Revisioning Latin American and Caribbean Studies: A Geopolitics of Knowledge Approach

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Introduction: The Transformation of Area Studies

In recent years, there have been a number of concerted efforts at revisiting the nature of what was called "Latin American Studies" in a relatively unproblematic manner. This has happened particularly in the United States, but also in some Latin American institutional locales (e.g., Cerutti Guldberg 2004). Well known are the 1990s project, funded by the Ford Foundation and involving a number of universities, on "Rethinking Area Studies" and LASA's *Strategic Plan 2003-2006*, undertaken in 2001-2002. It is also well known that over the past ten to fifteen years a number of institutes and centers have changed their names—and, to a greater or lesser extent, their orientations—from a strict "LAS" to a hyphenated ensemble of possibilities (including Caribbean and/or Latina/o studies), or to new organizing principles (Hemispheric or Global Studies, Centers for the Study of the Americas, reconceived International Studies, etc.). While these new structuring ideas—combining cultural/historical, geopolitical, and scholarly concerns—have not yet resulted in any widely accepted formulation, it signals the need to revise the long-standing paradigms that have guided "LAS."

These changes have been aired actively in the *LASA Forum*. From the "President's Report" on the Strategic Planning exercise in the Winter, 2003 issue up to the first issue of the elegantly re-designed and interestingly re-imagined *Forum* (Winter 2006), a sequence of articles has been published addressing the intersection and inter-relations of what can be seen as three distinct intellectual-political projects: *Estudios Latino Americanos* in Latin America; Latin American and Caribbean Studies in the United States; and Latina/o Studies, also in the United States (but potentially in Latin America as well). These fields can be seen as discursive formations located within distinct genealogies of thought. The notion of genealogies of thought connects geopolitical and epistemological factors into a "geopolitics of knowledge" framework; this geopolitics of knowledge analysis, in turn, is giving origin to novel intellectual-political projects, such as the "Shifting the Geography of Reason" project by Caribbean philosophers and thinkers (Lewis Gordon, Paget Henry, Anthony Bogues and Sylvia Winters), or the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality project, associated with a network of researchers and places in the Andean countries and the United States.

In the United States, the reasons for the revisiting of a well-established scholarly endeavor have been multiple; they are a reflection of a complex set of relations among: a) unprecedented geopolitical situations "in the real world" (globalization, broadly speaking, including those practices enabled by information and communication technologies); b) the emergence of paradigmatic trends in the social science and the humanities that were absent from the formative period of LAS (e.g. post-structuralism, post-colonial theory, new approaches to ethnic, sexuality, and gender studies, etc., and non-academic knowledge producers); and c) the concomitant questioning of interdisciplinary fields based on longstanding and allegedly well-demarcated "social sciences" and "humanities" fields, such as those with an area studies focus. The result of this questioning has been more substantial interdisciplinary approaches—such as Cultural Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and some varieties of environmental studies such as political ecology—and calls for transdisciplinarity and even "un-disciplinarity" in some quarters.

Some Social and Scholarly Factors in the Transformation of Area Studies Fields

There are a number of pressures driving the transformation of area studies in the United States, on both the social and the scholarly sides. The main ones include:

On the social side:

1. The breakdown, after 1989, of the post-World War II global order, particularly the end of the Cold War cultural-political-economic regime that had ushered in the notion of the Three Worlds, the ideology of developmentalism, and a certain style of U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere.

2. The steady rise, particularly since 1979 (Thatcher, Reagan, various Latin American regimes) of neo-liberal models, initially applied to the economy but progressively deployed in many aspects of social and cultural life, with the aim of creating a self-defined New World Order (Washington Consensus).

For many observers, these two changes have resulted in a new kind of "globality," that is, an ensemble of economic, military, cultural and political arrangements which differs in character and modes of operation from those of the Cold War II period.

3. The appearance of unprecedented sets of social actors linked to this project, either as enforcers (e.g., hosts of consultants, experts, mercenaries), mediators (NGOs, human rights organizations, development institutions), or transformative/resisting actors (social movements, from anti-globalization movements to local movements for the defense of work, environment, culture, water, natural resources, intellectual property, and so forth). While many of these actors tend to be place-based, they often operate transnationally.

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Some of the main results of these processes have been: a) *a questioning of the paradigm of area studies* under which "LAS" was constituted, given that "areas" are radically re-signified under conditions of globality; b*) the need to account for the dynamics of the most recent processes*, including conceptualizing the actors and concerns that most directly address globality. In this regard, there is a growing realization that established social science theories and methods are insufficient to the task. To the "classical" social, cultural and political actors (State, parties, formal organizations, established authors and artists, armies or well-defined armed groups, "the economy," etc.) one now has to add not only the new actors (a variety of cultural producers in all fields of arts and humanities, new kinds of movements, identities, political actors, knowledge producers, experts, informal and alternative economies, etc.) but the question of how the classical actors themselves have changed.

