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# Brazil, Think Tanks, and the International System: A discourse analysis

## Brasil, Think Tanks e o Sistema Internacional: Uma análise de discurso

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### Abstract

With the arrival of the Worker's Party to power in 2003, Brazil engaged in expanding its international political participation through the BRICS, IBAS, and other multilateral forums. United States-based think tanks noticed this heightened engagement and subsequently produced a considerable volume of research about Brazilian foreign policy. This article employs discourse analysis as its research method and post-structuralist and post-colonial theoretical approaches to understand the representation that Brookings and CFR publications crafted about Brazil as an "emerging" or "rising" power. Specifically, we argue that Brazil was typically portrayed in a positive light. However, this constitution was based on hierarchical and racialized thinking that seeks to reaffirm preexisting global power relations.

### Resumo

Com a chegada do Partido dos Trabalhadores ao poder em 2003, o Brasil iniciou uma expansão de sua participação política internacional por meio dos BRICS, IBAS e outros fóruns multilaterais. Os *think tanks* sediados nos Estados Unidos perceberam esse aumento no envolvimento político e subsequentemente produziram um volume considerável de pesquisas sobre a política externa brasileira. Este artigo emprega a análise do discurso como método de pesquisa, bem como abordagens teóricas pós-estruturalistas e pós-coloniais, para entender a representação que as publicações de Brookings e CFR elaboraram sobre o Brasil como um potencia "emerging" ou "rising". Especificamente, argumentamos que o Brasil era tipicamente retratado de maneira positiva. No entanto, essa constituição foi baseada num pensamento hierárquico e racializado, que busca reafirmar relações de poder globais preexistentes.

**Keywords:** Think Tank, USA-Brazil Relations, Foreign Policy, Discourse, Post-structuralism, International Order.

**Palavras-chave:** Think Tank, Relações EUA-Brasil, Política Externa, Discurso, Pós-estruturalismo, Ordem Internacional.

## Introduction

Since 2003, with the arrival of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his Worker's Party (PT) to power, until 2016, when his successor Dilma Rousseff was impeached, Brazil underwent an impressive transformation in both its domestic and foreign policies. On the domestic side, the PT governments worked to strengthen macroeconomic stability, create opportunities for Brazilian corporations to internationalize, and increase social expenditure for the country's most underprivileged citizens (CERVO, 2008). This process led to 30 million Brazilians leaving poverty and entering the middle class, along with a massive expansion in credit and consumption within the South American country (MORAIS AND SAAD-FILHO, 2012). Internationally, Lula, and his successor Dilma Rousseff, championed an enhanced profile for Brazil on the global stage through the creation of numerous multilateral forums, such as the IBAS (India, Brazil, South Africa), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and so forth. The PT governments strove for an "active and assertive" (*ativa* and *altiva*) approach to foreign policy that led to over 600 new diplomatic service positions, the opening of 40 embassies and consulates, and an outlook set on the entire world, instead of only Latin America or the United States (U.S.) (AMORIM, 2010; CORNETET, 2014, p. 121-124). This massive transformation of internal and external capabilities led to a discursive reinterpretation and reframing of Brazil's position on the global stage, whereby the pervasively violent and pessimistic storylines of *Cidade de Deus* (2002) and *Death Without Weeping* (SCHEPER-HUGHES, 1993) began to be replaced by the more auspicious narrative of *The New Brazil* (ROETT, 2010), as termed by one Brookings Institution publication.

Besides Brookings, other U.S. think tanks, such as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), also noticed Brazil's expanded presence in international affairs and provided policy analysis to understand its possible effects on the liberal world order. Secondly, these think tanks and their donors hoped to increase the visibility of, and knowledge production on, Brazilian foreign policy and capabilities, considering it is an understudied and overlooked area within Washington, D.C. circles that are more centered on studying: Russia, the Middle East, and China. Addressing the ideational production of think tanks is relevant in light of the complex role they play in the U.S. political environment. Insofar as they are intended to influence public opinion, bureaucracy, Congress, etc., think tanks are a relevant space for scrutinizing public debate and narratives that inform strategic decisions made, and policies implemented by U.S. administrations. Assessing the narratives vocalized in Washington's so-called "marketplace of ideas" (SMITH, 1991) is particularly important at a time when the U.S. has no consensus on the strategy to be adopted for various themes and regions, leading to the employment of ad hoc and contradictory policies (VEZIRGIANNIDOU, 2013).

