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Author(s): Michiel Baud

Source: *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, December 2015, No. 100, 50th Anniversary Special Issue: New Directions in Latin American and Caribbean Studies (December 2015), pp. 17-26

Published by: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns Amerika (CEDLA)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43673534>

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## Beyond the Headlines: An Editor's View on Latin American Studies in *ERLACS*

*Michiel Baud*

Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation, Amsterdam

The twenty-first century seemed to herald profound changes for Latin America. The return of democracy in the 1980s and the accompanying radical neo-liberal reforms had occasioned profound dissatisfaction. The resulting 'pink tide' that started with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999 was described by many observers, in and outside of academia, as the revolution the region had been waiting for. The new policies of growth and redistribution with their concomitant conditional cash transfers seemed to finally offer the solution for Latin America's endemic poverty and inequality. Some political scientists even dubbed these governments as 'post-neoliberal' regimes. They stressed the return of the state and point at the end of the hegemony of neoliberalism.

And indeed the panorama has changed. Latin American Gini coefficients have gone down persistently in all but a few countries. The middle class has grown and so have the patterns of consumption and levels of education. These are no mean feats and they have changed Latin American societies in fundamental ways.

On the other hand, the newness of these developments can be questioned. Today, with fifteen years of the new century gone by, many things seem to have stayed the same. In many ways, the present-day developmental process resembles the first stage of Latin American modernization in the late nineteenth century and its export-oriented growth model based on the production of primary commodities. The policies of redistribution present a terminology that is clearly innovative. The conditional cash transfers, first implemented in Brazil and later extended over the entire region were a new phenomenon, just as the new post-neoliberal rhetoric. Nevertheless, the new redistributive policies are quite similar to the policies implemented by the populist regimes in Argentina and Brazil in the 1940s. And so are the risks. Redistribution is politically dangerous when economies are contracting. The governments of Perón and

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ERLACS is published by CEDLA – Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation | Centro de Estudios y Documentación Latinoamericanos, Amsterdam; The Netherlands | Países Bajos; [www.cedla.uva.nl](http://www.cedla.uva.nl); ISSN 0924-0608, eISSN 1879-4750.

Vargas experienced the consequences of this rule in the late 1940s, just as the present-day governments of Venezuela, Ecuador and to a lesser extent Brazil. Today, at the moment of writing these lines, when the China-induced commodity boom appears to be receding, the weakness of the model has become clear.

It is evident then that it is not easy to distinguish continuities and change in Latin America. Policy makers tend to be carried away with conjunctural trends and often close their eyes to structural processes of change that take place ‘under the radar’. To what extent is that also the case for scholarly researchers? There is no doubt that academics are thinking and acting members of society but their duty is to go ‘beyond the headlines’ to preclude that their analytical frameworks are no more than post-hoc conceived confirmations of past processes. Journals like *ERLACS* that are dependent of ‘spontaneous’ submissions may be in a privileged position to assess this issue. The timespan of an academic publication normally precludes a direct connection with daily events. In general, *ERLACS* articles reflect longer term trends and implicitly or explicitly present a reflection of these events and processes. Only the ‘Explorations’ section, which was implemented from 1997 onwards, sometimes allowed for direct comments on occurrences in Latin America. Having been managing editor of *ERLACS* for 18 years (1997-2014) I have set myself the task to analyse these trends and to answer the question in what ways the content of a journal like *ERLACS* offers insights into the relationship between developments in Latin America and academic research. What topics were ‘trending’ in the journal and in what ways did the approaches and perspectives of the authors and their articles change over time and space?<sup>1</sup>

