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CRITICAL DEBATE

Revisiting Mainstream and Regional Dynamics: Navigating the Absence of a Middle Ground

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In his critique titled "The Comparative Politics of Latin America: Who Knows What and How?" Gerardo L. Munck engages with our paper, "A Unified Canon? Latin American Graduate Training in Comparative Politics," offering a series of critical observations. First and foremost, we thank Professor Munck for his thorough reading of our paper. His critique provides an opportunity to clarify and refine our arguments, addressing any misunderstandings that may have arisen.

As we will demonstrate in this rebuttal, it appears that Munck's response may have misinterpreted some of our core arguments and findings, prompting us to clarify our position and address the key areas of disagreement. Rather than evoking an epistemological privilege in favor of research on Latin America produced by scholars based in the United States, our article provides empirical evidence on the challenges of fostering a North-South academic dialogue. Furthermore, many of the points Munck raises seem to align with our position, underscoring its importance. To provide a structured response, we have organized our rebuttal around six key aspects.

The Missing "Middle Ground"

The "middle ground" that Munck advocates for—a space where neither the Global North nor the Global South holds epistemological privilege in the production of academic knowledge—is an ideal we endorse in principle. However, this ideal remains elusive in practical terms. Ideally, we aspire to a unified canon where theoretically oriented questions about Latin America are explored without regard to scholars' geographical location or the language of the publication. Such a canon would foster the seamless integration of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, ultimately enriching the field of Latin American comparative politics. However, this middle ground is conspicuously absent. Instead, our findings reveal a bifurcated landscape in the teaching of comparative politics at the graduate level in the region: on one side, a unified mainstream canon prevalent across most Latin American universities; on the other, fragmented regional content.

Fragmented regionalism, in this context, refers to limited overlap in regional readings among universities. By our definition, these readings, though not published in Scopus-indexed outlets, extend beyond a university's home country and involve cross-case comparisons. This fragmentation poses challenges because it results in a disjointed canon for doctoral training in Latin America. While scholars in the Global North frequently dominate mainstream publications, regional scholars struggle to find a collective, unified voice capable of counterbalancing the

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dominant trends in mainstream literature. This imbalance is precisely what our article's novel findings illustrate and critique. The absence of a unified canon of regional readings means that significant theoretical and empirical contributions from Latin American scholars are often marginalized or overlooked. Consequently, PhD students are not consistently exposed to a coherent body of regional literature, in stark contrast to the mainstream readings that are uniformly included in their curricula.

Clarifying "Mainstream"

Another key issue raised by Munck concerns the concept of "mainstream." Munck seems to equate this term with an empiricist conception of science, or more practically, with works published in English by scholars from the Global North. While this is an important perspective, it diverges from our conceptualization. In our paper, we define "mainstream" as those readings published in outlets indexed in Scopus—a widely recognized standard for academic quality and impact. Our definition emphasizes the venues of publication rather than the methodologies employed, language, or the nationality of the authors, focusing on *where* rather than *how* and *by whom*.

Munck's emphasis on methodological approaches, language, and the origins of scholars is indeed relevant; however, it represents a separate discussion. It seems that Munck conflates the methodological tendencies of the mainstream canon with our operational definition of "mainstream." Our definition does not hinge on methodology, though we acknowledge that the current mainstream canon may display biases, particularly favoring research oriented towards causal inference and publications in English. These biases are critical, as they shape the research questions considered legitimate and the methodological approaches deemed acceptable. However, our operationalization of "mainstream" is intended to reveal these biases, not to be defined by them.

Understanding Scholarly Training in Latin America

Professor Munck claims that our study focuses on who produces knowledge; however, this is a mischaracterization. Our research is centered on the type of knowledge offered to PhD students by Latin American universities. By examining the nature and interconnections of readings, or the horizontal flows of knowledge among educational institutions in the region, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics and implications for scholarly training in Latin America.

Our study sheds light on the dominant influence of a unified canon of mainstream readings in comparative politics across doctoral programs in Latin America. In doing so, we expose the systemic imbalances that shape the types of knowledge prioritized in the region's study of comparative politics. A descriptive study like ours is key to understanding the current landscape, specifically how knowledge is being disseminated within PhD programs in the region. Our findings reveal that while certain perspectives are amplified (mainstream readings), others are fragmented or marginalized (regional content).