This research article employs post-structuralist and post-colonial theoretical lenses to examine the discourses that were created during this period (from 2003 to 2016) by think tanks in their endeavors to study Brazil and Brazilian foreign policy. Specifically, we argue that think tanks generally portrayed a positive image of Brazil in their analyses; however, the resulting image relied on quasi-racialized and hierarchical thinking that reflects the position of power these think tanks possess,

and that works to constitute the place of Brazil on the global arena. Our contribution here is to bring the role of race and racialized thinking into our academic conversation about think tanks to highlight how they influence political discourse, especially with regards to Global South states.

For our methods, we conducted a discourse analysis to evaluate how U.S. think tanks conceptualize Brazil and its international position and delineate what this tells us about power and international political arrangements at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specifically, we part from a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis that critically examines power relations, how they are created and operationalized through discourse, and their resultant effect on societal relations through the creation of various “truth” narratives (FOUCAULT, 1972, 1978). Or to quote Jørgensen and Phillips as they examine Foucault’s approach to discourse analysis, “Thus power provides the conditions of possibility for the social. It is in power that our social world is produced...” (2002, p. 13). Furthermore, the insights presented here are also informed indirectly by both of the authors’ experiences living and working within Washington’s public policy sector.

We selected from within think tanks acknowledged as both influential and bipartisan with Washington, D.C. policy circles (MCGANN, 2007; ABELSON, 2006), as well as those who held programs and systematic publications about Brazilian foreign policy. This led us to select the Brookings Institution and the CFR as the institutions that best represent the think tank “environment” during the time frame addressed.<sup>1</sup> Considering that think tanks publish through a variety of different mediums (books, reports, op-eds, policy papers, podcasts, etc.), we choose to focus our attention on books and reports, since these kinds of publications tend to present more “in-depth” analysis. Overall, we concentrated our study on a sampling of five specific publications,<sup>2</sup> which despite their short number are still a significative and relevant amount. Their relevance rests upon the impact and credibility associated with their respective think tanks and on the fact that these published materials generated a myriad of reviews, roundtables, lectures, podcasts, and meetings promoted by the think tanks to “market” their main ideas and policy recommendations. Moreover, they are representative of the over 36 books, policy briefings, and numerous other publications produced by U.S.-based think tanks during this period.

## Think Tanks as Discourse Creators

Think tanks are a modern component of a grander historical legacy of political advice giving and counseling that stretches back to Ancient Greece, can be detected in works such as Machiavelli’s

1 Of course, many relevant think tanks were kept aside during this study. The Wilson Center’s “Brazil Institute” for example is devoted exclusively to Brazil, notwithstanding, we decided not to analyze its discourses because the Wilson Center often works as a platform for vocalizing the views of specific Brazilian groups within Washington, D.C., rather than as a source for scrutinizing the discourses of U.S. civil society institutions towards Brazil. Due to their importance, we intend to address the Wilson Center’s Brazil Institute and other think tanks elsewhere.

2 The five publications being: Bodman, Samuel, James Wolfensohn, and Julia Sweig. 2011. *Global Brazil and U.S.-Brazil Relations*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations; Jones, Bruce. 2014. *Still Ours to Lead: America, Rising Powers, and the Tension Between Rivalry and Restraint*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Mares, David, and Harold Trinkunas. 2016. *Aspirational Power: Brazil on the Long Road to Global Influence*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Piccone, Ted. 2016. *Five Rising Democracies: And the Fate of the International Liberal Order*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Roett, Riordan. 2010. *The New Brazil*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

*The Prince*, and since the 1800s have gained increased importance in the U.S. political field (MCGANN, 2007; SMITH, 1991). Think tanks are difficult to define and classify, or as Thomas Medvetz writes, “the central concept itself is fuzzy, mutable, and contentious” (2012, ch. 1). Numerous previous scholars have attempted to make sense of the rather open category that is “think tanks”, for instance, Donald Abelson has advanced four basic classifications for these institutions: universities without students, government contractors, advocacy think tanks, and a candidate or political legacy think tanks (ABELSON, 2006, p. 44-48). Abelson’s approach categorizes think tanks based on their type of institutional connection towards the rest of the political sphere. Universities without students would be those, such as Brookings, that cultivate a scholarly reputation by enlisting many academic experts into their ranks. Government contractor think tanks, such as the RAND Corporation, would be those which receive the majority of their funding directly from the state. Advocacy think tanks have a more markedly partisan or ideological agenda, such as the Heritage Foundation, and eschew objectivity by pursuing specific political ends. Finally, candidate or legacy-based think tanks are those centered around the political identity of an individual, such as the Nixon Center for Peace.