### *Politics and social movements*

There is no doubt that in recent years political themes have taken pride of place in the submissions to *ERLACS*. This clearly reflects the importance of politics in modern Latin America. After the end of the dictatorships in the 1980s and the start of what is usually called the ‘democratic transition’, political dynamics have been a central theme in Latin American studies. The first theme was the nature of Latin American political development and especially the co-occurrence of the transition and consolidation of democracy and the radical neoliberal reforms. This issue has been a continuous topic in *ERLACS*. A good example was a special issue with four full articles and four Explorations on elections in eight Latin American countries (70, April 2001). Sometimes we asked colleagues to reflect on the ‘headlines’, such as for instance Carlos Santiso (71, Oct. 2001), Jorge Schvarzer (74, April 2003) or the authors of the dossier on the New Left (79, Oct. 2005). In these Explorations the authors gave their understanding of recent events from their perspective as a political scientist or an economist. Such an analysis was prompted by a very specific case, when the late Carlos Ivan Degregori endeavoured to explain the seemingly senseless killing of a local *alcalde* in Ilave in Puno, Peru (78, April 2005). This

article, written by one of the most brilliant Peruvian scholars of our time, transcended the short-term headlines by focusing on the question of state intervention in Peru. In a piece that has not lost its relevance today, Degregori concluded that an absent or weak Peruvian state exacerbates long-term tensions and power struggles which a state-centred, 'colonial' narrative has tended to obscure. The article explained the historical background of the conflict. In the view of the author, the killing was emblematic of the long-term tensions between the (democratic) state and more or less autonomous civil society. Degregori wrote: 'Así, en el conflicto de llave se percibió el choque entre la dinámica de la democracia representativa y la de la movilización social' (p. 95).

Social movements as a topic have a long history in *ERLACS* and continue to be so. Politics was never only about (state) institutions, but also about how people made sense of them, or even more often, resisted the consequences of state policies. On the one hand, there was the political anthropology which tried to understand local politics as a performance. This approach was fomented by CEDLA anthropologist, Geert Banck, and like-minded researchers (for instance 65, December 1998), but was also visible, among others, in articles by Elisabet Dueholm Rasch on local governance in Guatemala (88, April 2010) and a dossier on participatory budgeting (83, October 2007). On the other hand, there was a strong focus on protest and resistance. The small but revealing dossier edited by Gemma van de Haar on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Zapatista revolt was an example of the critical reflection this often amounted to (76, April 2004). The contributions by Willem Assies on Bolivia (76, April 2004) or Javier Auyero on Argentina (89, October 2010) are other examples. These and many other articles focus on politics 'from below' ask pertinent questions about the extent of state power in Latin America. They clearly indicate the importance of a longer-term analysis of Latin American politics, which has now been recognized by many social scientists.

### *Ethnicity*

A second topic that had a clear presence in *ERLACS* in the past decade refers to ethnicity and ethnic politics. Sometimes hardly distinguishable from the literature on social movements, this topic merits separate attention. The attention for ethnicity started in December 1997 when *ERLACS* (63) published a small dossier on ethnicity and politics in the Andes. In two articles Gerardo Leibner and Sarah Radcliffe presented some of the core issues of the longer-term importance of ethnic politics in the Andean region. The indigenous legacy created ethnic policies of state-making as well as alternative strategies to ethnic empowerment and politics. Radcliffe's article in many ways foreshadowed the indigenous revival occurring in the Andes in the twenty-first century. Her emphasis on the adoption of 'indigenous' ways of being by indigenous *and* non-indigenous, often urban populations goes a long way in explaining present-day ethnic politics in the region.

