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Third-Party Legitimation as a Model of Authoritarian Cooperation: The Case of CLACSO in the Face of Latin American Authoritarianisms

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Abstract— This article examines the editorial output and institutional conduct of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) towards the regimes of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua between 2017 and 2026. It starts from a historical thesis: although the Cold War ended in 1991 with the material defeat of the Soviet bloc, the hegemonic narrative in Latin America's cultural industry and academic apparatus has favoured the Bolshevik side of that conflict. Drawing on the concept of third-party legitimation, the study analyses the 338 titles of the Working Groups collection in CLACSO's catalogue and a subsample of sixteen editorial records. The findings reveal a differential assignment of analytical frames: the vocabulary of political domination (coup, repression, authoritarianism) is applied to right-wing governments, whereas the three regimes enter the catalogue as cases of social policy, theoretical production or internal crisis of the left. The analysis is complemented by the network of member centres, the joint statement signed by CLACSO's Steering Committee and its Cuban member centres after the protests of 11 July 2021, and the contrast with the confiscation of Nicaragua's Central American University in 2023. The article proposes the notion of authoritarian epistemic cooperation to name the coordinated production of legitimacy between a transnational academic network and the institutional apparatus of an authoritarian state.

Keywords— Third-party legitimation, authoritarian cooperation, CLACSO, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cold War.

I. The Cold War and Its Narrative Outcome

The 1990s can be considered the era of the promise of Globalization, of the last wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991), of unipolar expectation, the United States as the "winner" of the Cold War, and of the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1989), in the sense of the end of authoritarianism as a possible outcome of the struggle between two great ideologies: Soviet Bolshevik communism and capitalist liberal democracy. However, once the Clintonian illusion dissipated, owing to the world's stubbornness in continuing to row against the liberal market economy, against Globalization, which, admittedly, had a hegemonic cultural aspect, and because of an exaggerated suspicion of liberal democracies and their failures of representation, authoritarianisms such as Cuban Castroism suddenly began to gain value, even though many of us had witnessed the sociological and vital degradation of the Cuban people. Why? Because the Cold War was won, in the end, by the Bolshevik left.

Anyone may argue with me that the extreme dates of the Cold War do not correspond to the victors I name, the Bolsheviks. My periodization of the Cold War is fairly consensual (1947-1991), from 12 March 1947 to 25 December 1991; its starting date is owed to the famous speech by US President Harry Truman, who asked Congress to approve an aid package for Greece and Turkey, since in both partisan wars the invisible hand of the Soviet Union was undermining and draining both countries in order to bring about two revolutions at the most important geopolitical pivot of Eurasia.

Truman's description in his 1947 speech of the "two opposing ways of life" in conflict is real, terrifying and dramatic; he wanted to frighten the members of Congress into supporting him, but he did not lie in a single word about what the communist or socialist way of life was when he said that it "is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms" (Truman, 1947). Truman's analysis is inaugural: the moment of the Cold War began with this speech and would immediately be transformed into the Truman Doctrine.

The end of the Cold War might seem simpler: the day the last Soviet premier resigned, television broadcast live the lowering of the red Soviet flag, with the hammer and sickle, and shortly afterwards the imperial tricolour was hoisted. Others will say: that was not the end of the Cold War, even I say so, when I argue in a recently published article that the FARC in Colombia did not lay down their arms and that the Cold War in Colombia did not have a symbolic closure with the end of the Marxist guerrillas in 1991, but then socialism did not end either in Cuba, North Korea, China, Laos or Vietnam and, nevertheless, within a few years the paradigmatic Venezuelan democracy would come to an end in order to install a Cuban-style socialism, but with oil, and Cuba began to lead a third wave of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) in Latin America. How was that counterintuitive dynamic possible in Latin American societies and in some European ones? How was it possible to legitimize

the Cuban Revolution, creator of poverty and exterminator of freedoms, and to devalue democracies such as the Venezuelan one?

Why begin by speaking of the Cold War in order to announce the resilience of ideology in post-Soviet socialist regimes and their mechanisms of international cooperation? Why not frame CLACSO's editorial action directly within a "Cold War logic" or as support for today's socialist regimes? Although the answer seems to resurface in the very logic of the concepts set out so far, cooperation, authoritarianism, socialism, legitimation, it is crucial to point out that the Cold War, as a historical period, as an ideological-political process, as a phase in international relations and as a geopolitical moment, is essentially all of those preceding nouns taken together, but markedly configured by the ideology whose semantics is operationalized in political and economic forms that can be derived or scaled up in a conflict growing from the local to the global. The Cold War is a secular jihad whose god is ideology and whose infidels are the dispassionate, realist, and rational individuals, the market and liberal democracy.

Thanks to the subsequent bifurcation produced by the Russian Revolution of 1917, a "Cold War logic", or "bipolar" logic, became possible 30 years later. The world would be divided, from large to small, into two parts: one capitalist, liberal democratic, articulated by the market, and in the best places together with democracy, and another socialist, far more homogeneous than the first, authoritarian, single-party, with planned economies, illiberal, without the four freedoms, articulated by a powerful and omnipresent State. Likewise, to a lesser, and more sophisticated, extent, there would be a subdivision into a "bipolar logic" within liberal societies as well, which, being liberal, allowed ideological coexistence with those of their own number who were militants for socialism within their liberal democracies. Another subdivision moves directly into the academic, intellectual and cultural field, where that group of socialist militants tolerated by the guarantees of liberal democracies, which, paradoxically, they want to bring down with the sledgehammer of revolution, are the majority; they are the majority in universities, in academic networks and in cultural spaces, publishing, art, film, and in the post-Soviet era they will control the narrative of an increasingly powerful cultural industry: the true expansionist challenge of world Sovietism was an essentially intellectual and artistic manoeuvre, as Melvin Lasky defined it in 1947, the strategic head of the American cultural Cold War (Scott-Smith, 2000 & Stonor, 1999).

