3 Main Points

- Why do Latin American elites keep courting foreign power—chasing recognition abroad while trading away sovereignty?
- A fantasy of imperial recognition—embedded in an external legibility regime—rewards mimicry and validation abroad over democratic legitimation at home.
- Break the spell—traverse the fantasy. Reform elite pipelines, ditch external benchmarks, and make domestic accountability the currency of rule.

About the Author

Eduardo Cury is a passionate Master's student of International Governance & Diplomacy at Sciences Po Paris, where he also completed his undergraduate studies in political science and international affairs. His research centers on diplomacy, global governance, and the decolonization of state institutions in Latin America. He is currently writing a thesis on the Instituto Rio Branco, Brazil's diplomatic academy, examining how it reproduces epistemic and social hierarchies. Eduardo recently concluded a six-month traineeship at the EU Delegation to the Holy See and UN agencies in Rome, where he worked on multilateral diplomacy and policy reporting. He is also preparing to join Brazil's diplomatic corps and his broader mission is to foster more pluralistic, democratic, and strategically autonomous institutions in the Global South.

In the Eyes of Empire

In the Eyes of Empire: Elite Desire and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Latin America

Eduardo Cury

I. In the Eyes of Empire: Fantasy and Elite Betrayal

In 2025, three episodes crystallized long-standing anxieties about elite collusion with external powers in Latin America. In Colombia, leaked recordings of former foreign minister Álvaro Leyva

(2022–2024) sent shock waves through the country, in which Leyva appeared to implicate U.S. officials and armed cartels in a plan to oust the country's first left-wing, democratically elected president, Gustavo Petro—prompting swift, cross-party condemnation. In the United States, Brazilian congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro—son of former president Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023)—escalated a year-long lobbying push for sanctions on Brazil. After a series of high-level meetings, President Donald Trump announced 50% tariffs on Brazilian imports and threatened sanctions on judicial figures unless Jair Bolsonaro's prosecution over the January 8, 2023 "attempted coup" and "violent overthrow of the democratic order" ceased—an ultimatum issued in open defiance of Brazil's democratic institutions and independent judiciary. In Mexico, Senator Lilly Téllez told Fox News she would welcome a U.S. military intervention against the cartels, drawing a firm rebuke from President Claudia Sheinbaum—"Mexico's disputes are resolved internally"—and culminating in a cross-party congressional declaration against any foreign military action, promoted by Morena and ultimately backed by the PAN. Taken together, these incidents are not aberrations but the latest turn of a recurrent historical pattern: segments of national elites enlisting external powers to prosecute domestic battles—often at the expense of institutional integrity, sovereignty, and the popular will.

Why does this pattern endure? Why do Latin American elites repeatedly act against the national project, undermining their countries' autonomy in exchange for subordinate alignment with external powers? Conventional explanations—corruption, ideological affinity, pragmatic geopolitics—are insufficient. They miss a more fundamental structure: elite betrayal—here meaning collusion with external powers—is not merely strategic; it is psychic, symbolic, and historically sedimented.

What, precisely, is the structure at work—and why does it persist? At its core is a fantasy of imperial recognition: a learned expectation that elite status, protection, and legitimacy flow not from democratic accountability to one's own public and institutions, but from being seen and validated by metropolitan centers. To explain how this operates and endures, we draw on three anchors. First, Fanon (1961) shows that postcolonial bourgeoisies tend to inherit rather than transform colonial state forms; therefore, alignment with external authority reads as continuity rather than rupture. Second, Quijano (2000) details how coloniality embeds Eurocentric hierarchies in subjectivities and institutions; accordingly, competence and rightfulness become

tacitly equated with external validation. Third—and central to the "why"— Lacan (1978) clarifies the mechanism of persistence: identification with the Other's gaze leads external approval to be treated as legitimacy within elite fields, even when it lacks domestic democratic legitimation.