Stated differently, there is no singular common characteristic to all think tanks as the term is constantly evolving and polyvalent. Medvetz unites Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “field of power” with Foucauldian and Weberian approaches to social discourse to argue that think tanks occupy a unique position within society, which he refers to as a “field of expertise” (2012, ch. 3, see also RICH, 2004). In other words, this field of expertise is divided between four different quadrants: political and bureaucratic field (state, political parties, etc.); the field of cultural production (universities, policy journals, etc.); media field (magazines, cable news, etc.); and economic field (corporations, labor unions, etc.) (MEDVETZ, 2012, ch. 1, 3). Think tanks position themselves, more or less, at the center of these four social fields without ever becoming too closely aligned with any of them. For example, think tanks typically cultivate good media relations to disseminate their publications and enhance their members’ public profile; but must be careful in how they present themselves on the news, lest they be labeled as unscholarly (ABELSON, 2006, p. 170-173). “Being” or “acting” like a think tank involves a careful balancing act, whereby the institutions must be constantly wary of maintaining their delicate position, hence the difficulty in defining think tanks, since they are not quite a university, government entity, media outlet, or private business (MCGANN, 2005). Our point here will *not* be to reach a perfect classification of think tanks – because that task is unattainable. The purpose of this article is to employ this difficulty of classification and discursive instability to understand think tank publications focused on Brazilian foreign policy (see AYERBE, 2007; BELLÍ, NASSER, 2014).

Think tanks, overall, aspire to influence political discourses and outcomes, through various means: media relations, academic publications, congressional testimony, policy briefs, etc. (ABELSON, 2006, p. 148; RICH, 2004, p. 180-194). However, the influence of think tanks is difficult to measure and comprehend because they are present at various stages of the policy production process and their close relationships and chameleon-like identity as a, “hybrid’ organization: part academic research center, part technocratic agency, part advocacy group, part PR or lobbying firm, and so on”

(MEDVETZ, 2012, ch. 1), only complicates any attempt to measure their influence. Think tanks do still hope to affect policy outcomes; but despite this desire they have, “failed to inspire scholars to study their activities, to assess their influence, and to consider their significance in understanding ‘how power works’ in liberal democracies” (PARMAR, 2004, p. 19). Moreover, this discussion raises the question of racial hierarchies in transnational settings and how they affect think tanks’ views of their “object” of study and scholarly production on the “other”? One cannot view discourse as being free of racial, gendered, and other social systems of differentiations and oppression.

To achieve that end, this article employs Foucault’s insights, and those of other post-structuralist scholars (DERRIDA, 1997; DOTY, 1996), to reassert the idea that both the political and social spheres are composed of numerous and fluctuating discourses, which are constituted through *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech), as Saussure (1974) critically separated the two concepts (DOTY, 1997, p. 377-378; HALL, 2003). Discourses work to form, deliver, and expand power, and relations of power, in multifaceted ways throughout the social arenas, or as Foucault writes, “Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1978: 101). For Foucault, power is not only a means by which one agent can exert force over another agent; but rather it is a more encompassing concept that functions as a “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 92-93) and that has far-reaching consequences for interpersonal and state relations.

Additionally, as Shapiro has argued (1989), texts are not the outcomes of a settled social “reality”, acting as products of an agreed-upon understanding, but rather operate as part of the political process that gives limited stability to social “realities”. Texts then are not only outputs but also inputs towards the creation of social hegemonies (SAID, 1983; DARBY, 1998). Or following Derrida’s famous maxim, “There is nothing outside of text” (1997, p. 158), which can be taken to mean that writing products have a crucial role within representational practices as a force that weaves intersubjective understanding about objects. Furthermore, IR is a field, in many ways, concerned with boundaries: divisions between domestic/international, lines between sovereignty/anarchy, and schisms between Global North/South – yet most of these boundaries are typically accepted as “natural”, instead of problematizing the power-infused systems that produce them (CAMPBELL, SHAPIRO, 1999; WALKER, 1993).

If states are contested and not well-defined entities that are affected constantly by discursive processes, how do states and non-state actors (such as think tanks) respond discursively to other states, specifically those that may pose a challenge to their position of power? Or as Zehfuss writes when considering post-structuralism and post-colonialism, “The impact of colonialism and imperialism on how the West – including Western academics strongly opposed to any form of neoimperialism – conceives of itself is both uncomfortable and not easy to see from the Western position” (2013, p. 157). How then is a possible threat, an outside “thing”, a Global South actor, partially produced by the discursive practices of U.S. think tanks, most of which are based in Washington, D.C., and are explicitly connected to the U.S.’s policy actions (see MIGNOLO, 2011; WALKER, 1991; ZEHFUSS, 2013)? Our theoretical move here is to place post-structuralist analyses of texts and post-colonial approaches

to hierarchies in conversation to understand how think tanks authors, with nationalist and other biases, affect the research objects they study.