But socialism was a failure after 1991: Cuba is probably one of the materially poorest societies in the Western Hemisphere, the longest-lived dictatorship in the region. North Korea is a socialist nightmare for insiders and outsiders alike. China and Vietnam are unique cases, and with many exceptions to the rule (free-market economies, open and globally interconnected, but with a single party). Ostdeutschland is still the poorest and most backward part of Germany, and the countries of Eastern Europe, with the memory still alive, would not return, at least in this century, to sympathizing with socialist left-wing narratives, except for left-wing parties reinvented as social democracies or green parties. Except in Moldova, no Eastern European party of the Soviet era kept its name and won elections. The Czech KSČM kept its name, but has never won an election.

However, in the rest of the Western, democratic and capitalist countries, that bipolar logic survives and is perverse. That achievement of Cuba, Venezuela or Nicaragua, resilience and durability over time, seen as a triumph can only be measured by comparison with their failures: ruined countries, atrophied economies, devastated infrastructure, peoples persecuted, imprisoned and tortured, and, in parallel, these authoritarian regimes survive and enjoy the networks of cooperation they manage to weave with other governments, from the Spanish and Brazilian democratic left, through the eroded Turkish democracy, to hybrid regimes in the Middle East and Africa.

The foregoing works, as we have already noted, to describe Cuba and Venezuela in the present, in the post-Cold War period. Nevertheless, what I want to highlight is the capacity to replicate in free and democratic societies a failed ideological, political, economic and social model that is nonetheless successful in the cultural and propagandistic sphere and therefore has a great capacity for third-party legitimation, an action that is no small matter, since it grants a margin of manoeuvre in domestic authoritarian consolidation and in the reaffirmation of a legitimacy useful enough to evade several forms, not all, of international pressure, whether systemic, structural or, of course, symbolic.

This essay takes as a laboratory of that capacity the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), the largest academic network in the region, founded in 1967 and which today declares nearly a thousand associated centres. I am interested in its book catalogue, particularly the Working Groups collection, because there the network publishes what it understands as its output of political intervention, and I am also interested in its institutional conduct in three episodes of the 2017-2026 decade in which Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua tested its vocabulary. The argument proceeds in four stages. The next section specifies the concept of third-party legitimation and its relation to the literature on authoritarian cooperation. The third presents the corpus, the method and the editorial findings. The fourth moves from the editorial pattern to the institutional mechanism, that is, to the network of member centres and the joint acts that allow us to speak of cooperation. The last returns to the Cold War to argue that academic apparatuses

such as CLACSO helped the Bolshevik, Castroist and post-Soviet left narrative end up winning, in the realm of memory and categories, the war it had lost in 1991.

II. Third-Party Legitimation and Authoritarian Cooperation: The Place of Academic Networks

Third-party legitimation designates the process whereby actors external to an authoritarian regime, companies, international organizations, media, academic networks, contribute to sustaining its claim to legitimacy. The concept shifts the focus from what the regime says about itself to what others say, withhold or endorse about it.

CLACSO has operated in that direction. Beetham (1991) argued that legitimacy is not a property that a power attributes to itself, but a relationship that third parties recognize. From this it follows that self-legitimation is structurally insufficient and that every regime depends on validators it does not entirely control: CLACSO has consistently maintained an editorial line that ends up validating the left-wing authoritarianisms of Latin America and the Caribbean, despite all their excesses against Human Rights and, needless to say, their invalidation, persecution and harassment of any form of or initiative towards democracy.

For Gerschewski (2013), Venezuela and Cuba would have it all. He situates legitimation as one of the three pillars of authoritarian stability, together with repression and co-optation. In this essay we will show how CLACSO, through the elasticity of its concepts and the omission of objects of study, is the largest academic centre of legitimation of the socialist authoritarianisms of the region. To that end we will analyse its published intellectual output.

Dukalskis (2021) and Tsourapas (2021) move the problem to the international plane under the notion of authoritarian management of the image abroad, completing the picture by integrating transnational legitimation alongside transnational repression and co-optation. Of course, CLACSO does not work as a device of co-optation by any means; nor does it work in any direct way towards encouraging models of authoritarian repression; however, it does contribute to the legitimation of those regimes through the act of omission, deviation, ambiguity or myopia in its critical narratives within the concepts, dictatorship, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and in the international arena, with strong impact on spaces of academic, intellectual and cultural conversation and, naturally, on the *spill over* of those arenas into the media and into less specialized political opinion.

In this sense CLACSO's role is optimal, since third-party legitimation works best the more independent of the regime the third party appears to be; it is a game of perceptions, because its endorsement is not read as propaganda. Understanding that actors with epistemic authority, academics, intellectuals, cultural figures, social scientists, technical bodies, are for that reason more effective vehicles than official apparatuses, and the mechanism does not require intent because it is enough for the effect to be produced.