The focus on ethnicity led to two dossiers. In October 2004 (77) a number of articles focused on the restructuring of ethnic identities as a result of globalization, migration and state policies. This focus was continued in a thematic issue on 'ethnic labelling' with contributions on Brazil and Colombia (80, April 2006). The article authored by Margarita Chaves and Marta Zambrano on Colombia demonstrated the paradoxical consequences of the pro-indigenous Constitution of 1991. The two authors suggest that the new project of multiculturalism in Colombia led to a process of *re-indigenización* of communities that had erstwhile considered themselves and were considered by others as 'de-indianized' and mestizo. On the basis of research in Bogotá and Putumayo they analysed both indigenous and mestizo ethnicity. They conclude that the ethnic dynamism they found 'question[s] fixed ethnic categories and also reverse[s] mestizaje's directionality: from a privileged path to whitening to an enabling road for becoming indigenous' (p. 11). The new state policies led to an upsurge in indigeneity and indigenous reclamations. This led established indigenous political elites which represented recognized ethnic groups to start wondering about these measures, even favouring to block new approvals. At the same time, state authorities adapted to these new developments. In 1999 the government gave local officials detailed instructions defining which types of ethnic indigenous subject could be considered legitimate and thus be recognized by the Colombian state. There was a strong preference for communities that spoke indigenous languages and resided in rural areas, and whose mores responded to traditional *usos y costumbres*. This resulted in a struggle for ethnicity in which various stakeholders engaged in creating new ethnic markers in the process often leading to new essentialized views on ethnic identities.

This dynamic view on ethnicity in Latin America has become central to our understanding of ethnic relations in Latin America. It also returned frequently in *ERLACS*, and acknowledges the importance of ethnic identities in Latin America but stresses at the same time their political and social dimensions. Articles in *ERLACS* have focused on both political and non-political processes connected to ethnic identity. As such, they have emphasized the ambiguous and often contradictory ways in which ethnicity has been perceived and expressed by different actors.

### *Collective memories*

Another topic that can be related to the political dynamism in Latin America concerns processes of commemoration and memory. The authoritarian regimes of the 1970s and 80s committed large-scale violations of human rights. This caused social, political and psychological scars among their populations which extended far beyond the duration of these regimes. Social and political movements had already started to organize and express rejection of human rights violations before the end of these regimes' time in power. In organizing the resistance, they were instrumental in the struggle for a democratic transition

and the punishment of the culprits. They became the hall-bearers of the struggle for memory in the past decades. The truth and reconciliation commissions became an important characteristic of post-dictatorship politics in the region.

The interest in memory and commemoration in the journal started with the historical analysis by Miguel Centeno (66, June 1999) which intended to understand the use of historical imagery for Latin American state building. Shortly after, Mario Aguilar wrote a contribution (69, Oct. 2000) in which he analysed the significance of the 'memory-place' Villa Grimaldi in Chilean post-dictatorship perceptions. From then on, the theme has never been absent in *ERLACS*, tracing Jan Knippers Black's analysis of the international repercussions of the London arrest of ex-dictator Pinochet (73, Oct 2002) to a dossier on Guatemala, Chile and Paraguay in October 2006 (81) and articles by Nina Schneider and Ralph Sprenkels on the problematic influence of the past in, respectively, Brazil (90, April 2011) and El Salvador (91, Oct. 2011).

It could be argued that Schneider's article on the systematic denial to account for the military human rights violations between 1964 and 1985 was overtaken by later events when a truth commission was installed under the first government of Dilma Rousseff. In December 2014, this commission presented its findings about the repression during the military dictatorship in Brazil. Nevertheless, the article is still relevant in its emphasis on the different ways in which the struggle for memory expressed itself in Latin America. For a long time, Brazilian society rejected an explicit discussion of the dictatorship, and even favoured amnesty. While this article looked for explanations for that situation, it may also be used today to explain the change in attitude which has occurred in recent years. In that sense Schneider's conclusion is significant: 'A detailed analysis of the Brazilian amnesty debate revealed that those who favour impunity do not necessarily defend the military regime or wish to deny the military past' (p. 51). The article thus explains the long delay in appointing a truth commission, but, in hindsight, also gives insights in the ambiguous and in many ways polarized reception of its results.