As Svartman (2016, 2018) has argued, during the Lula and Rousseff Administrations, U.S. think tanks (many of them for the first time) undertook publications on Brazil's foreign policy. In his analysis, Svartman focuses on the academic production of seven think tanks specifically: Brookings Institution, Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), etc., and concludes they generally frame Brazil in a positive light, while focusing on areas for possible policy convergence between the U.S. and Brazil (2016, p. 165; see also TEIXEIRA, 2011). This article explores these productions further and asks why is Brazil typically presented as an ally and contributor to global order? Due to limited space, we cannot discuss here at length all of these productions and their nuances. Instead, below we present some of the common threads that can be identified among all of these productions and then elaborate on the possible political ramifications and identities that these publications constitute. Various other Brazilian scholars have remarked on the connection between think tank "expertise" production and political ends, using differing approaches (see RIGOLIN, HAYASHI, 2012; TEIXEIRA, 2015; WIETCHIKOSKY, 2018). Our aim here is to present a post-colonial and post-structuralist one to this blossoming field.

## The BRICS, Emerging States, and Think Tank Narratives

One of the most blatant characteristics that all think tank productions about Brazilian foreign policy from 2003 to 2016 have in common is a rather favorable view of Brazil's role within the international system. Despite occasional disagreements, for instance over military interventions in Libya or Ukraine, Brazil (during the years of the PT governments) and the U.S. seemed to agree on most global governance questions, according to think tanks authors. As David Mares and Harold Trinkunas state in *Aspirational Power: Brazil on the Long Road to Global Influence*, published by Brookings: "In particular, Brazil sees both reform and revision as attainable and beneficial, both for its growth as a major power and for the stability of the international order" (2016, p. 3). Viewed differently, what we see here is a careful weaving of a discourse that seeks to reaffirm Brazil's place in the international system as a *natural* and *fixed* ally of the U.S, coming from two scholars who specialize in defense policy and civil-military relations. Curiously, when we compare think tanks production on all of the BRICS and emerging powers (see TEIXEIRA, 2011) overall, what we see is a rather negative depiction of Russia, a moderate assessment of China, and a more positive representation of Brazil, Indonesia, etc.<sup>3</sup> These various portrayals of emerging states raise the question: to what extent are think tanks conducting an objective analysis of other states' foreign policy strategies, or are they regurgitating preexisting discourses about who is a well or ill-behaved global citizen?

<sup>3</sup> For an example of a think tank publication on Russia see Alina Polyakova et al. *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses* (2016). For China, see Xenia Wickett et al. *The Asia-Pacific Power Balance: Beyond the US-China Narrative* (2015). For Indonesia, see Joshua Kurlantzick *Keeping the U.S.-Indonesia Relationship Moving Forward* (2018). Think tanks tend to make a more "positive" analysis of Brazil than of other rising states as these publications exemplify.

The treatment U.S. think tanks give to emerging states, in many ways, correlates with pre-established notions within the U.S. foreign policy community of who does, and does not, pose a threat to U.S. interests. Furthermore, there is a vast academic production on emerging powers and what effect, if any, they want to have on the international system (see HURRELL, 2006; KAHLER, 2013; VEZIRGIANNIDOU, 2013). Most of this production also reasserts the discursive narrative that states can be socialized within the rules and regimes of the international order because of the attractive qualities of the liberal world order. Think tanks repeat this narrative without critically analyzing it, taking on the line of reasoning that strong liberal world order can accommodate rising powers. Bruce Jones, a regional specialist in East Asia, in another aptly titled Brookings publication, *Still Ours To Lead*, seems to lay this point out rather directly by stating: “In 2007 a Brazilian politician told me, ‘We don’t want a collapse of American leadership. We want a long, slow soft landing for American dominance” (2014, p. 21).