In Lacan's (1949) terms, Imaginary mirroring—that is, when elites stabilize identity by emulating the metropole's image (manners, rhetoric, institutional blueprints, aesthetics)—yields a gratifying coherence; the Symbolic—the codified order of law, procedures, performance metrics, international rankings, and diplomatic protocols that define what counts as "proper" governance—translates that craving into rules that reward outward conformity; when the Real—the remainder that resists codification (plebeian demands, Indigenous and Afro-diasporic practices, informal economies, eruptions of social conflict)—returns, the internalized injunction is to double down ("be more modern," "more orthodox"). Thus, exchanging autonomy for external approval is coded not as betrayal but as professional common sense. This dynamic is not abstract; it is taught and rewarded in concrete institutions from the earliest stages of socialization to the highest levels of policymaking.

Consequently, the imperial fantasy renders collusion not only intelligible but gratifying. Influential actors do not merely maneuver for power; they seek recognition in the eyes of Empire, trading domestic legitimation for field-specific legitimacy abroad. Rather than grounding legitimacy in democratic representation, they perform deference to global hierarchies, enacting imported scripts that promise to make the elite subject "civilized," "universal," and "mature"—even as such performances narrow domestic deliberation.

Yet critique alone is insufficient. For Lacan (1967), liberation requires not accommodation but an Act: a rupture with the fantasy that structures desire. Likewise, Fanon (1961) calls for the dismantling of colonial legacies, and Mignolo (2009) for epistemic disobedience against universalizing pretensions. Accordingly, Section II traces how this fantasy became sedimented across eras; Section III translates that diagnosis into measurable reforms aimed at decoupling legitimacy from the imperial gaze and re-anchoring sovereignty in domestic accountability. Is elite desire the true battleground for Latin American sovereignty?

II. Historical Sedimentations and Shifting Masks of Imperial Desire

Latin American independence was less a rupture than a reconfiguration of colonial desire. While formal sovereignty was proclaimed, the hierarchies established during European colonization nevertheless remained largely intact. As Fanon (1961) warned, the postcolonial bourgeoisie did not abolish the colonial order; rather, it sought to inherit its privileges. Accordingly, national elites, instead of forging an emancipatory project, fashioned rule in the image of Empire. Thus, the newly independent states retained the same racialized exclusions, external economic dependencies, and symbolic structures that defined colonial rule—now rebranded as the 'national interest' and defended by domestic elites in the name of sovereignty.

This dynamic is best understood through Lacan's mirror stage, where identity emerges through méconnaissance—a misrecognition of oneself in an external image. For instance, when a child first sees its reflection, it jubilantly identifies with the coherent, stable image despite lacking bodily unity; the mirror offers an illusion of wholeness that is taken for the self. So, too, after independence, many Latin American elites took the imperial Other as their mirror—an image coded as white, rational, modern, and externally validated—so that sovereignty became a project of mimicry. Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power clarifies this structure: elites internalized Eurocentric hierarchies, equating authority less with popular legitimacy than with civilizational proximity to Europe. Accordingly, they governed not for the people, but through a fantasy of being seen by those who had once ruled them.

By the mid-19th century, the mirror shifted to London. As Iberian rule receded, British financial–commercial hegemony filled the vacuum—not by conquest, but by credit, trade, and codes. London became the the new axis of legitimacy: sovereign bonds were placed there; merchant banks structured loans and concessions; commercial law, consular courts, and gold-standard discipline defined what counted as "sound" policy. Elites admired British manners, mimicked institutions, and embedded British capital in railways, ports, and customs administrations. These works were not only instruments of commerce; they were monuments to recognition. In Lacanian terms, Britain's gaze functioned as an objet petit a —an unattainable prestige that organized the pursuit of modernity. To be seen by Britain was to be respectable; to be local was to be uncivilized, irrational, invisible and irrelevant.

