Albaret Mélanie, Puissances Moyennes dans le Jeu International.
Le Bresil et le Mexique aux Nations Unies

(Middle powers in the international game: Brazil and Mexico at the United Nations)

Reviewed by Joan Deas
IEP, Grenoble

Melanie Albaret’s book analyses through a socio-historic lens the roles and uses of multilateralism as a foreign policy instrument by two ‘middle Powers’, Brazil and Mexico. She does so by undertaking an extensive qualitative comparative study of Brazil and Mexico’s behaviour within three different United Nations’ multilateral bodies: the UN Security Council (UNSC), the Human Rights Council (HRC, former UN Commission on Human Rights) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). These three UN bodies have been chosen for the large spectrum of fields they cover (security, human rights, trade and development), and the particular role Brazil and Mexico have played in those institutions, considered by the author as characteristic of their global relation to multilateralism and its evolution since 1945.

The long period covered by the comparative study (1945–2012) and the adoption of a chronological analysis are characteristic of the socio-historical approach, which aims at “focusing on the evolution, transformation and movement of practices and relations over a long period of time” (pp. 25–26). Despite a wide temporal frame, the author’s chronological analysis does not fall into the trap of excessive description. The study is well problematised and efficiently backed by the rigorous interpretation of an extensive corpus of primary data (numerous archives such as UN statements and resolutions, official documents, etc.). The findings are bolstered by interviews and a participatory observation led in Brazil, making the case studies empirically rich. The systematisation effort throughout the analysis is praiseworthy.

With this case study, Albaret seeks to understand when and why states chose to cooperate; the motivations behind their non-cooperative presence in multilateral institutions and their expectations with regards to this strategy. The author analyses whether the nature of those actors’ investment has consequences on the actors themselves, and if so, of what sort. Albaret also questions the nature and divergence of implications depending on the actors’ choice to develop a cooperation policy or to adopt a passive presence. Finally, the author examines whether the effects of a state’s participation in multilateralism depend on the identity of the actor choosing to cooperate.
To answer her research questions, Albaret analyses the ‘game’ of Brazil and Mexico in multilateral UN bodies using Norbert Elias’ game model as a theoretical base, from which she draws the hypothesis of the existence of an interactive relation between domestic politics and multilateral participation. Elias’ model and its adaptation by Albaret convincingly highlight the interactivity linking domestic and international levels in foreign policy making. Brazil and Mexico’s multilateral engagements are therefore understood as differentiated and non-linear. The author analyses it as the expression of a combination of internal and external dimensions, constantly in interaction with each other, with no level of analysis prevailing over the other. This interactivity among variables means that one variable can become significant because of the evolution of another. The author therefore draws upon the other hypothesis of the circularity of the participation dynamic to multilateralism. The analysis of Mexico and Brazil’s foreign policy at the UN is thus systematically conceived as a two-level circular interaction between the national and multilateral levels. The strength of Albaret’s study lies primarily in her demonstration of this circular dynamic.

Albaret proposes a typology of multilateralism and its use by the two middle Powers studied. She distinguishes between three game configurations in actors’ circular relation to multilateralism: non-multilateralism, limited multilateralism and cooperation. This typology serves as a conductive frame to the extensive and rigorous chronological study of Brazil and Mexico’s foreign policies evolutions at the UN since 1945.

Non-multilateralism is defined as non-cooperative behaviour, where state actors turn their back on multilateral cooperation. Their presence in multilateral institutions only generates passivity, apathy or is diverted to serve unilateral objectives. Non-multilateralism corresponds to the behaviour adopted by Mexico and Brazil at the United Nations over the period 1946–1960 (Chapter 1), and demonstrates that being part of a multilateral institution does not necessarily imply leading to a cooperative policy and participating in the multilateral game.

Limited multilateralism is defined as “participation without cooperation” (pp. 91–92), or as the ambivalence between the leaders’ will to shield themselves from the potentially destabilising effects of multilateralism and the aspiration to use to their own advantage its collective legitimisation function. It is characterised by a selective engagement from the actors, at the margin of the multilateral game, with behaviour oscillating between limited cooperation and non-cooperation. This behaviour corresponds to the period of 1960–1970 (Chapters 2 and 3), during which multilateralism was reduced to the level of a necessary auxiliary to bilateral relations and a forum of orchestration of the third-world rhetoric. The author shows that this strategy can only be limited in time as it fuels an anti-cooperative vicious circle, paralysing the UN and thus decreasing its function of collective legitimisation.

