

SELA does little to further Latin American integration

By Jacques Zylberberg

Latin America is a heterogeneous collection of states that are quite happy to be states — coercive, amoral geopolitical entities, not subject to the hasty value judgments of a Western intelligentsia satisfied with a two-pronged description of an underdeveloped David confronting the military-industrial Goliath personified by the United States. The signing in Panama on October 18, 1975, of the constitutive instrument of the Latin American Economic System (SELA) aroused general enthusiasm among journalists and sympathetic observers, who once again trotted out the usual clichés about Latin American unity, saying that the southern countries — proletarian nations — were actively displaying their solidarity in working towards economic integration and opposing the industrialized nations whose selfishness was symbolized by American imperialism.

Numerous articles have been written in praise of the positive contribution of SELA to economic development in the area and highlighting the role of the technocratic élites and the new political forces that, since the creation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in 1947, have stepped up their efforts towards continental integration. We should like to counter this optimistic, even sentimental, view with a more realistic hypothesis on inter-American relations. SELA is perhaps, ideally and in the minds of the technocratic élites, a basis for consolidating regional integration and developing continental integration. In fact, however, it is — and will be — first and foremost a system providing additional room for manoeuvre to the major local powers — Brazil, Argentina and Mexico — in their attempt to reorganize inter-American relations under their trusteeship by taking advantage of the discomfiture of the United States Gulliver, pegged to the ground by its cultural malaise and the contradictions of its economic environment. The growing inconsistency of the State Department's Latin American policy under Mr. Kissinger's diplomatic reign has

enabled the major local powers gradually to take the place of the United States as centres of control and domination over the smaller states. This flowering of sub-empires on the continent does not imply — far from it — a redefinition of their national interests, which have always driven them — sometimes to fight, often to sabotage, and always to boycott any real efforts toward integration, despite their rhetorical statements to the contrary.

Concessions to rhetoric

The constitutive instrument of this new geographic entity did, however, make certain concessions to the rhetoric of regional integration and preferential treatment for relatively less-developed countries, as indicated by the five objects of the agreement:

(1) To promote regional co-operation for the purpose of complete, self-sufficient and independent development.

(2) To support the integration process in the region and to encourage co-ordination of activity and co-operation among SELA member states, particularly of any activity tending to ensure the harmonization and convergence of these processes in observance of the commitments undertaken.

(3) To promote the development and implementation of economic and social programs and projects of common interest to member states.

Dr. Zylberberg is a professor in the political science department at Laval University. He is in charge of Latin American reports for the magazine Civilisations, and is a member of the scientific body of the Institut belge de science politique. From 1962 to 1973, he did field research in Latin America and the Caribbean, and he has written numerous monographs and published articles in Spanish, French and English. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and of his research colleagues, Messrs Monterrichar and Armijo, graduate students at Laval University.

Flowering of sub-empires does not imply redefinition of interests