In the 20th century, the mirror migrated to Washington, yet the structure endured. Through treaties and aid, training missions, OAS alignments, IFI conditionalities, and security cooperation, the United States consolidated rule-setting authority—what Lacan (1955-56) would call the Name-of-the-Father, the Symbolic law that bounds what counts as "responsible" governance. Consequently, elites did not merely accept U.S. hegemony; they invited it: from intervention in Cuba (1898) to Guatemala (1954) and support for military regimes in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, Washington's approval was sought to discipline domestic insurgencies. As Tickner (2003; 2021) argues, this dynamic generated policy dependence: foreign policy—and often macroeconomic frames—was received rather than authored, carried by affective fidelity to external scripts. Accordingly, to govern "rationally" came to mean speaking Washington's grammar—its institutions, idioms, and standards—thus further entrenching the habit of looking outward first.

At the margins and for the first time, a counter-mirror appeared on parts of the left. Although most communist revolutionary projects were harshly repressed or contained, some urban intelligentsias emulated everything from Soviet orthodoxy to Maoist fervor in both doctrine and cultural policy—at times overriding local traditions. For example, in revolutionary Cuba, there were periods (especially in the 1960s–70s) of stigmatization and administrative suppression of Afro-Cuban religions (e.g., Santería, Palo) as "superstition" incompatible with scientific socialism—an instance of mirroring an external standard at the expense of local cultures. Therefore, this recognition regime was not confined to conservative elites. On both the right and the urban left, elites systematically treated external arbiters as the benchmark of "proper" rule—pursuing recognition abroad rather than domestic democratic legitimation and, when the two conflicted, sidelining local traditions in favor of imported norms.

As the Cold War receded, this recognition regime adapted once again. The authoritarian brute force of the 1960s and 70s gave way to the neoliberal technocracy of the 1980s and 90s. Figures like Chile's Chicago Boys—including Sergio de Castro and Hernán Büchi—and Argentina's Adolfo Diz, trained in Northern universities, returned home not as national intellectuals but as high priests of global orthodoxy. Their authority stemmed not from democratic mandate but from epistemic proximity to Empire. They implemented IMF structural adjustment, fiscal austerity, and monetary independence, not to serve the popular will but to preserve international credibility.

Bourdieu's (1979) notion of symbolic capital illuminates this logic: legitimacy was conferred through fluency in foreign codes, transforming governance into a ritual of mimicry. Once again, the Real—popular demands, plebeian identities, redistributive claims—was foreclosed as irrational and irresponsible.

By the 2000s, this structure found yet another institutional mask: lawfare. Judicial systems, cloaked in neutrality, became the preferred instruments of exclusion. As an example, the imprisonment of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, later declared unlawful, was not a legal aberration—it was a symbolic Act. As Zaffaroni et al. (2024) argue, the case exemplifies legal warfare: the use of juridical power to repress the political return of the Real. Operating in coordination with foreign institutions like the U.S. Department of Justice, courts did not merely enforce rules—they sustained a fantasy of elite moral purity. In Lacanian (1959-60) terms, they acted as superegoic agents, punishing not actual transgressions but threats to the fantasy that anchors the legal order. Sovereignty, therefore, was not defended; it was once again sacrificed to maintain symbolic coherence.

Across these historical layers—from independence to technocracy to judicial repression—what remains constant is the recognition regime of imperial fantasy. The external mask may change— Spain, Britain, the United States—but the psychic structure endures. Elites desire not justice but recognition; not sovereignty but legitimacy in the eyes of Empire. And the greatest threat to this fantasy is the Real: the insurgent presence of racialized, impoverished, and mobilized majorities who speak in their own voice, assert their own history, and demand an alternative horizon of power.

As Lacan reminds us, the mask is not a lie—it is the truth of desire. Latin American elites have not merely adapted to Empire; they have desired through it. To break this cycle demands more than institutional reform. It requires a confrontation with the fantasy that binds the subject to domination.

