization results in a significant concentration of power in the hands of the United States, raising issues related to digital sovereignty and the privacy of other nations that rely on this infrastructure globally. Currently, internet access occurs through digital platforms, defined as "a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users - not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data".[16] These actors are not neutral; their interfaces and algorithms reflect strategic choices made by developers. Systematic data collection, storage, and analysis are essential components of platform functioning with direct consequences.

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10) Vicente Freije, "The 'Emancipation of Media': Latin American Advocacy for a New International Information Order in the 1970s," Vol. 14, No. 2 (2019): p. 301-320.

11) A. Bhuyan, *Internet Governance and the Global South: A Demand for a New Framework* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Ulla Carlsson, "The Rise and Fall of NWICO: From a Vision of International Regulation to a Reality of Multilevel Governance," *Nordicom Review*, Vol. 2 (2003).

12) John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (London: Continuum, 1991).

13) Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

14) Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (London: Pearson, 2012).

15) Joseph Straubhaar, "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Independence and Cultural Proximity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1991): p. 39-70.

16) José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018): 4.

The BRICS in Face of Cultural Imperialism

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant,[17] cultural imperialism "rests on the power on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such".[18] It applies both to its intellectual and media versions. Presenting themselves as endowed with the right (and the burden) of defending universal values was a crucial element in allowing Western European countries to legitimize their imperialistic expansion. The flip side of this rhetoric is to strip societies subjected to imperialist control of any intrinsic meaning or value. Santos called this process "epistemicide."[19]

The ability of the Western countries to present their perspectives as endowed with a universal character has solid historical roots that date back to the time when they ruled large empires across the world. As seen in the previous sections, this power is currently grounded on a vast array of institutional and technological devices, which allows the United States to define the entire world about itself (and secondarily its allies). No other term illustrates better how this logic works than "democracy.

The United States and its Western allies have successfully presented themselves as model democracies. The academic literature has massively supported this idea. Political Science and Communication works often use the term "established democracies" to designate Western countries. With few exceptions, all the others fell into the categories of "authoritarian" or "transitional democracies." In fact, democracies outside the core West have remained "transitional" for decades, frozen in a perpetual adolescent status. Terms such as "fragile" or "defective" democracies are also used. Scholars using these classifications rarely feel compelled to justify their choices. They are taken for granted. This classification has concrete consequences: Established democracies should lecture other societies by "promoting democracy" abroad. Otherwise, transitional democracies and especially authoritarian regimes – the categories comprising most of the BRICS countries – provide examples to avoid.[20] The negative consequences of this situation for the international legitimacy of the BRICS group are apparent. On the academic front, BRICS face an uphill battle against the U.S. and its Western allies.

An analogous problem happens concerning the media, as the United States controls most of the global infrastructure of digital media. In the mid-2010s, a group of companies known by the acronym FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix,

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17) Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, "On the Cunning of the Imperialist Reason," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1999): p. 41-58.

18) Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, (1999): p. 1.

19) Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

20) Afonso de Albuquerque, "Transitions to Nowhere: Western Teleology and Regime-type Classification," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 85, No. 6 (2023): p. 479-497.

and Google) controlled about 80-90 percent of the global platform market. For this reason, even though many countries can now produce media content, the U.S. platforms can exert a gatekeeping role in distributing this content worldwide. Netflix provides a vivid example of how this works. It has demonstrated monopolistic ambitions concerning the internet distribution market for audiovisual content. Unlike in the past, Netflix has a diversified catalogue, including content produced in many countries. Still, Netflix plays an influential role as a mediator of the global imaginary, as it defines which audience has access to which content a given country produces. For instance, how Netflix presents China for the Brazilian audience overrepresents Taiwan and Hong Kong over Mainland China, the past over the present, and provides a stereotyped view of China. An even more blatant example refers to Russia. Following the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Netflix removed all Russian content from its catalogue. The results are that the U.S.'s current control over the global platforms market strongly inhibits the cultural exchange between the BRICS countries.

Towards a Multicultural International Order?

How has the BRICS group dealt with the challenges of the present-day unipolar order? What steps should be taken to build an alternative to it? What have the BRICS effectively done in this regard?

In the last two decades, calls for de-westernizing the international research agenda gained much traction. Prestige journals and international scientific associations have often affirmed their commitment to the cause of de-westernizing. However, the impact of such discourse has been minimal. It happens because western-centrism is not a matter of goodwill but is deeply entrenched in the institutional logic of international scholarship. Without challenging this structure, it is not possible to overcome academic unipolarity. Similarly, it is not possible to boost the intercultural exchanges between the BRICS countries if the market of global platforms is in the hands of U.S. companies.

How consistent have the BRICS efforts been in coping with this situation? In its summits, BRICS has repeatedly emphasized the role of culture as a means of connecting people around the world. It is right. Since its inception, the European Union made a considerable effort to build a common market as a part of their project of building a European identity.[21] Given the cultural differences and geographical distances separating its members, the challenge presented to BRICS is much more significant. However, concretely, its actions have been very modest in scope.

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21) Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media: Structures, Policies and Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Initiatives such as the BRICS Network University and the BRICS League University may be embryos of a more ambitious effort to build academic articulation between the BRICS countries, but the results are still modest. Currently, collaboration among scholars from BRICS countries is still minimal.[22]

Concerning the media, the initiatives aimed at promoting BRICS cultural integration are still less expressive. One of their most expressive is the BRICS Film Festival, which, however, targets a very narrow audience. On the other hand, in the last years, China has made significant advances regarding social media platforms, better exemplified by TikTok. Still, the Chinese expansion in this sector does not seem to occur in articulation with policies aiming to reinforce BRICS' cultural identity.

Despite the notable progress that the BRICS group has made concerning political and, especially, economic articulation, culture remains the soft belly of BRICS. Without a solid technological and institutional infrastructure allowing the BRICS countries to exchange ideas and cultural products, the dream of a more multicultural world will remain a distant dream.

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22) N. Comel, Kohls, C., Orso, M., Otavio Prendin Costa, L., & Marques, F. P. J. "Academic Production and Collaboration Among BRICS-Based Researchers: How Far Can the 'De-Westernization' of Communication and Media Studies Go?" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 10776990231217466