

Spotlight: The United States and Latin America, Views from the South

# With a Little Help from My Friends in the U.S.

by **Patricio Winckler Grez** | Mar 12, 2026

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DRCLAS Visiting Scholars in 2023. The historians María Bjerg and Jessica Lepler, sociologist Álvaro Hofflinger, anthropologist Patricia Ames and political scientists Laura Gamboa and Fernando Limongi. Art by Patricio Winckler[/caption]

On an airplane to Bogotá from my home in Chile, I stumbled upon the documentary “**Woodstock**” that brought back memories from my youth tied to that country in the north. Although I was born years after the hippie era, I recall Jimi Hendrix’ powerful riffs, Joan Baez’ angelic voice and Joe Cocker’s divine “With a Little Help from My Friends,” which accompanied my innocent university years in Valparaíso.

During this period, feelings about the United States were very mixed. Some of us disliked certain logos like those of McDonalds, which we thought would displace modest local businesses in every medium-sized city throughout the country. Other unhappy feelings had to do with the intervention of the United States in the tragic events that would sweep Latin America in the 60s.

At the dinner table, my youthful idealism clashed with the conservative ideas of my parents, Mariana and Huguito. My mother insisted I would change my mind with time, and, based on the facts, she was right: my children were raised in the United States and, after living in that northern country for quite a few years, I have learned to separate the wheat from the chaff.

As fate would have it, my at-the-time-young family and I went to Ithaca for my doctoral studies at Cornell University, an experience which ended up transforming our lives. My children Tomás and Martina grew up speaking English in playgroups and public schools with far better quality than those in Chile. I remember Tomás playing the violin in the school yard, an epiphany almost unheard of in my country, where culture has succumbed to screens; I also remember activities at school or parties at the community center, where friends from all around the world shared something of their cultures. Those were rewarding times, indeed...

The decision to study in the United States was quite deliberate. As a boy, the trips of Carl Sagan in the television series Cosmos inspired me to meet him somewhere in the future. Life’s paths led us to live years later in his exact Ithaca neighborhood, although he had died years before. I frequently visited his grave with one of my kids in a stroller covered in plastic to fend off the freezing temperatures of the endless winter. The dozens of rockets, spaceships and sunflowers left by his admirers in the graveyard in the previous spring glowed under the snow slowly melting in the springlike sun.

My good friend and doctoral colleague Jorge Escobar recalls the demanding studies at Hollister Hall, a picturesque building located at Cornell’s campus. There, I encountered professors who formed the way I think about science and the philosophy underlying it.

Those hallway conversations brought me back to the basics: blackboard, chalk and endless ideas to play with. I managed to form my own opinion before falling into clichés, a method I nowadays use to confront life scientific challenges. In this melting pot I learned the value of thinking from scratch, paying attention to details, and listening to classmates from the most diverse backgrounds, in a multicultural atmosphere seldom found elsewhere.

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In 2023, I was accepted as a visiting scholar at Harvard's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS), a bid I never imagined would become true as this center focuses in humanities and social sciences. As a couple of times before, we decided to abandon our routine in Chile and set out to Boston for a semester. I'd applied for the fellowship because I wanted to experiment with interdisciplinary intersections, which in my dear home country are difficult to find. Having enjoyed the podcast *The Unanswered Question* —a course in 1973 in which Leonard Bernstein appreciated the interdisciplinary spirit that permeates Harvard— I thought of the almost unlimited opportunities to ask essential and perhaps naïve questions in an intellectually rigorous atmosphere. And at the same time, to give our children the opportunity to swap some months in their exclusive private school in Chile by and experience in a public high school, which ended being quite a worthy experience.

As I approached my fifties, I hadn't had the opportunity to learn much about humanities or social sciences before, and that fall in Cambridge changed that. Over morning coffees, I found new ideas from my peer scholars and several unexpected yet inspiring moments. At the Harvard Kennedy School, I attended a terrific talk by New Zealand's former president Jacinda Arden, whose successful control of the Covid pandemic was recognized worldwide, and another about Nobel Peace Prize Juan Manuel Santos's efforts to bring peace to the armed conflict in Colombia. I also joined a session by the unbelievably talented professor Michael Sandel, who with sublime ease challenged the audience with ethical dilemmas that should matter to every human being. These are just a few examples of the opportunities that arise in environments where ideas freely flow, where dissent is

welcome, where respect for democracy is found at every level, and where appreciation for reason and knowledge is profound. These values, most certainly, are those found in U.S. universities.

During my semester at DRCLAS, I learned that the quest to produce reliable information for the common good requires to distinguish verifiable facts from mere slogans and fake news. And this task requires a certain amount of intellectual courage, in an environment often lost among polarizing dogmas. This type of thought would have never come to my mind without the chance to be part, at least for a few years, of north American's academic life. But as someone in the "Woodstock" documentary comments, "There is always a little piece of heaven in a disaster area." From my humble position as a distant observer, I prefer the welcoming United States of Obama to that of the current administration. But that fate, of course, has been freely decided by at the polls and should be respected.

To wrap my ideas about United States up, I embrace the ideas expressed in the Woodstock documentary: Peace, music, ecology, liberty, community, democracy, alternative, knowledge and altruism, to which I would also add friendship.

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