In his article on El Salvador, Ralph Sprenkels demonstrates how the history of polarization and violence in the country continues to influence present-day politics. In 1992, the Peace Accords put an end to twelve years of armed confrontation that had cost almost 80,000 lives. This opened the way to electoral democracy. However, during election time opposing partisan groups continued to glorify their past and discredit that of their adversaries by the use of 'militant memories'. These memories specifically aimed 'to generate trust, cohesion and discipline in their political in-group, while nurturing distrust towards outsiders, and especially political adversaries' (p. 26).

Both these articles thus draw attention to the contrasting political projects to which 'memory work' may lead and caution us in accepting a simple positive embracing of political uses of collective memory. These articles and a number of Explorations provide an excellent starting point for a comparative analysis



of the pressing question to what extent ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ have been achieved in the region.

### *Rural and agrarian studies*

Agriculture and social relations in rural regions have traditionally been very important topics in *ERLACS*. This trend was strengthened under the influence of Cristobal Kay as long-term member of the editorial board. Although articles on agricultural production have always been present in the journal, a real change came with the dossier on the restructuring of Latin American agriculture in issue 75 (Oct. 2003). In four articles the contours were sketched of the rapidly changing context of agrarian production and the subsequent new roles of rural producers. Years before the idea of new ‘ruralities’ became popular, Ute Schüren dedicated a detailed analysis of the changing context of *ejido* production to the emergence of a so-called ‘post-peasantry’. Adrian Premat analysed the urban agriculture in Havana, while another article focused on the increasing importance of fair coffee production. Although not the first to draw attention to these issues, it may be said that this dossier certainly was in the vanguard of a new approach to Latin American agriculture. It started a new attention to agrarian issues in the journal.

This expressed itself, among others, in three insightful articles on Ecuadorian rural relations by Luciano Martínez (77, Oct. 2004), Victor Bretón (78, April 2005) and Tanya Korovkin (79, Oct. 2005). Martínez demonstrated how rural society is characterized by increasing fragmentation and multiple livelihood strategies of rural inhabitants. This new reality links them as producers to the world market, but at the same time, in a social sense, it has allowed them to be active on different scales of society, and even as migrants on international scale.

Taking another perspective, Bretón highlighted the dangers of the so-called incorporation of the indigenous population under the umbrella of ‘etnodesarrollo’ which easily becomes an excuse for traditional clientelist modernization projects. Korovkin’s focus on the gendered outcomes of these changes in agrarian society is particularly interesting, especially because she places them in a global context. She shows how development projects, such as the cut-flower sector in Ecuador, have hardly been able to support the livelihoods of the rural poor. Even worse, in spite of rhetoric saying otherwise, it has led to reduced access to resources and disempowerment. In different ways, these articles show that state interventions in Ecuador have been an important factor in the increasing fragmentation of the rural population. Similar processes of change have been visible in Argentina as the articles of Raúl Paz (81, Oct. 2006) and Clara Craviotti (89, Oct. 2010) clearly demonstrate.

The large-scale, market-oriented agriculture that emerged in many Latin American countries during the neoliberal reforms also exacerbated rural inequalities. Much of the social movement activity discussed above, even as it

was organized under a different, often ethnic banner, should also be seen as a reaction to these new inequalities. They created new pressures on natural resources like land and water. This process endangered small-scale rural production, but at the same time also increased the problems of pollution and environmental degradation. Increasingly the study of agriculture and rural production has therefore been connected to environmental perspectives which tried to account for the increasing co-occurrence of social inequalities and environmental destruction.

### *Environment*

Environmental studies gradually became an important concern in *ERLACS*. It started with articles by Anthony Hall (62, June 1997) who explored and identified the new directions of environmental analysis in Brazilian Amazonia and by the late Jean Carrière (63, Dec. 1997) on the degradation of wetlands in Central America. From then on, discussions on environmental issues have been a continuous feature of the journal. The underlying concern of these contributions was to explain the specific environmental changes in the region. This became clear in a number of topics. One central issue has been the importance of mining in the developmental model of Latin America but also in the changing social circumstances on local level. Jeanette Graulau's article (71, Oct. 2001) on female participation in small-scale mining in the Amazon (also the first *ERLACS* article which included photographs!) may be considered the starting-point of this kind of approach. Through its strong empirical backing and focus both on small-scale mining and female agency, it drew attention to the varied consequences of mining in a local setting. It was followed by comparable articles by Josep Pont Vidal (84, April 2008) and Marjo de Theije and Marieke Heemskerk (87, Oct. 2009) on small-scale mining in other parts of the Amazon region.