From Cooperation between States to Cooperation with Third Parties

The literature on authoritarian cooperation was born looking at States. Von Soest (2015) described international collaboration among autocracies as a form of democracy prevention, whose aim is to reduce the risk of democratic contagion in the neighbourhood and among allies. Tansey (2016) organized the field of the international politics of authoritarian rule around the external supports that regimes receive in order to endure, from diplomatic protection to security assistance. Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016) introduced the notion of authoritarian gravity centres, States that radiate models, practices and resources towards their regional environment, a figure that in the Western Hemisphere fits with remarkable precision the post-1999 Cuba, when the alliance with Chavista Venezuela gave back to it the material means that the Soviet collapse had withdrawn. In that sense Mijares and the present writer (2020) defined the corruption of agents close to Russian and Venezuelan political power as another form of cooperation, an alliance by other means that achieved a versatile amalgam between resources and objectives.

In all of these works the agent of cooperation is the State and the resource that circulates is material or coercive: oil, credits, intelligence advice, corruption, votes in multilateral bodies. Legitimacy appears as a result, only rarely as an object that is produced and exchanged. Dukalskis (2021) and Tsourapas (2021) opened that door by showing that regimes invest in their external image and that they seek non-state allies in order to do so, but the focus of both remains on the initiative of the regime, on what the authoritarian State does so that it is seen in a certain way. Our study situates itself on the other side of that relationship, in the third party that produces legitimacy for its own reasons, with its own resources and with an authority that the regime could not manufacture.

That figure has a long history. Hollander (1981) documented the political pilgrimages of Western intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba between 1928 and 1978, and the pattern of selective perception that allowed them to return convinced they had seen the future. Aron (1955) had earlier diagnosed the phenomenon as a secular religion of the literati, an opium that fulfilled for intellectuals the function that Marx attributed to religion for the masses. In Latin America, Gilman (2003) showed how the Cuban Revolution organized the intellectual

field of the 1960s and 1970s around the figure of the committed writer and institutions such as Casa de las Américas; Rojas (2016) reconstructed the debate that the Revolution provoked among New York intellectuals, for whom the position towards Havana became a dividing line within the left; and Cardozo and Cardozo (2024) demonstrated, through the analysis of Venezuelan poets, the articulation of these writers' lived existence with the phenomenal atmosphere of the Cold War and how it influenced their work and their political life and, therefore, ended up influencing the political country, of parties and ideologies, through their cultural militancy.

It is better not to read this history in one direction only: the cultural Cold War was fought with the resources of both sides, and Saunders (2001) documented in detail the CIA's covert funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, its magazines and its festivals. Iber (2015) showed that in Latin America that front was a competition between two apparatuses, the anti-communist one and that of the Moscow-aligned peace movement, and that neither emerged unscathed. The difference that matters for this argument is one of persistence. The American cultural apparatus was exposed and discredited after the revelations of 1966 and 1967 about its sources of funding, and its legacy became a matter of academic denunciation. The Cuban apparatus, with Casa de las Américas at its head, survived 1991 with its prestige intact, despite being financed by sources even more opaque such as the KGB, and managed to keep its place secure in regional networks, including that of CLACSO, as will be seen in the fourth section.

CLACSO as an Object of Study

Founded in 1967, CLACSO consolidated itself in the 1970s as a refuge for social scientists persecuted by the dictatorships of the Southern Cone and as a support for research under conditions of censorship. That origin explains the moral authority that the network retains and also explains the grammar with which it organizes its memory of authoritarianism, constructed from the experience of right-wing military dictatorships. Two recent works published in this same journal have opened the critical examination of that grammar. Chaguaceda (2026) describes the institutional capture of academic associations by authoritarian States and their allies, traces the Soviet template that Cuba adopted after 1961 and points to CLACSO as a documented vehicle of Cuban public diplomacy. Angel and Gómez (2026) analysed 443 declarations and communiqués of CLACSO's Working Groups between 2018 and 2026, from which they extracted 130 mentions of eight countries of the region. Between 87% and 90% of those mentions hold right-wing governments responsible, while between 0% and 5% denounce left-wing governments or authoritarianisms. The nine mentions of Cuba defend, without exception, the government of Miguel Díaz-Canel against "interference" and the blockade, and 95% of the twenty mentions of Venezuela support the government of Nicolás Maduro against US pressure. Nicaragua, with four mentions that hold the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo responsible, is the only exception they record.

Those findings refer to conjunctural discourse, to what the network says when it reacts. My inquiry concerns what the network publishes when it thinks, that is, books, which have a longer life, circulate in course bibliographies and in repositories, and fix the categories with which a generation of students learns to name Latin American politics. If the bias in the declarations were a reflex of urgency, the books should correct it. If the books reproduce it, the bias belongs to the structure.

Two Mechanisms: Conceptual Elasticity and Omission

The legitimation of interest here operates through two mechanisms that political science has known for decades, although they are rarely applied to the academic field itself. The first is what I have called conceptual elasticity, and which Sartori (1970) described as conceptual stretching: a term is stretched to cover cases that do not correspond to it, or is contracted to exclude cases that do. When "authoritarian" qualifies neoliberalism and never a single-party State, the concept has been stretched in one direction and amputated in the other. Collier and Levitsky (1997) warned that the proliferation of democracies with adjectives could serve either to classify precisely or to evade classification, and the observation holds in the opposite direction as well, for autocracies to which agreeable adjectives ("progressive", "revolutionary", "Bolivarian") are assigned in place of the noun that would correspond to them.