What this discursive rendition hints at, even when it includes Brazilian voices, is that the U.S. need not worry about Brazilian interests within the international system. These think tanks scholars, in concert with the academic community, intimate that Brasilia will always be won over to the cause of democracy, capitalism, and so forth. A very different discourse is employed towards other BRICS members, especially Russia and China. For instance, for Brookings expert Ted Piccone<sup>4</sup> (2016, p. 223) Russia and China “are playing leading and complementary roles in undermining core principles of democracy and human rights at the national and international levels”. Russia and China are not only depicted as authoritarian states, but also as threats where the “worst fear is a China that feels confident enough, or sees the opportunity, to initiate a strike for retaking Taiwan” (JONES, 2014, p. 159), which if the United States did not “respond” immediately could force the region to accept it as a fait accompli.

In the time frame analyzed, Brazil is pictured as a country that the United States should engage with, not contain. That is the core idea that Samuel Bodman, James Wolfensohn, and Julia Sweig<sup>5</sup> refer to when they speak about a “Mature Partnership” between the U.S. and Brazil in their CFR “Independent Task Force Report”, titled *Global Brazil and U.S.-Brazil Relations* (2011, p. 76). The report presents a variety of proposals that would “appease” Brazilian calls for global governance reform without actually ceding U.S. hegemony. It can be understood as a blueprint for how to manage U.S./Brazil relations in a way that advances the interests of the U.S. foreign policy community, without giving up influence or maneuvering space. For example, the report calls for waiving visa requirements for Brazilian tourists to the U.S. as a way of expanding cultural and commercial ties (BODMAN ET AL., 2011, p. 74). In summary, U.S. think tank productions on the BRICS, and on emerging/rising powers more broadly, should be viewed as a discursive strategy that reasserts preexisting narratives within the international system, and works to maintain the U.S.’s position, while allowing for minor concessions.

4 Piccone held various posts in the Clinton administration, including senior foreign policy advisor, dealing primarily with Central America and the Caribbean.

5 Bodman was Secretary of Energy during the Bush Administration, Wolfensohn is a former World Bank president, and Sweig is an expert on U.S.-Latin American relations, especially with Cuba. Sweig also signed a column for the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*.

## *Grandeza Brasileira and Notions about Latin American “Others”*

Think tanks also tend to “view” Brazil in a particular manner that relies upon pre-established notions of Latin America (and Latin Americans) as racialized “others”. More concretely, most of the think tank productions on Brazilian foreign policy, since the PT came to power in 2003, use “Brazilian Greatness” or *Grandeza Brasileira* as a concept to encapsulate what Brazil wants from the world system, and how the Latin American country views itself within that system. Ted Piccone, in his Brookings publication, *Five Rising Democracies*,<sup>6</sup> describes Brazilian foreign policymaking and identity by stating:

Once Foreign Minister Rio Branco, the father of Brazilian diplomacy, negotiated the legal national borders at the end of the 1910s, Brazil turned wholeheartedly to national development as the North Star of its foreign policy... As it grew in strength, Brazil also sought *grandeza*, to be recognized as a great country with the capacity to be regionally and internationally influential. To achieve *grandeza*, its leaders chose the path of political autonomy, which has taken different forms over the years... (italics in original, PICCONE, 2016, p. 98-99).

Mares and Trinkunas also draw upon *grandeza* to explain Brazilian foreign policy decision-making both historically and at present:

This diplomatic success is embedded in Brazil’s international DNA and has been transmitted to successive generation of diplomats at the Foreign Ministry... The desire for international standing was admittedly created within a closed political system in which the elite and the military determined domestic and foreign policy. Nevertheless, the idea of Brazilian *grandeza* did become implanted in society over time and thus became accepted as a desirable goal even in later democratic periods (italics in original, MARES, TRINKUNAS, 2016, p. 30).

In Piccone’s discourse *grandeza* is articulated with recognition and autonomy, two important goals for many countries’ foreign policies. Nevertheless, the word *grandeza* has a semantic content connected not exactly to the traditional and measurable foreign policy objectives pursued by established powers but with something intangible, often associated with status or vanity. These authors veer towards the reproduction of discourse about Latin America, by portraying Brazilian foreign policy as a quest for *grandeza*, defined by Feres Jr. (2005) as the opposite of the glorified self-image of a (white) “America”: traditional, instable, passionate, childish. In this sense, a favorable depiction of Brazil is also entangled within a narrative where this “aspirational power” is driven by other superfluous goals.

*Grandeza Brasileira*, itself, is probably borrowed from a line in Brazil’s national anthem that refers to the country’s considerable size. These scholars though have read too deeply into a term which Brazilian scholars might be hesitant to employ as an all-inclusive explanation for the South

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<sup>6</sup> The five democracies being: India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia.