Cooperation corresponds to the type of behaviour Brazil and Mexico have adopted since the 1980s (Chapters 4 and 5). Actors here accept all rules of the multilateral game and choose to invest in the process of norm-entrepreneurship. They produce norms and rules to establish a cooperative international order holding sway over international interdependences. This process increases the actors’ international credibility by conferring on them a status and consolidating internal dynamics that contributed to initiating this cooperative strategy, such as democratisation and
liberalisation processes. It therefore enhances actors’ legitimacy at both internal and external levels of the game, once again in a circular dynamics of interaction.

Albaret rigorously analyses and relevantly stresses the fragile balance between the prioritisation of non-interference and sovereignty values on the one hand, and the wish to profit from the benefit of multilateralism and the legitimisation function of international institutions on the other hand. This tension between cooperation and the temptation of power adds to the fact that multilateralism and global governance increasingly ‘matter’. The author demonstrates that multilateralism has become a strong tendency in international action, which has expanded for more than a century to every field of action, at both the regional and global levels. The UN has emerged as a key public good by becoming the consecration and ultimate manifestation of multilateralism. Multilateralism has therefore turned into a major practice that cannot be ignored and thus necessitates a reflection from every state actor in order to make the most of its legitimisation function. This pushes Brazil and Mexico to define a participation strategy to key multilateral bodies, even though their mandates can become intrusive, such as the evolution of the HCR mandate. It therefore results in a tension between preservation and participation strategies, where participation is selective and depends on the compatibility between the issues when considered at a multilateral level, and the actors’ national interests.

Throughout the book, the author tacitly establishes as a benchmark a correlation between the radicalisation of Brazil and Mexico’s third world rhetoric (particularly in the 60’s and 70’s), the politisation of the ‘development’ theme both nationally and within the UNCTAD, and a non-cooperative behaviour from those two countries at the multilateral level. Starting from the 1980s, Brazil and Mexico’s progressive adoption of cooperative strategies and acceptance of the rules of the multilateral game has evolved through a detachment from the G77 and this ‘third world label’. The Southern contestation strategy has been abandoned in favour of a stronger integration into the multilateral system and its decision-making process. This international order being designed by traditional Western liberal Powers, Brazil and Mexico’s strategy has thus required a reinforcement of the relations with the West. This apparent incompatibility between the voicing of a third world rhetoric and the adoption of a cooperative behaviour in multilateral institutions appears to be questionable and would deserve further investigation in future studies.

Albaret’s reflection can be more broadly related to the academic debate surrounding the evolution of ascending Southern middle Powers’ behaviour with regards to the existing international liberal order and global governance institutions¹.

Two major theses usually confront each other. On the one hand, liberal-institutionalist authors and constructivist authors observe or anticipate a progressive assimilation of rising Southern middle and regional Powers to the liberal order shaped by traditional Powers (assimilationist thesis). On the other hand, realist authors decode or predict a revision of this order, even its possible dislocation (reformist/revisionist thesis), notably through classical antagonist power strategies such as hard and soft balancing against the US hegemon. According to this thesis, ascending Southern middle Powers choose to adopt this behaviour in an attempt to impose a frame more adequate to their values and interests that are presupposed different than those of Northern countries. This behaviour could be translated by a withdrawal towards a neo-Westphalian order, implying a certain rejection of multilateralism to prefer a type of cooperation essentially ‘transactional’ without formal institutions hampering states’ sovereignty. The opposite choice consists in building alliances between ascending middle Powers to aim at potentially renewing a systemic revisionism following the Non-Aligned-Movement model of the Cold War era, or the reinforcement of those actors’ positions within existing international multilateral institutions in order to influence on procedural and substantive aspects of the negotiation processes occurring on various topics of the UN agenda, considered as a priority concern to those states. Here, presence in multilateral institutions and influence on multilateral negotiation processes is conceived as a means to increase the state’s power status, rather than putting cooperation on transnational issues as a priority in itself.

Albaret’s analysis of Brazil and Mexico’s use of multilateralism in the 1960s and 1970s seems to fall into this last category. Albaret shows how the logic of regime and national preservation prevailed both for Brazil and Mexico until the early 1980s. However, the author shows that the two actors’ approach to multilateralism changed and became more cooperative in the period from 1980 to 2000. Nonetheless, even if the chronological evolution of Brazil and Mexico’s behaviour seems to go towards a virtuous movement of acceptance of the multilateral game and adoption of cooperative behaviour, which would tend to confirm the assimilationist hypothesis, it does not indicate that these actors definitely and totally accept multilateralism.