The second mechanism is the omission of objects of study. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) pointed out that power is also exercised by preventing certain questions from being formulated, the second face of power, which operates through non-decision. Transferred to an academic network, non-decision consists in not convening, not compiling and not publishing that which would oblige one to apply the political-regime framework to allies. Its effect is difficult to contradict and challenge, because an absence lacks a statement that can be put to the test.

Working Definition and Levels of Evidence

On the basis of the foregoing, we will understand third-party legitimation in an academic network as the sustained production of a legitimating effect upon an authoritarian regime by an actor with epistemic authority, through the assignment of analytical categories, the selection of objects of study and public

pronouncements. Legitimation can exist without coordination. Cooperation, by contrast, requires, according to the available literature, joint action oriented to mutual benefit, with some degree of coordination or transfer of resources. Hence the analysis is organized into three levels of evidence, each more demanding than the last: a sustained editorial pattern, an institutional channel linking the network with the apparatus of the authoritarian State, and a documented joint act. The first level is sufficient to speak of third-party legitimation and the three together allow us to speak of cooperation.

III. The Catalogue as Evidence: Corpus, Method and Differential Assignment of Frames

Corpus and Procedure

The corpus is the Working Groups collection of CLACSO's book catalogue, which comprised 338 titles at the time of consultation and constitutes the segment where the network publishes its output of political intervention. The other forty-nine collections in the catalogue include postgraduate training, methodology, journals and co-editions, whose thematic profile responds to other institutional functions. The choice is deliberately favourable to the institution analysed: if there is a place in the catalogue where one would expect to find critical examination of the region's regimes, it is where the working groups, which bring together researchers from different countries around common problems, decide what to compile and how to present it.

The procedure of my inquiry had two phases: the first retrieved the 338 records and applied a lexical count to the titles; the second retrieved the individual records of sixteen publications selected for their political relevance, from which the year and the presentation text were extracted. The records were consulted at libreria.clacso.org on 24 September 2026.

The coding scheme was fixed before the records were examined and distinguishes three lexical families: the vocabulary of authoritarianism (authoritarian, dictatorship, totalitarian, repression, coup), that of criticism of the right-wing adversary (neoliberal, right, far right, conservative, imperial) and that of self-affirmation (left, socialism, revolution, emancipation). The unit of analysis is the title and, in the subsample, the presentation text. Each occurrence of the vocabulary of authoritarianism was checked against the corresponding record to identify the case to which it applied.

The extreme dates of the observation, 2017-2026, respond to a methodological criterion. From 2017 the vertiginous deterioration of Venezuela made a critical voice about the regime more plausible and viable: the repression of that year's protests, the National Constituent Assembly imposed over the parliament elected in 2015 and the exodus of millions of Venezuelans offered any social scientist an object of study that was hard to avoid. If in that decade no critical line appears in the face of the authoritarian ferocity of the Maduro era, which deepened and intensified its punishments of dissent, the absence cannot be attributed to a lack of evidence. These dates do not imply that before 2017 CLACSO maintained a different narrative; nothing in the corpus suggests that that of the preceding years was any less legitimating, and extending the analysis backwards remains a pending task.

Presence of the Cases

Seven titles out of 338, 2.1% of the corpus, name Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua or ALBA. Two of those seven are successive editions of the same book, so that the distinct records are reduced to six. Three correspond to Cuba, one to Venezuela, one to Nicaragua and one to ALBA as an integration mechanism. The datum acquires meaning when compared with the treatment of other political processes in the region. Bolivia and Honduras, each with a single title, receive instead a monographic treatment of the political event that defines them. Mexico accumulates eight titles, all from the same series on the northern border.

The low presence of the three cases could be explained by reasons unrelated to legitimation, such as the thematic distribution of the working groups or the availability of researchers. The argument, therefore, should not rest on frequency but on the way the cases appear when they do appear, and on the contrast with the way governments of the opposite persuasion appear. In these subtleties lies the effectiveness of a tendentious, partisan and concealed ideological agenda.

The Lexicon of Authoritarianism in CLACSO

The count of titles appears in Table 1. The vocabulary capable of naming political domination is scarce in absolute terms, but it is present, and its distribution seems to form a pattern.

None of the four occurrences of the vocabulary of authoritarianism refers to the three cases. The single appearance of "authoritarian" qualifies neoliberalism, in *Lex Mercatoria, Human Rights and Democracy* (2021). The single mention of "dictatorship" refers to the memory of the Southern Cone dictatorships. The two mentions of "coup" correspond to Bolivia and Honduras, both referring to the interruption of left-wing governments. "Totalitarianism" and "repression" do not appear in any title. The vocabulary of criticism of the right, with sixteen occurrences if neoliberalism, right, far right, conservatism and imperialism are added together, quadruples

Table 1. Frequency of Lexical Families in the Titles of the Working Groups Collection (n = 338)

Term	Titles	Applied to
authoritarian / authoritarianism	1	to neoliberalism
dictatorship(s)	1	to the dictatorships of the Southern Cone
coup (d'état)	2	to Bolivia 2019 and Honduras 2017
totalitarian / totalitarianism	0	—
repression	0	—
neoliberal / neoliberalism	9	—
right / right-wing	3	—
far right / extreme right	1	—
conservative / neoconservative	2	—
imperial / imperialism	1	—
democracy / democratic	15	—
left(s)	5	—
revolution / revolutionary	3	—
emancipation	7	—

Note. Count of titles. The four occurrences of the vocabulary of authoritarianism were checked one by one against the corresponding record. Author's own elaboration from libreria.clacso.org, accessed 24 September 2026.

that of political domination, and that of self-affirmation (left, revolution, emancipation) adds up to fifteen.