Parochialism, Regionalism, and the Contributions of Latin American Scholars

Professor Munck suggests that parochial readings are those published in Spanish or Portuguese by Latin American scholars. His interpretation of parochialism, much like his understanding of mainstream, appears to differ from our operationalization. Conceptually, we define parochial readings as those focusing exclusively on their respective Latin American universities' home countries. We operationalize them as parochial if they concentrate solely on the country where the university is located and are not published in Scopus-indexed sources. Therefore, our classification is based neither on the language of the reading nor the nationality of the author, but rather on

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whether these readings adopt a comparative approach to studying political phenomena while being published in reputable journals.

Our findings reveal minimal parochial tendencies, with only 5 percent of the materials offered being parochial. Instead, we highlight the importance of regional scholarship in Latin American graduate programs, which Munck overlooks in his critique. Regional scholarship is crucial because it provides context-specific insights often missed in more generalized, mainstream studies. This work addresses issues and nuances that may be overlooked by scholars operating outside the region. By emphasizing the importance of regional scholarship, we advocate for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of Latin American politics.

Regarding the contributions of Latin American scholars, many of the works that Munck values in his critique were produced outside the region *or* are considered mainstream by our definition (e.g., O'Donnell 1988; Mazzuca 2021; Mazzuca and Munck 2021; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Cotler 1979). However, there are also scholars based in Latin America who publish in Scopus-indexed outlets, thereby being considered mainstream (e.g., Luna and Medel 2023; Pérez et al. 2020; Campello and Urdinez 2021; Wills-Otero 2016). These scholars often face significant barriers, including limited access to resources, institutional support, and networks that facilitate publication in high-impact journals. Recognizing the contributions of scholars based in Latin American is crucial for creating a more equitable academic environment and fostering the "middle ground" that both Munck and we advocate.

Epistemological Privilege and the North-South Tension

Epistemological privilege refers to the tendency to prioritize knowledge produced by certain groups, often those in positions of power, over others. This privilege can distort academic discourses and marginalize critical perspectives. We agree with Munck's assertion that epistemological privilege should not be granted to scholars from the Global North. However, it seems he may have misinterpreted our article—primarily a descriptive study—by suggesting that it implies or invokes such privilege. On the contrary, our article, supported by descriptive empirical work, highlights the valuable contributions of Latin American scholars, seeking to unify a regional canon and promote a more reciprocal flow of knowledge between the Global North and South. Our collaborative paper itself exemplifies the benefits of a two-way flow of knowledge, as it was produced by Latin American scholars studying in the Global North (at Brown University and the University of Illinois at Chicago), and a professor from the Universidad Católica del Uruguay.

The tension between Global North and Global South scholarship is well-documented (Tanaka 2017; Freidenberg 2017; Codato et al. 2020; Lucca 2021). Our study provides empirical evidence of this tension in Latin American graduate training in comparative politics. Munck's critique, which claims we advocate for a one-way flow of knowledge from North to South, misrepresents our position. We do not support reinforcing this imbalance; rather we highlight its existence, evident in a unified mainstream canon but a fragmented regional one. By acknowledging this imbalance, we aim to foster a more inclusive academic environment with a bidirectional flow of knowledge. We advocate for PhD programs in the region to consolidate a unified share of regional readings.

Concluding Thoughts

Munck's insightful critique of our study raises important considerations while also reflecting some misunderstandings that may emerge from our arguments. We appreciate his engagement with our work and the opportunity to clarify our stance. Our research highlights the absence of a middle ground between mainstream and regional scholarship, showing how this lack of integration marginalizes significant contributions from Latin American scholars in training future comparativists from the region. By focusing on the influence of mainstream readings in Latin

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American doctoral programs, we expose systemic imbalances that affect which knowledge is prioritized in Latin American PhD studies.

Munck's proposal for a theoretical framework—the so-called "Latin American triangle"—to address contemporary Latin American issues/politics is compelling. Understanding how macro-structures such as the political regimes, the economy, and the state operate is indeed a necessary first step in studying questions with contextual rigor. Although this framework does not directly address the specific issues our study investigates, exploring how these structures might influence decisions by political science departments to incorporate regional scholarship and address existing imbalances in PhD curricula is a promising avenue for future research. We hope this rebuttal contributes to an ongoing dialogue within the field of comparative politics on how to foster a more equitable academic environment.

Competing interests. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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