A second important topic concerned 'El Niño', the occasional anomalous warm water along the Pacific coast of Latin America and its resulting consequences for the region's climate. This was the topic of a short dossier that was published in December 1999 (67). The considerations and conclusions of the two articles on this topic are still relevant today as peasants and environmentalists again prepare for the complex and often disastrous consequences of this natural phenomenon. They made clear that these nature-related disasters can only be understood in relation to social and political relations and the vulnerability of poor populations. The interaction between environmental disasters, socio-economic contexts and peoples' livelihoods remains one of the principal challenges for the social and environmental sciences, although its interpretations have changed radically. These changing views were the topic of a few articles published in October 2002 (73), in which different views on human-nature relations in Argentina, Mexico and Ecuador were analysed.



ERLACS has also demonstrated an emerging attention to water issues in Latin America. It started with an article by Sergio Antonio Ruíz and Ingo Georg Gentes (85, Oct. 2008) on the increasing importance of governance issues around water in Bolivia. Their article demonstrated how similar problems occurred in many different Latin American regions. Recently ERLACS published a dossier on water-related megaprojects (97, Oct. 2014) by a group of Latin American scholars. They demonstrated how strongly the accessibility to clean water has become influenced and endangered by the current Latin American trend towards neo-extractivism.

The contradictory relation between Latin American left-wing governments and environmental issues is another increasingly important issue, not only in ERLACS, but in the social and political analysis of Latin American politics in general. Although often elected on tickets that included environmental protection and a more harmonious relation with nature, these new governments have rapidly been confronted with critique on their contradictory environmental policies. It is no coincidence that Bolivia and Ecuador – the two countries that have taken up the ‘rights of nature’ and ‘*Buen Vivir*’ in their Constitutions – have come under scrutiny in this respect. In April 2012 (92) Bolivian anthropologist Ricardo Calla wrote a detailed and critical account of the TIPNIS conflict which pitted the government of Evo Morales against local indigenous populations supported by social movements and environmental groups. The violent repression of a protest march in 2011 elicited national and international protests and uncovered the ideological tensions apparent in the political ideology of the Bolivian government. Calla concludes that ‘la imagen de Evo Morales ha quedado descolocada y, finalmente, situada de modo muy ambiguo en la cada vez más urgente y compleja discusión sobre un calentamiento global que obliga a todos a seguir con atención lo que ocurre en la ecológicamente vital Amazonia’ (p. 82).

Similar confrontations and discussions occurred in Ecuador under the government of Rafael Correa. The new Constitution that was accepted in 2008 recognized the ‘rights of nature’ and celebrated the idea of *vivir bien* or *Sumak Kawsay*. In daily practice tensions arose which were very cogently described by Victor Bretón (95, Oct. 2013). In a critical essay, he analysed the origins of the concept and showed that it was not so much an indigenous concept but an Aristotelian idea that was instrumentally used by politicians. It allowed them to re-establish a strong role for the state and to legitimize new extractive policies which would work in favour of the poor parts of the population. Bretón ends his article with an almost apocalyptic conclusion: ‘Todo ello puede convertir al Sumak Kawsay, si no lo ha hecho ya, en otra de esas imágenes esencializadas, a modo de espejo, frente a la que contemplar la sombra alargada de un desarrollo convencional revestido de tintes posmodernos y alternativos donde sus supuestos portadores no son más que figurantes de la performance o, en el mejor de los casos, clientes de un sistema redistributivo-clientelar a gran escala’ (p. 88). At this moment, these issues are causing intense debates in Andean socie-

ty. Much research is currently taking place and the judge is still out. In any case, Bretón's article points to the need of continuous critical political analysis concerning the complex subject of environmental governance in present-day Latin America (see also 90, April 2011).