Differential Assignment of Frames

The three regimes never receive the political-regime framework of analysis, while that framework is applied promptly and with dense normative vocabulary to ideological cases of the opposite persuasion. Table 2 sets out the contrast on the basis of the presentation texts.

The Honduran case is the most eloquent, since the terms "repression" and "persecution of the opposition" do not appear in any title of the corpus, but do appear in the presentation text of that book, applied to a right-wing government. The catalogue therefore has the categories needed to describe state coercion and uses them when the subject is a political adversary. Lack of vocabulary is ruled out as an explanation.

Conversely, Venezuela enters the catalogue as a case of social policy within a project compared with Brazil and Chile, and its government is described through the category of the "progressive cycle". The book dates from 2020, the year after the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on extrajudicial executions in Venezuela and the same year in which the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission presented its first report on possible crimes against humanity. None of that reaches the presentation text. Cuba enters twice as a place of feminist and Marxist theoretical production, and a third time as an actor in Caribbean foreign relations; the regime framework is never discussed in any of the three.

Two absences reinforce the pattern: *The Many Faces of Democracy in Latin America* (2023) organizes its comparison around Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. *States in Dispute. Rise and Fracture of the Cycle of Contestation of Neoliberalism* (2019) analyses the rise and collapse of the progressive cycle without naming Venezuela in its presentation text, even though no other country in the region embodied that cycle with greater intensity or suffered its collapse at greater human cost. In both, the cases available for comparative democratic analysis exclude precisely the three regimes in question. We are faced with Bachrach and Baratz's "non-decision" carried over into the composition of an index.

An Example Against the Grain: Nicaragua

Nicaragua in Crisis. Between Revolution and Uprising (2019), edited by Aleksander Aguilar Antunes, Esteban de Gori and Carmen Elena Villacorta Zuluaga, is the only critical treatment of the three cases contained in the corpus. Its existence prevents us from sustaining a thesis of absolute omission. The book gathers texts that describe the state violence of 2018, and its mere publication indicates that within the network there were researchers willing to examine the drift of Sandinismo, but it is an exceptional case —strictly in that sense—, since its framing, nevertheless, confirms the pattern more than it contradicts it: the presentation text opens by establishing that "Nicaragua is a revolutionary symbol" and defines the problem as that which "obliges the left to take a stand". The crisis is posed as a matter of the left's own political identity rather than as a question of regime, and the subtitle chooses "uprising" where the vocabulary available in the catalogue offered "repression". The exception operates within the same revolutionary grammar that organizes the rest of the collection: what is at stake is the coherence of the left, and the hundreds of fatalities of the 2018 repression appear subordinated to that question.

Legitimation through the Assignment of Categories

The corpus hardly offers evidence of explicit praise, since legitimation operates in another register, such as that of the assignment of categories. A regime to which the regime-analysis framework is never applied is removed from the universe of objects with respect to which the question of authoritarianism could have been asked. Because the operation precedes any judgement, it is more difficult to challenge, since it lacks a claim that can be put to the test. Anyone who reads the catalogue learns that in Latin America there were dictatorships in the Southern Cone, that there were coups in Bolivia and Honduras, that neoliberalism can be authoritarian, and that Cuba is a place from which emancipation is thought.

Table 2. Analytical Frame Assigned and Vocabulary Used, According to the Presentation Texts

Case	Publication	Year	Assigned frame	Vocabulary of the text
Bolivia	*Bolivia and the Geopolitical Implications of the Coup d'État*	2021	Coup d'état	"coup d'état", "usurpation of power", "putschist strategy"
Honduras	*Electoral Coup and Political Crisis in Honduras*	2018	Coup and repression	"fraudulently", "brutal repression", "persecution of the opposition"
Region	*Lex Mercatoria, Human Rights and Democracy*	2021	Authoritarian neoliberalism	"captured or complicit governments", "subvert democratic channels"
Venezuela	*Neoliberalism, Neo-developmentalism and Bolivarian Socialism*	2020	Development model	"progressive cycle", "policies alternative to the neoliberal model"
Cuba	*From Revolutionary Cuba*	2018 and 2019	Theoretical production	"revolutionary Cuba", "emancipatory alternatives"
Cuba	*Cuba in Its Relations with the Rest of the Caribbean*	2017	Foreign relations	"the Obama doctrine", "bilateral relations"
Nicaragua	*Nicaragua in Crisis. Between Revolution and Uprising*	2019	Internal crisis of the left	"revolutionary symbol", "obliges the left to take a stand"

Note. Quotations are taken from the presentation texts of each record at libreria.clacso.org, accessed 24 September 2026.

This connects with the idea of third-party legitimation, with which I have sought to explain how external non-state actors confer legitimacy on non-democratic regimes. Its application has been concentrated on corporations and international organizations. Extending it to transnational academic networks is our novel contribution, and serves to look for the mechanisms of autocratic cooperation beyond the relationship between States. A transnational academic network produced, in a sustained manner over a decade, a legitimating effect on three regimes by removing them from the analytical framework it applies to the others without reservation.