III. Traversing the Fantasy: Reclaiming Sovereignty Beyond the Imperial Gaze

If elite betrayal in Latin America is sustained by a fantasy of imperial recognition, then genuine political transformation requires more than institutional reform—it requires a rupture in the symbolic coordinates that bind elites to Empire. As Lacan reminds us, desire is structured not by the object itself, but by the gaze of the Other through which the subject seeks recognition. In Latin America, this Other has long been the imperial center—first Iberian, then British, then American—whose gaze confers legitimacy and symbolic worth. The historical shifts mapped in Section II do not mark emancipatory breaks; they reflect the fantasy's capacity for mutation. Empire's mask may change, but its libidinal hold endures. What must be confronted, then, is not simply foreign dominance, but the unconscious desire that compels elites to seek validation from it.

One site of intervention must be in elite formation. Diplomatic academies, law schools, and public administration programs function as factories of imperial desire—spaces where proximity to Euro-American norms is aestheticized as competence, neutrality, and civility. These institutions do not merely teach governance; they encode a racialized habitus of decorum and deference, training elites to perform for Empire's gaze. While, for instance, efforts such as Brazil's affirmative action at the Instituto Rio Branco mark symbolic advances, their transformative potential remains limited if they do not challenge the ontological assumptions of the system itself. Inclusion without epistemic disruption risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to overcome. As a result, curricula must be repoliticized, provincialized, and pluralized—foregrounding typically marginalized epistemologies, Indigenous worldviews, and Afro-diasporic memory not as supplements, but as foundations of political knowledge.

Second, legitimacy must be decoupled from external recognition as it is now. As long as authority flows from alignment with international financial institutions, Western diplomatic codes, or Northern legal rationality, Latin American elites will remain vulnerable to libidinal capture. As a result, the fantasy of being "seen" by Empire will continue to override accountability to local constituencies. Alternatives must be built from within. Legitimacy must be grounded in the sovereignty of peoples, the reparative logics of memory, and the ontological plurality of the region. Bolivia's plurinational diplomacy and Colombia's efforts to center Afro-Colombian and Indigenous perspectives in peacebuilding are not perfect models—but they signal possibilities. They move

toward institutionalizing the Real rather than foreclosing it, making visible the constituencies historically excluded from elite fantasy.

Yet none of these transformations are possible without confronting the fantasy itself. As Fanon insisted, decolonization is not a gentle process of reform—it is a rupture, a break from the desire to become like the colonizer. Lacan similarly argued that true change requires an Act that disrupts the symbolic order—the system of meanings and norms that shapes how subjects understand themselves and their world. In this sense, Latin America's challenge is not simply to modernize its institutions or make them look more like those of the Global North. It must question the deeper psychic investment in that resemblance. As long as elites remain fixated on gaining recognition from Empire—measuring success by external validation—sovereignty will remain out of reach. The people's voices will remain unheard, their histories sidelined, and their ways of knowing dismissed.

Finally, returning to the cases that opened this brief—Eduardo Bolsonaro urging Washington to sanction his own country, Lilly Téllez publicly welcoming U.S. military intervention in Mexico, and Álvaro Leyva covertly aligning with foreign-backed actors—these are not anomalies. They are contemporary expressions of the external legibility regime: moments when field-specific legitimacy abroad is pursued at the expense of domestic democratic legitimation, and where collusion with external powers is not only rationalized but libidinally gratifying. Yet each also revealed fissures. Bolsonaro's request met institutional pushback; Téllez's remarks provoked a cross-party congressional declaration rejecting any foreign intervention; and Leyva's maneuver drew public condemnation and legal consequences. In each instance, the Real broke through—not merely as opposition, but as mobilized publics, procedures, and practices that unsettle the fantasy and raise the domestic cost of seeking recognition elsewhere. The task ahead is to shift the gaze: away from Empire's mirror and toward plural, sovereign futures that Latin America can author for itself.

To reclaim sovereignty, Latin America must therefore not only resist Empire. It must stop desiring through it.