The author indeed states that the process is not absolute, can be reversible, and cannot be generalised to other states. The chronological logic of evolution between the successive phases of relation to multilateralism cannot be proven and


7 Andrew Hurrell, op. cit.
does not stand as an absolute model of interaction to multilateralism. According to the author, the formulation of multilateral politics is demanding and imposes constraining challenges that may incite states to go back to a previous protective and opportunistic behaviour such as limited multilateralism. Albaret also shows that the cooperative behaviour itself can be paradoxical and ambivalent. It offers states symbolic retributions by providing them with an international role, therefore upgrading their status and prestige. In return, this paradoxically reinforces actors’ temptation for power strategies and their ambition to participate in oligarchic clubs such as the permanent members of the UN Security Council or the G20. Brazil already voiced its will to gain such a permanent seat at the UNSC and is part of the G20 with other so-called ‘rising Powers’. This also questions as a benchmark the relevance of Brazil’s classification in the ‘middle Power’ category.

I would have liked to see more theoretical inputs on this ‘middle Power’ category. Even if mentioned in the title of the book, few elements of definition and conceptualisation are mobilised in the study to analyse this concept (except a brief allusion to the category — p. 34 — and a book section — pp. 160–164). With the exception of a few references (Badie, Cooper, Holbraad, Hurrell9), the author does not use the existing theoretical literature related to middle Powers. Yet this concept is complex. The integration of Brazil and Mexico in this group of actors deserves to be justified and may be questionable depending on the definition and delimitation given to this category. It would also have been helpful for the analysis to distinguish between Northern and Southern middle Powers, as Brazil and Mexico do not demonstrate the same set of preferences and behaviour than traditional Northern Powers such as Canada, Norway – or Australia. This ‘post-colonial’ component – overall well tackled and analysed in Albaret’s study – shares a fair part in the differentiation of behaviour and strategies between those two categories of middle Power.

More globally, as well explained by Stephen, “the (current) process of global rebalancing is reconstituting the middle Power category”10. The terms ‘middle Powers’, ‘niche Powers’, ‘intermediate Powers’, ‘regional Powers’ or even ‘pivotal middle Powers’, traditionally used to categorise states ‘in between’ great and small Powers, have become increasingly insufficient to describe the capacities, behaviour and perceptions of ascending Southern actors like Brazil or Mexico. Even though those states still demonstrate a set of preferences and strategies traditionally associated with those categories, such as coalition-building, multilateralism, compromise brokerage, niche diplomacy, ‘middlepowermanship’ and a flexibility...
to avoid direct confrontation\textsuperscript{11}, they have increasingly distanced themselves from those categories, adopting behaviour and strategic choices going beyond the traditional roles set by the regional and middle Powers categories. States like Brazil have indeed deployed various strategies to be recognised not only as ascending or ‘pivotal’ middle Powers\textsuperscript{12}, but as soon-to-be great Powers. Unlike classical middle Powers such as Canada or Australia, Brazil is for instance not an ally of the United States and “has at some point advocated for a different kind of international order”\textsuperscript{13}. Brazil also has leadership claims in its region, independent foreign policy portfolios, behaves as political entrepreneur who “invents or deploys ideas and information to produce significant structural change and openly challenges the dominant Western political paradigms”\textsuperscript{14}. Finally, Brazil has recently made it its goal to “transform the international distribution of power in a more multipolar system”\textsuperscript{15}.

In the end, the lack of attention and theoretical conceptualisation regarding the middle Power category is by no means debilitating to Albaret’s impressive research. Her demonstration remains sophisticated, strong and lucid, and so does her socio-historical analysis. Her study suggests important avenues for further work on the evolution of multilateralism and the dynamics of its use by various actors of the society of states.

Given its breadth and its accessibility, Albaret’s book will appeal to a wide audience, from scholars and practitioners to advanced undergraduate and graduate students alike. Its important contribution to the understanding of the use of multilateralism by states and the interactivity linking domestic and international levels in actors’ relation to the multilateral game makes Albaret’s book well worth the read.


\textsuperscript{12} Mehmet Ozkan, “A new approach to global security: pivotal middle powers and global politics”, \textit{Perceptions} (Spring 2006), pp. 77–95.

\textsuperscript{13} Matthew Stephen, ‘Rising regional powers and international institutions: the foreign policy orientations of India, Brazil and South Africa’, \textit{Global Society}, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2012), p. 293.

\textsuperscript{14} Nukhet A. Sandal, ‘Middle powerhood as a legitimisation strategy in the developing world: The cases of Brazil and Turkey’, \textit{International Politics}, Vol. 51, No. 6 (2014), pp. 694–696.

\textsuperscript{15} Matthew Stephen, ‘The Concept and Role of Middle Powers during Global Rebalancing’, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 48.