IV. From the Editorial Pattern to the Institutional Mechanism

The editorial finding supports a thesis of third-party legitimation, and we are not yet in a position to discuss cooperation, which in the available literature would require joint action oriented to mutual benefit with some degree of coordination. The most direct way to document that link would be to code the institutional affiliations of authors and editors, but it runs into a material obstacle: the sixteen catalogue records do not state institutional affiliation, therefore the link must be documented by another route, and the network of member centres offers one that is official, and moreover verifiable and publicly accessible.

The Network of Member Centres

CLACSO declares 980 associated centres in 60 countries. Table 3 sets out the full member centres of fourteen Latin American countries, ordered by density relative to population.

Cuba ranks second in the region in density of member centres, behind only Uruguay, and surpasses Argentina, the country where CLACSO's headquarters is located. Venezuela ranks fourth. Both exceed Brazil and Mexico by a factor of roughly between three and six. Density, by itself, may reflect affiliation policies, academic traditions or the mere willingness of institutions to pay their fees, and it does not definitively prove much about the editorial line. But the nature of those institutions in the Cuban case is indeed highly suggestive.

Table 3. Full Member Centres of CLACSO by Country and Relative Density

Country	Centres	Population (millions)	Centres per million inhabitants
Uruguay	12	3.4	3.53
Cuba	35	11.0	3.18
Paraguay	19	6.9	2.75
Venezuela	72	28.4	2.54
Chile	49	19.8	2.47
Argentina	98	46.0	2.13
Colombia	107	52.3	2.05
Ecuador	25	18.1	1.38
Nicaragua	8	6.9	1.16
Bolivia	14	12.4	1.13
Mexico	113	130.0	0.87
Peru	19	34.2	0.56
Brazil	115	212.0	0.54
Guatemala	6	18.1	0.33

Note. Centres according to CLACSO's directory of associated centres, accessed 24 September 2026. Population according to United Nations estimates for the middle of the decade, rounded. The figure for Cuba is disputed owing to recent emigration; the highest figure is used here, which is the conservative one for the argument, since a smaller population would raise the density.

What Kind of Institutions the Cuban Centres Are

The 35 Cuban centres share a structural condition: in a single-party State there is no independent academic sector, so that every research institution is state-run. Although that alone does not prove alignment, what is indeed suggestive is that several of those centres belong not to the university sphere

Table 4. Cuban Member Centres with Direct State Affiliation Outside the University Sphere

Institution	Affiliation
Raúl Roa García Higher Institute of International Relations (ISRI)	Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Centre for International Policy Research (CIPI)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Fidel Castro Ruz Centre (CFCR)	State institution of political memory
Casa de las Américas (CASA)	State cultural institution since 1959
Centre for Martí Studies (CEM)	Ministry of Culture
National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX)	Ministry of Public Health
Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS)	Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment
Institute of Philosophy (IF)	Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment
Institute of History and Marxism, UCLV	Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas

Note. Membership in the network is documented in CLACSO's directory of associated centres. The affiliations come from the institutional information of each centre.

but to the diplomatic and ideological apparatus of the State, as Table 4 shows.

The presence of the diplomatic academy of the Cuban foreign ministry and of the state centre of political memory dedicated to Fidel Castro among the full members of a regional academic network is a datum of a different nature from mere university affiliation. Casa de las Américas, for its part, is the same institution that Gilman (2003), Iber (2015) and I (2021) identified as the axis of the cultural Cold War on the continent; its membership in CLACSO is the institutional continuity of that front in the post-Cold War period. A datum of authorship points in the same direction: Rosa Campoalegre Septien, a researcher at CIPS, appears as editor of four titles in the collection, all within the 2017-2026 window, which places her among the most recurrent editors of the period: the network of centres thus offers the institutional channel of our argument.

The Joint Act: July 2021

On 11 July 2021 thousands of Cubans took to the streets in dozens of cities across the country, in the largest protests since 1959. The next day, 12 July, CLACSO published the "Statement on the Campaign of Manipulation against Cuba" (CLACSO, 2021). The text rejects "the attempts at destabilization that are promoted against the Cuban social project", attributes the unrest to the blockade and to the spread of "blatant *fake news*", and links the protests to external funding of "vandal and terrorist acts". The statement appears signed by "the Steering Committee and the Cuban member Centres of CLACSO", and it is therefore a joint act between the governing body of the network and the set of its Cuban centres, that is, between the leadership of a transnational academic network and a group of state institutions of a single-party State, several of them attached to its foreign ministry. Coordination, which was the missing element for being able to speak of authoritarian cooperation in the strict sense, is documented in the very signature of the text.

The declaration was issued while the most extensive episode of repression of the post-Soviet period in Cuba was under way, with mass detentions, summary trials and subsequent long sentences, documented by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression (CIDH, 2021). The vocabulary of the statement reproduces that of the Cuban government in those hours, from the external attribution of discontent to the characterization of the demonstrators as vandals. In the language of Dukalskis (2021), the regime obtained at that moment what its external image apparatus seeks most doggedly: the voice of a third party with epistemic authority repeating its version of events without it being readable as official propaganda. The most effective propaganda is the one that does not look like propaganda.

