

## New Interpretations on the Life and Ideas of Raúl Prebisch (1901-1986)

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(Dosman, Edgar. 2011. *Raúl Prebisch (1901-1986): a construção da América Latina e do Terceiro Mundo*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto)\*

Edgar Dosman's *The life and times of Raúl Prebisch (1901-1986)* is the kind of book that might catch the attention of scholars working within different agendas, research interests and disciplines. Those interested in Latin American history and politics will probably note how Dosman underlines Raúl Prebisch's contributions – both as an intellectual and as a policymaker – to regional and international debates on development and modernization in the Global South. The impact of Dosman's work on the current debates on development, economic growth, and international trade in the face of the emerging countries phenomenon is also worth mentioning. These subjects are more controversial and highly disputed than ever and Dosman's biography on Prebisch's life and ideas could contribute to enhance the quality and diversity of current debates.

On the other hand, scholars working on the emergence of the social sciences in Latin America and the Third World will find Dosman's narrative on Prebisch's role in building up a network of young social scientists during his administration in the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America worthy of notice. Some of the most actively engaged economists and social scientists in the UNECLA were key public intellectuals and/or politicians and decision-makers in their home countries – for example, Celso Furtado, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Juan Noyola, to name but a few.

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For those interested in regional cooperation, Dosman's narrative is full of surprises. They can both retrieve Prebisch's ideas and projects designed to develop regional institutions and appreciate the ambiguous relationship between Brazil and Argentina. They may be surprised to find not only evidence of long-standing problems of regional coordination, but also attempts at close cooperation between the two countries. Finally, scholars interested in the history of particular Latin American countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, for example, will find Dosman's work full of intriguing remarks on the relationship between Prebisch's personal and political trajectory and the dynamics of regional and domestic politics.

Dosman is very straightforward about the problems that drove him to write a biography on the life of Latin American economist Raúl Prebisch. At the beginning of the book, Dosman states that his aim is to present a reasonable narrative on Prebisch's contribution to the development of international institutions and development theory during the 20th century, something for which there is surely a great need. Until Dosman's book was published in 2008, there was no biography available on the life of Raúl Prebisch. His contribution to development and modernization theories is still as underexplored as his personal character remains controversial. His professional legacy and ideas on the nature of the economic system and development are still surrounded by institutional disputes. This can explain in part why his memory was left almost untouched after his death in 1986.

The end of the Cold War meant that the life of some of its main characters remained undisclosed. This was the case of Raúl Prebisch, an Argentine economist born in 1901. Prebisch was a key player in some of the major events that shaped Argentine and Latin American development in the 20th century. He was responsible for the creation of the Argentine Central Bank and acted as head of the UNECLA for over a decade, a period during which he had great influence over some of the most powerful Latin American countries. From the late 1960s onwards, he was the principal name behind the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). As one of the most influential Latin American policymakers in the UN system for more than four decades, it is interesting to see how Prebisch's memory has been almost intentionally left underexplored.

Dosman does not sufficiently stress the importance of the mysterious destruction of the UNECLA and Prebisch archives by the UN after the end of the Cold War. Neither does he further explore the consequences of the relative lack of documentation on his personal and professional trajectory. Due to the lack of documents available, he conducted an extensive number of oral interviews, while collecting documents in archives all over the world. His extensive research is one of the book's greatest merits. It is also worth noting that Prebisch's memories were collected, organized, and maintained by his first and second wives – Adelita and Eliana Prebisch. They both created institutions designed

to preserve Prebisch's documents in Santiago (*Adelita's Prebisch Papers*) and in Buenos Aires (Eliana's Prebisch Foundation). As Prebisch's first wife, Adelita, was the main keeper of his documents and memoirs, this may be the reason for which there is not a single photograph of Prebisch's second wife, Eliana Prebisch, in Dosman's book but plenty of photos of Adelita and Prebisch in different occasions until the late 1970s, when they separated. Here, the politics involved in accessing memory could have been a constraining factor, as in the case of the contemporary debates over Carlos Prestes' memory in Brazil (in many ways similar to Prebisch's).

The choice for a biographical approach in order to recover Prebisch's contributions is not devoid of tension, as Dosman's work shows. Although a biography can present itself as a relatively impartial account of someone's trajectory, it is more keenly defined as an exercise in memory production. As a historiographical genre that has witnessed a recent boom after decades of virtual lack of interest, a biography can hold some traps even for the most experienced researchers. For example, there is danger in assuming sympathy for the life of the character being analysed. This can lead to unsupported or overemphasized features of the subject's personality. In Dosman's book, this problem exists and is more acute when the author is referring to Prebisch's childhood and early development.

Dosman's narrative on Prebisch's early years is largely based on an interview conducted by Mateo Margariños. As a late recollection of his childhood, Prebisch's interview retraces and reconstructs some controversial personality features such as his early commitment to Argentine society and politics and his outstanding genius. These are two central points of Dosman's narrative on Prebisch's childhood. It is interesting to note that for Prebisch, these two could also be seen as the most important (and controversial) personality issues in his history. Firstly, because his commitment to the development and growth of Argentine society was disputed and denied on a number of occasions, in part due to his stance on the political environment in Argentina. And secondly, because Prebisch's academic status remained ambiguous (he did not even conclude his bachelor's degree) and because of his resentment over the relative disadvantages and constraints faced by Third World intellectuals. These controversial issues can explain why it was so important to stress his early intellectual aptitudes and his natural commitment to Argentine history. Unfortunately, Dosman overlooks these tensions in his narrative.