*To conclude*

Of course, this overview has not done justice to the variety and richness of the articles published in *ERLACS*. The steady stream of historical articles, which are a specific feature of its multi-disciplinary approach, has not been mentioned. The same can be said about a number of articles on migration, and the increasing efforts of governments to control them. Finally, the articles about the Caribbean have remained out of sight. They have been an important element of *ERLACS*, but unfortunately for reasons of space and coherence, they have remained outside of this overview.

At the same time, some significant and to a certain extent surprising gaps in certain topics can be noted. For instance, there have been relatively few contributions on urban geography and anthropology, such as the persistent violence in Central America. That there exists a real interest in this topic may be concluded from the fact that Salvador Maldonado Aranda's recent analysis on drug cartels in Michoacán (94, April 2013) is already among the most downloaded of *ERLACS* articles. Another clear absence is formed by the broad range of themes that we can capture under the term 'cultural studies'. *ERLACS* has hardly attracted articles on cultural change, popular culture, (new) social media, cultural associations, sports or (popular) religion. An area studies journal like *ERLACS* cannot cover everything, but these absences are noticeable. It will be interesting to see whether some of these themes will be addressed in future editions of the journal.

Let me finish with one last example of the often surprising topics presented in the journal, and which also highlights the importance of gender as an analytical category that has been a recurrent theme in *ERLACS*. It is an example of the little 'treasures' that have made *ERLACS* such an interesting journal in presenting significant stories which are often ignored by the more theoretical and general academic articles. In issue 97 (Oct. 2014) an article was published by Manuela Camus in which she analysed the political action of widows of bus drivers in Guatemala city. Bus drivers (*pilotos*) have one of the most dangerous professions in Guatemala. Between 2009 and 2012 more than 600 were killed. Camus catches this phenomenon under the concept of 'social cannibalism', which resulted in a variety of social responses. In 2009 'las viudas de los pilotos' had already organized themselves in an association that fought for financial support by the bus company AVITRANS. Their activities have brought great risks to the members of the association and revealed the deep gendered and racial exclusion within Guatemalan society. In addition, they took place in a society which is deeply scarred by neoliberal reforms and political clien-

telism. However, against all odds, these women have kept on fighting for compensation and social justice, and often in unlikely alliances, such as their links with ‘el general’ Otto Pérez who himself had been involved in the executions of bus drivers. Manuela Camus concludes: ‘Por ser mujeres, las viudas de AVITRANS son abusadas como cuerpos, y lo son también como trabajadoras, como mestizas-shumas y pobres, como inferiores siempre, y a pesar de todo mantienen la responsabilidad y la fuerza para recrear la vida, hacer posible la convivencia y generar la posibilidad de futuro’ (p. 21). Apart from this shocking but hopeful conclusion, the article demonstrates how a relatively isolated phenomenon, largely ignored by social scientists and politicians, can bring out important and relevant trends and interpretations which have a bearing on the field of Latin American studies in general.

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**Michiel Baud** <J.M.Baud@cedla.nl> is Director of CEDLA, and was Managing Editor of *ERLACS* from 1997 to 2014.

**Acknowledgements:** I wish to thank Barbara Hogenboom and Cris Kay for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

### **Note**

1. The articles are referred to by the issue number and date of the journal. Interested readers can easily access the articles mentioned in the text in the index which can be found on the CEDLA website – [http://www.cedla.uva.nl/50\\_publications/erlacs\\_index.html](http://www.cedla.uva.nl/50_publications/erlacs_index.html). See also [www.erlacs.org](http://www.erlacs.org).