The Academic Response

On 20 July 2021, more than eighty academics from twenty countries signed a public letter addressed to CLACSO's donor entities and counterparts (Rialta, 2021). The text expresses indignation at "the attitude of academics and academic organizations who showed solidarity not with the repressed people, but with the repressive State", and maintains that "when CLACSO speaks of a 'social project' it whitewashes an authoritarian government".

That second sentence deserves our attention, since it states in 2021 the same mechanism that the analysis of the catalogue independently identifies: the substitution of the category of regime by a category of another order. The letter formulates it as a political reproach; whereas what the editorial corpus demonstrates is a pattern, replete with hypocrisy, criminal complicity, authoritarianism and a profound anti-humanism, sustained over a decade. The convergence between a contemporary challenge and a later measurement reinforces the finding, and also shows that the critique existed within the Latin American academic field itself. CLACSO's line was a choice made in the face of colleagues who warned, in real time, of what was happening.

The Nicaraguan Contrast

CLACSO has eight member centres in Nicaragua. Four of them are units of the Central American University (UCA): its Department of Social Sciences, the Institute of History of Nicaragua and Central America, the Nitlapan Institute and the Interdisciplinary Institute of Social Sciences. A fifth, CIELAC, belongs to the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua.

In August 2023 the government of Daniel Ortega confiscated the UCA by court order, accusing it of being a centre of terrorism, and the university suspended all its academic and administrative activity (Confidencial, 2023; El Faro, 2023). The confiscation affected thousands of students and forms part of a process that reached twenty-nine universities in the country (Expediente Público, n.d.). The network thus lost, through the action of the regime, most of its member centres in Nicaragua.

CLACSO's response did exist: in February 2020 the Steering Committee had issued a communiqué entitled "In the Face of the Acts of Intimidation and Persecution against the Central American University of Nicaragua", in which it expressed solidarity with the UCA and lamented the closing of spaces for dialogue by the government, without naming Ortega or Murillo (CLACSO, 2020). On 18 August 2023, after the confiscation, the Steering Committee published a communiqué of concern over the closure of the UCA that describes the court order seizing assets and funds, records the creation of a new state university on the confiscated premises, and calls for a prompt return to academic normality for the benefit of teachers and students, together with respect for university autonomy (CLACSO, 2023). The text does not name the Ortega and Murillo government, nor does it use the words dictatorship, regime, repression or authoritarianism. For their part, three CLACSO Working Groups appeared among the signatory organizations of a collective statement by academics and university workers against the closure of the UCA, promoted from outside the governing structure of the network.

The comparison between the two episodes is the strongest proof of our essay: faced with the Cuban protests of 2021, the Steering Committee signed, together with Cuban state institutions, a text that adopted the government's version and characterized the demonstrators. Faced with the confiscation of its own member institutions in Nicaragua, the same body issued, alone, a communiqué of concern that omitted the party responsible. And in the editorial collection, the book on Honduras speaks of "brutal repression" and "persecution of the opposition" in reference to a right-wing government, while the institutional response to the loss of four member centres at the hands of a left-wing regime calls for a "return to normality". The asymmetry of framing ceases to be a matter of vocabulary when the victims are identifiable within the network itself.

The contrast also qualifies the thesis, since Nicaragua is the case where the network allowed itself some distance, which coincides with what Angel and Gómez (2026) found in the Working Groups' declarations. That the exception is Nicaragua has a plausible explanation: the Sandinismo of Ortega and Murillo has lost a good part of its symbolic capital among Latin American lefts since 2018, while Cuba retains its own intact and Venezuela administered it until January 2026 as an extension of the Cuban. Third-party legitimation is selective, and its selectivity follows the symbolic hierarchy of the regimes within the revolutionary tradition.

Venezuela: The 2025-2026 Juncture

The Venezuelan case confirms the hierarchy. Angel and Gómez (2026) record in the Working Groups' declarations a peak of fourteen mentions of Venezuela in 2025, none of them referring to internal repression, in a year marked by the detention of opponents after the presidential elections of July 2024 and by the escalation of US military pressure. After the United States military operation of 3 January 2026, CLACSO convened on 6 January a dialogue entitled "In the Face of the Military Attack on Venezuela and the Interventionist Escalation against Latin America and the Caribbean", whose call announced that two member centres had been bombed (CLACSO, 2026). The call contains no reference whatsoever to political prisoners, to the refusal to recognize the 2024 electoral results or to the deadly repression exercised by the Venezuelan State. That abundant vocabulary for external interference contrasts with the absence of any mention of the coercion exercised by the Venezuelan State over its own people.

Scope and Limits of the Evidence

The affiliation of Cuban institutions does not prove alignment in itself; nevertheless, given the absence of an independent academic sector, any link with Cuban academia necessarily passes through state institutions, and a regional network that wished to include Cuba would have no other way of doing so. For this reason the argument of cooperation rests on the joint act of July 2021 and not on membership.

The 72 Venezuelan centres are of a mixed nature, since they include autonomous universities that have been the object of harassment by the government itself, alongside institutions created by Chavismo; Venezuela is an uncomfortable case for militant academics, the 'organic intellectuals', both foreign and domestic, since the ideological framing of Chavismo, a left-wing disguise with the practices of a police-state right, together with the phenomenon of the diaspora, unmasks the narratives and the conceptual stretchings with brutal evidence: the migration and the abandonment of its universities. Moreover, reading that figure as alignment would not be the most accurate, and the case-by-case coding of those centres remains a task for another investigation or for a later stage of this study. The 2021 statement is a one-off act; sustaining a broader pattern of cooperation requires documenting whether equivalent joint acts exist with respect to Venezuela, and the 2026 calls point in

that direction without yet reaching the form of a joint signature with Venezuelan state institutions.