Dosman's work, however, is a great example of how to avoid defining a man's trajectory as a self-fulfilled prophecy. Prebisch's lifespan makes it easier to see his trajectory as a reflection of conjectural events: he lived in what is considered the longer 20th century and took part in its most important developments, especially for the countries of the Global South. Prebisch's ideas and decisions could easily be taken as by-products of structural incentives and constraints.

Dosman shows us otherwise. The author is successful in showing that Prebisch was mostly responsible for his actions and decisions. Although the author argues there is coherence and unity of purpose in Prebisch's development, his narrative underlines Prebisch's agency and the unintended consequences of his actions. Dosman also stresses the importance of Prebisch's changing network of allies and adversaries in defining the success or failure of his personal and political projects (see, for example, chapter 3) – the death of certain politicians, for example, contributed to enhance or decrease the chances for a political appointment or even resulted in ostracism.

The author also depicts Prebisch as a personality who sometimes made wrong decisions or was unable to interpret the political environment in his favour. The learning period in the UN, when Prebisch witnessed first-hand the dynamics of bureaucratic and world politics, did not make him less prone to make unbeneficial decisions, such as in the case of his return to Argentina in the 1980s, for example. Prebisch's trajectory is not a continuous flow of events in Dosman's narrative but rather a curious story that underlines Prebisch's own agency in responding to the limits and possibilities presented by the contemporary political and social environment. As Prebisch's career was turning global, he had to deal with a changing and challenging political international environment. In the end, Dosman creates a narrative in which Prebisch is not always successful in reaching his desired objectives, and not only due to structural or conjectural constraints. In this sense, Prebisch's career could denote the relative prominence and decline of the South – and especially of Latin America – in world politics.

Dosman's contribution could be seen as ambiguous due to the lack of reference to evidence and documents in the text. There is no doubt that the book was extensively researched, the lack of documents available in public and private archives notwithstanding. In spite of this, social scientists and historians interested in the history of Latin America, of the Third World and of development and modernization theories – as well as in many other themes that emerge from Dosman's narrative – will probably find this book both fascinating and frustrating.

On countless occasions, for example, when Dosman refers to documents, talks, conversations, or when he specifically quotes Prebisch, his works, or data, there is simply no reference to the sources of evidence provided in the text. Researchers interested in going back to the sources or reading more than what is mentioned in the text will find themselves (more often than not) lost in the multitude of archives and interviews listed at the end of the book. It is not only a matter of being able to replicate and/or wade through the evidence used to support arguments. In some cases, the possibility of assessing the quality or the character of the evidence presented is not open to the reader. It is easy to see why an interview (especially one conducted in later years) has different implications from personal

or official documents when it is used to support an argument. Each one has its limitations and possibilities. The author, however, does not offer the reader the possibility of analysing claims based on evidence in cases where it would certainly be necessary to do so.

This problem also arises when Dosman defines the events in which Prebisch took part or that had some kind of impact over his life and/or ideas. Most of the time these events are presented as descriptions rather than as analyses. References to works that guided Dosman's interpretation about some still controversial themes are missing from the text. Prebisch's role in creating a global strategy for the Third World at the UN or his commitment to programmes of reform in Latin American countries, and his relationship to authoritarian governments in the 1960s and 1970s in the region have different interpretations in the literature. Besides that, Dosman's analysis can sometimes become confused with Prebisch's understanding of contemporary issues. Prebisch's ideas are, in some cases, justified by how Dosman develops his narrative, as he attempts to define how Prebisch would have responded to certain events. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a line between the author's narrative and Prebisch's own recollection.

The analysis component is also missing when Dosman presents the relationship between his preferred interpretation of these events and Prebisch's ideas. Although Dosman argues that he is looking for the unity between Prebisch's life and his ideas (and he chooses the biographical approach in order to retrieve Prebisch's contribution), this is neither an intellectual biography nor a work of intellectual history (or the history of ideas). Dosman is primarily concerned with the political impact of Prebisch's actions and ideas, and this is the framework established to present and interpret the development of Prebisch's intellectual contribution to contemporary debates. At the same time, Dosman shows how Prebisch's ideas were deeply influenced by his personal and political achievements and setbacks as well as by the political projects he assumed during his life.

Nonetheless, the tensions mentioned above do not put the contribution of Dosman's book to a number of fields in any doubt. Dosman attains his stated objective: he is successful in stressing Prebisch's contribution both to the development of international institutions and to debates on modernization and development theories. He shows that Prebisch was a key agent in some of the most important developments for Latin America and the Third World during the 20th century. His ambitions and complex personality, combined with his inability to take advantage of the political environment and the much emphasised constraints faced by actors from the South in international society, account for his successes and failures as much as the structural and conjectural factors.

A biography can stress certain features while leaving others (intentionally or unintentionally) underexplored. Interestingly enough, the Brazilian translation of the title chose to portray a unique view of Dosman's biography as it chose a different subtitle. A

*construção da América Latina e do Terceiro Mundo (The construction of Latin America and the Third World)* is only one part of this multifaceted book. A biography does not consist of a description of the principal events in a character's life – it is an act of memory production. Dosman's book is part of this scholarly exercise. Although extensively based on well-conducted research, Dosman's biography on the life and times of Raúl Prebisch is not the ultimate work on this controversial historical figure. Prebisch's ideas and political projects still remain to be further explored through different lenses and frameworks. Dosman's work on Prebisch's life and ideas should be seen as a leading contribution that has not yet put an end to the tensions and debates in the literature.