American state's foreign policy approach since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The wide usage these U.S. authors make of the term is comprehensible since it is an easy concept to digest with an apparent historical legacy. *Grandeza Brasileira* ignores the intricacies and insecurities that exist within Brazilian national identity and that complicates the employment of this all-encompassing concept to generalize the PT governments' foreign policy positioning. For instance, feelings of inferiority also compose a considerable part of Brazil's national identity, as well as feelings of being excluded from particular spaces, such as the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The discursive narrative that Brazilian foreign policy interests are led by a desire for "greatness" speaks back to a racialized conception of Latin American "others" that is pervasive within U.S. culture and elite political circles since the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

When we examine closely how these authors utilize *grandeza*, what becomes apparent is the reemergence of common historical tropes being adapted to explain the present political comportment of Latin Americans vis-à-vis their northern neighbors. For instance, Piccone's *grandeza* is the repetition of a larger historical narrative, which contends that Latin American states "prefer" or "need" strongmen rulers. In this sense, the Baron of Rio Branco is discursively transformed throughout Think Tanks publications into a militarized and hyper-masculine figure covered in medals and regalia who desires *grandeza*, and not a "serious" seat at the table of international governance. His representation can be connected to that of numerous Latin American *caudillos* in the reading that these think tank publications make about the history of Brazilian international relations. These types of leaders, and their states by extension, are not suitable for permanent seats on the UN Security Council or for a serious role in global affairs – their guiding light is instead the glamour of *grandeza*. It worth noting that this picture of Rio Branco is utterly different from the dominant view shared by Brazilian scholars, which tend to emphasize Rio Branco's legacy in terms of his commitment to realism, pragmatism, and political wit (RICUPERO, 2000; CERVO, BUENO, 2015).

The over-reading these think tank authors make of *grandeza brasileira* and its possible effects on the country's foreign policy lead to a simplification of Brazilian international interests and tactics. Moreover, this discursive act replicates an older approach by U.S. agents, both in popular culture and in academia, of representing Latin American's subjectivity in a way that legitimizes their subordinate peripheral status. As Dorfman and Mattelart (1975) demonstrated in their seminal study of Donald Duck and Disney cartoons, subtle and often overlooked details, words, and images have been employed historically to depict Latin Americans as obsessed with trivial and banal objects, in comparison to U.S. actors with their more concrete and reasonable desires. Regarding Brazil specifically, this discursive narrative has been employed to depict Carmen Miranda as a fun-loving immigrant with poor English-speaking skills (ROBERTS, 1993), Zé Carioca the Brazilian parrot in World War II-era animated movies, and even more recently the cartoon movie *Rio* (2011). As Feres Jr. (2005) argues

<sup>7</sup> Feres outlines how U.S. political cartoons represent Latin Americans as racialized children in need of guidance by an older white person in the figure of Uncle Sam (2005: 70-1). The words "Latin America" are themselves loaded terms within U.S. vernacular, signifying a geographic region and political and social shapes and structures. The field of Latin American Studies itself has played an immense role since the Cold War in discursively portraying the region.

“Latin America”, in everyday U.S. parlance, has become a concept with a historical progression that is adaptable to various political ends and goals. The result is a Latin American “other” that is inherently inferior and operates under a different system of morals, ethics, and reasoning. In a subtle, but still perceptible, way this is what Mares and Trinkunas reaffirm when speaking about, “the desire for international standing was admittedly created within a closed political system”. Brazil, and all Latin American states, one is led to infer desire “international standing”, a synonym for greatness.

Global South “others” are rendered as not desiring a more equitable international system, or one that addresses its hidden racial and gendered prejudices – they simply want “standing”. Think tank “texts” about international politics then are *not* a facsimile or rendition of a preexisting social reality. Instead, they call upon historical discourses to establish a specific interpretation of the present and future as fact, hiding racialized narratives under a veneer of objective science. The present articulation of U.S./Brazil relations, and U.S./Latin American relations more broadly, become one dimensional where despite the changes that Latin American states seek both domestically and internationally, they are still read through atemporal discursive practices. These practices render Brazil and Global South actors as constant and unchanging “others” that can be managed across time and space by think tanks policy recommendations.

## The Discursive Power of Think Tank Publications

The racialized manner by which think tanks analyze the guiding principles of Brazilian international projection is a discursive process that multiple Latin American scholars from José Martí, to Walter Mignolo to Aníbal Quijano have noted in the U.S. approaches to Latin America since the 1800s. The resultant narratives preclude certain ways of viewing Latin America and instead apply a U.S.-centric approach to understand the internal dynamics of these countries. This process of creating racialized “others” has been widely critiqued by post-colonial thinkers within IR because it often attaches immature and reductionist cognitive behaviors to Global South agents. As Inanna Hamati-Ataya writes:

To an observer who is willing to see difference in the world, or is so positioned that difference is impossible to ignore, there is perhaps nothing more obvious, more natural to acknowledge than the violence of IR as a Western social science that is subtended by and that naturally promotes the hegemonic position of the West (2013, p. 28).