Finally, the lexical count is applied to titles, and the subsample of presentation texts is small. Analysis of the full content of the books, with coding by several researchers and measurement of inter-coder reliability, would allow the magnitude of the bias to be refined. None of those extensions seems capable of reversing the direction of the finding, because the pattern is repeated in three types of source independent of one another: the catalogue, the statements of the Steering Committee and the Working Groups' declarations analysed by Angel and Gómez (2026).

V. Conclusions: Who Won the Cold War?

The argument can be formulated at three tiered levels, each with its own support. The first is the editorial pattern: for a decade, the Working Groups collection removes Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua from the analytical framework it applies to the other cases in the region, and reserves the vocabulary of political domination for right-wing governments and for neoliberalism. The second is the institutional channel: the network incorporates as full members Cuban state institutions, among them the diplomatic academy of its foreign ministry, the memory centre dedicated to Fidel Castro and the institution that led the Cuban front of the cultural Cold War. The third is the act: in July 2021 the governing body of the network and those centres jointly signed a declaration that delegitimized the protests and backed the government during a documented episode of repression, while two years later the same body responded to the confiscation of its own centres in Nicaragua with an expression of concern with no one to blame.

Taken together, the three levels support something more than third-party legitimation, and something different from autocratic cooperation in the state sense of the term. I propose to call this figure authoritarian epistemic cooperation: the coordinated and sustained production of legitimacy between a transnational academic network and the institutional apparatus of an authoritarian State, whose product is the suppression of an analytical category with respect to that State and the dissemination of its version of events with the authority of social science. The figure is distinguished from cooperation between States in three features. One of its poles lacks sovereignty and coercive resources, and its contribution is exclusively symbolic. The mutual benefit is asymmetric: the regime obtains external validation before audiences that its official propaganda does not reach, and the network obtains institutional density together with confirmation of its founding narrative. And coordination may be intermittent, because the legitimating effect is sustained between one joint act and the next through the everyday assignment of categories in books and calls.

There remains the historical thesis with which I opened this essay. The Cold War ended in 1991 with the material defeat of the Soviet bloc, and no one in 2026 would maintain that the planned economy, the single party, the gulags or the annihilation of personal freedoms won the competition of models that Truman described in 1947. However, an ideological war is also decided on the terrain of memory, that is, on the question of who was the villain, which regimes deserve the name of dictatorship and which victims have the right to be remembered. Revel (2000) warned very early that the fall of communism had not produced an examination of conscience comparable to the one that followed the defeat of fascism, and that the socialist utopia survived in the West thanks to a moral amnesty that its supporters granted themselves. Furet (1995) had shown that the communist idea lived off the prestige of the anti-fascist cause, and that this prestige protected it for decades from judgement on its own crimes, perhaps worse than those of fascism.

The CLACSO catalogue offers a precise measurement of that amnesty in the Latin American academic field. In the titles of the collection, "dictatorship" designates only the military regimes of the Southern Cone, the two coups mentioned interrupted left-wing governments and the qualifier "authoritarian" falls upon an economic model. Cuba, the longest-lived dictatorship of the hemisphere, enters as a place from which emancipatory alternatives are thought. The features that Truman listed in 1947, the minority imposed by force, the controlled press, the fixed elections and the suppression of personal freedoms, describe the Cuban regime of 2026 with exactness, and none of them has a name in the catalogue of the region's largest academic network. The memory of the Cold War that those books transmit to new generations of social scientists keeps only one of the two sides in the dock.

In that precise sense I maintain that the Cold War was won, in the end, by the Bolshevik side. It won in the distribution of moral categories, which is where it is decided which regimes can be questioned and which remain protected by the prestige of their revolutionary origin. Academic apparatuses such as CLACSO contributed to that belated victory with an instrument more effective than propaganda: the authority of the third party who appears independent. The cultural apparatus of the Western side was dismantled and denounced in the 1960s and 1970s, and its history is taught today as a warning about the instrumentalization of intellectuals (Saunders, 2001). The apparatus of the other side, with Casa de las Américas as its emblematic piece, survived 1991, integrated itself into the regional social science networks and went on producing the legitimacy of a regime that no longer had the Soviet Union

to sustain it. Cuba obtained in the indexes of books a victory that its economy and its political system could not give it.

This conclusion opens an agenda that exceeds the limits of this article. The analysis should be extended to the other collections of the catalogue, to the postgraduate programmes and to the conferences of the network, and be subjected to independent coding. Comparison with other academic associations, such as the Cuba section of the Latin American Studies Association examined by Chaguaceda (2026), would make it possible to establish whether authoritarian epistemic cooperation is a trait of CLACSO or a pattern of the Latin American academic field. And the question of the benefit the network obtains from this relationship, which I have barely sketched here, deserves a study of its own on its funding and the composition of its governing bodies. What can already be affirmed is that the regimes of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have not needed to manufacture their legitimacy before the region's academic world on their own, because a part of that world has produced it for them.

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