The “violence” Hamati-Ataya refers to can be understood here as a form of Spivak’s (1988, p. 280-281) epistemic violence, and “the West” can be replaced by the U.S. think tanks, in the way they represent emerging states.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest Brazil and Latin America are not part of “the West”, if one is talking about cultural legacies, for instance. Instead, Brazil and Latin America are not part of what is viewed as the “core” Western producers of economic and intellectual might, usually implied as the U.S. and Western Europe.

Hamati-Ataya's critique of international relations as a field of study can be connected to post-structuralist reinterpretations of world politics. As Roxanne Doty argues, "In international relations, hierarchy has been more of a background condition from which analyses proceed rather than something which is itself in need of examination (1993, p. 303)". Doty's conclusion is the same type of critique advanced here, of the way think tanks conceive of and treat Brazil and Brazilian politics. Put blatantly, think tanks, despite employing interviews with locals (usually white Brazilian elites) as part of their methodology, and crafting well-written narratives of Brazilian history, still tacitly accept international hierarchies and power relations as natural and given. Besides, these entities do not question the position of power they hold, considering they are based in the U.S. and have considerable financial resources at their disposal.

Curiously, most of the publications we have presented here come from the Brookings Institution, typically viewed as a more left-leaning think tank within Washington, D.C. policy circles. This shows how interpretations of Brazil cross the left/right political divide, a finding similar to Wietchikoski's (2018) in her study of U.S. think tanks. This also demonstrates how a racialized and erroneous way of decoding Latin American political processes is pervasive throughout think tanks' productions. Furthermore, these productions reaffirm Brazil's semantic positioning as a "Latin American country", despite various Lula and Rousseff government initiatives to expand Brazil's foreign policy identity by joining in the BRICS, IBAS, and other coalitions. For example, Bodman et al. (2011, p. 71) call for more U.S./Brazilian cooperation on health and development throughout Africa and the Americas, but not on the U.N. security council or in other global regions. The discursive struggle over how to signify "Brazil", and what Brazil can and cannot mean/do, is a process that negates the possibility of alternative discourses or policies that would present Brazil with an expanded subjectivity.

Seen differently, think tanks are very much part of Foucault's power/knowledge nexus since their purported mission is to demonstrate policy expertise for the ends of influencing policy decisions. Think tanks may present themselves as either neutral or more openly partisan – yet all of them still hold power. This power does not come in a militarily threatening form; rather it stems from how think tanks aid in the constitution of specialized knowledge about given countries or policy areas. Or as Judith Butler argues: "The state draws upon non-statist operations of power and cannot function without a reserve of power that it has not itself organized" (2009, p. 149). Think tanks are part of that reserve power that the U.S. has not itself organized. Moreover, they operate within the same Western logic and political context as the U.S. and are reflective of this discursive setting.

The outcomes of this process are think tank publications that at times infantilize or diminish the political aspirations of Global South states. For instance, Piccone's text presents an overall favorable picture of Brazil, while scolding various foreign policy positions. For the case of point, let us analyze how he ends his chapter on Brazil:

Brazil has the potential to become a leader—by its example at home and by its actions abroad—for a more effective international democracy and human rights order. Until then, its demands for democratization of global governance will continue to be met by reasonable doubts about how Brazil would behave once it got a more secure seat at the table (PICCONE, 2016, p. 128).

Piccone's usage of the metaphor a "seat at the table" is reminiscent of a child hoping to sit at the adult table during a family dinner. The author's analysis of Brazilian capacities might not be consciously aiming to infantilize the South American actor, yet his words rely upon a pre-established narrative that views Latin American states as not "mature" enough for democratic and global aspirations. Moreover, Piccone's analysis treats international democratic governance and human rights regimes as inherently positive concepts, denying how they could be used to justify violence or intervention. Piccone's stance also puts Brazilian foreign policy decision-makers in a bind, because any disagreement with the State Department could be seen as overt aggression towards the international pillars of democracy and human rights. Words and concepts take on an imposing character as they attempt to mold the possible courses of action available to Global South states.

Think tank publications about transformations within Brazilian politics since 2003 also attempt to insert themselves within the discursive narrative of U.S./Latin American relations by attempting to give *temporary* stability and fixity to U.S. notions of "Brazil" as an object, concept, and discourse. For instance, Roett's (2010) book has a chapter on foreign policy since 2003 titled, "Brazil's Emergence on the Global Stage"; this discursive act precludes any notion of Brazil having been a global player before this period, and sets the framework in which said "emergence" can be understood and controlled. Roett writes towards the end of the chapter:

Perhaps not all stories have a completely happy ending. In late 2009 Brazil took a series of somewhat baffling policy decisions that raised the question of whether or not the country was truly prepared for a global role, other than in trade and energy. The first was the somewhat confusing role of Brazil, and many of its neighbors, in the events in Honduras (2010, p. 145).

The tone in this quote captures the overall attitude of the chapter, whereby any move by Brazil on the world stage that is not in line with U.S. policy wishes is dismissed as signaling a lack of understanding of international order, and not as a possible move for greater autonomy. Efforts that strengthen the voice of Global South states, such as Iran or Turkey, or that address the inequalities of the world system are seen as examples that reify the notion that Brazil is still a commodity, and not leadership or idea, producer.

This discussion raises the question, for who are think tank publications written? Since they are written in English, they are produced mainly for U.S. audiences and Brazilian elites who know English and have an interest in the topic. Think tank publications are written in a very clear and "reader-friendly" style to make their point concise and communicable, but they tend to include very few Brazilian authors and their ways of interpreting Brazilian foreign policy. Furthermore, of all the authors presented here, except for Roett, none are self-proclaimed experts on Brazil, despite many being specialists in other Latin American countries. Think tank scholars inhabit a U.S. discursive space, and their position within that space results in an elegant, yet stale understanding of Brazilian agents and institutions, written under the guise of academic "expertise". Experience researching

Cuba, Mexico, or Venezuela is not necessarily translatable for researching Brazil (and vice-versa), without inducing blind spots about each country's singular identity and political positioning. This process showcases the "revolving door" (and its pitfalls) that exists in Washington, D.C. between the government and think tanks, whereby individuals may be working one day at the State Department and be providing "policy expertise" the next at CFR, even if they were assigned to a neighboring country/region previously (see TEIXEIRA, 2015).

## Conclusion

Our purpose in this article is not to discard think tank publications or the policy analyses they intend to advance, instead our objective has been to present a closer reading of these publications through post-structuralist and post-colonial theoretical lenses. Through the discourse analysis conducted here, we have described some of the faulty premises and concepts that guide think tank publications and policy proposals, while calling for a more profound understanding of Brazilian political processes. The racialized narratives on which various think tank publications draw upon partially serve to reassert a U.S.-centric notion of the international system that places Latin American and Global South states in a peripheral and inferior position, relegating them into the identity and space of international "others". Think tanks, mainly based on Washington, D.C., with sizeable budgets and connections, must always be placed within the greater web of power relations that they inhabit. Brazil is generally presented by think tanks in a more positive light than other BRICS states – this is not without consequence. The discursive practice of labeling certain states as well-behaved, and others as ill-behaved global citizens, works to maintain hierarchies within the international system.

By articulating a positive narrative, the think tank discourses analyzed here depict Brazil as a *potential equal*, an emergent state eligible for accommodation at the "table" of the international liberal order. Notwithstanding that, when they are silent about the fact that Brazil has been on the international stage for more than a century, actively participating in the Hague Convention, League of Nations, World War I and II, the creation of the U.N., and so forth, they reframe Brazil as a newcomer other whose behavior remains to be seen. In this sense, the attitudes of the Obama administration – who sought to "engage" with Brazil – but did not support Brazil's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council might be understood not only through strategic calculations but also through the way Brazil is perceived amongst policy elites. Furthermore, the positive analyses conducted by these think tanks in a way minimize the possibility for more confrontational foreign policy stances by Brazil, such as those taken by Argentina, Venezuela, etc. during the same period.

Further research is needed to delineate the role of think tanks in crafting and giving temporary stability to global political orders, as well as a deeper reading of how these institutions represent Global South states and their political transformations and outcomes. The nuances presented here can also be drawn out to include the publications of academics, journalists, and government entities, as well as popular productions in the form of marketing, novels, or movies, all of which produce "texts" that

are inherently tied to power relations and specific interests within various social fields of power. For Brazil specifically, it will be interesting to see how think tanks and other academic interpretations of Brazilian foreign policy shift discursively during the government of far-right pro-U.S. President Jair Bolsonaro that came to power in 2019.

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