On the scholarly side, the last two decades have seen the following changes:

1. A more complicated landscape of paradigmatic possibilities and orientations. In the heyday of LAS (1960s and 1970s), the paradigms of choice were relatively clear: Liberalism and Marxism (e.g., in the form of modernization and dependency theories). In the 1970s and 1980s, there emerged hyphenations of these two paradigms with other categories arising from newly significant experiences (e.g., Marxist or liberal feminisms and environmentalisms). In the 1980s and 1990s, a third paradigm—post-structuralism, as a language and meaning-based social theory—made its entry, affecting most theories and fields. Today, combinations of these three paradigms are practiced by many scholars, rather than a strict application of just one framework, with one paradigm usually predominating in a given discipline or in the work of particular authors.

2. Second, the process of globality poses novel questions. The customary categories of the social sciences are often no longer sufficient to give visibility to a host of rising questions concerning power, identity, creativity, connectivity (networking, assemblages, complexity), and unprecedented economic and political practices, forms of mobilization and self-organization, and so forth.

3. There are also interdisciplinary fields that have appeared or become more salient from the 1970s to the present, including ethnic studies, women's studies, Latina/o Studies, queer studies, Afro-Latin American or Africana Studies, on the one hand; and Cultural Studies, Science and Technology Studies, Environmental Studies, Global Studies, etc., on the other. Although the first set of these is suffering increasing pressures to downsize and normalize in some places (re-peripheralization), it is in some of these quasi-peripheral programs that some of the most innovative thinking is taking place.

4. The university, particularly public universities, has been facing tremendous financial pressures in both the United States and Latin America in connection with the neo-liberalization of social and institutional life. This has consequences for intellectual and scholarly agendas (as in "the corporatization of the university" arguments). Area Studies Centers, perhaps more than conventionally defined units, are being pushed to fund their activities through donations and external grants. This has to be taken into account for new designs and orientations.

The consequence of this set of factors is that *the apparatuses of scholarly knowledge that used to take "Latin America" as an object of study have changed*. If the first set of factors have resulted in the transformation of "Latin America" (through diverse social processes of constitution in the age of globality), the second set has transformed the knowledge practices through which scholars may understand it.

These two sets of factors are experienced differently in Latin America and the U.S. academy. While there are many overlaps between traditions of academic/intellectual work in both continents (broadly speaking, the same set of modern social sciences and humanities disciplines), there have also been noticeable differences. U.S.-based Latin Americanist academic fields have treated Latin America largely as an object of study, even if many of its practitioners have done so from a political perspective and have built a practice of solidarity along the way. In contrast, critical perspectives arising from Latin America have been as a whole more prone to foreground radical political questions and positions; most often than not, the "scholar" is politically positioned in her/his society. This means that Latin America-based Latin Americanists have tended to operate on the basis of a direct, albeit complicated, relation between academic/intellectual work and political practice (across the political spectrum, although more among the Left).

The tradition of *Pensamiento Crítico* is a clear example. Based on the notion of liberation and anchored in intellectual-political movements such as philosophy, theology, and sociology of liberation (side by side with the liberal focus on development and modernization), this tradition can be seen as a paradigmatic case of Latin American critical intellectual work, different and complementary to the U.S.-based tradition of "Latin American

Studies." The question of "Latin American identity" and the issue of "Latin American" modes of knowledge and intellectual practice (*una ciencia social propia*, *una filosofía de nuestra América*, *la praxis*, etc.) have been an integral part of the intellectual landscape of the continent since at least the second half of the 19th century. Indeed, they have been part and parcel of movements for cultural and political independence since the struggles for formal independence.

Some Challenges

The question then becomes: how will "LAS" (or LACS, including the Caribbean)—as a scholarly endeavor of social and political relevance—transform itself given the above set of conditions? The following are a few of the challenges that could influence this transformation. Generally speaking, there is the need to think about a transition from a strictly geographical geopolitical approach to a focus consistent with globality (at the social level), and the geopolitics of knowledge (at the epistemological level). This in turn finds reflection in a more complicated set of institutional, political, and epistemological demands:

1. A complication of *the overall object of study*. While the geographical Latin America continues to be a privileged object of study, it is crucial to recognize that Latin America is today a global reality—Latin America is literally the world over. The ever growing presence of peoples of Latin American descent in the United States is the most important case in point. The merger of LACS with Latina/o Studies on some campuses is a response to this reality; so are attempts at inventing new geographies of thought in terms of Studies of the Americas, World Latin American Studies, Hemispheric Studies, etc. It remains to be seen which of these provisional solutions will become fully workable. There are no systematic studies yet of how these approaches have fared on scholarly, institutional, and political grounds, or the advantages and disadvantages, visibilities and invisibilities introduced by each proposal.

2. A complication of the *boundaries of various objects of study*. It has become commonplace to assert that the global is present in the local in its very constitution. The "communities" of the early days of LAS (e.g., in anthropology, history, sociology, literature) no longer exist, nor the "nation-states" of political scientists, the "national economies" of the economists, or the "national cultures" of a variety of fields. While the nation-state remains important, transnational flows make it a partial reality; the same applies to culture and the economy. The idiom of networks is the more common concept used to broach this contemporary complexity.

3. A complication of *regional sub-groupings*. Regional sub-groupings were largely the result of colonial processes. Different colonial histories created "Hispanic America," "Brazil," and "The Caribbean." Today, these divisions are calling for revision. Again, the explicit integration of Latin American and Caribbean Studies is a reflection of this reality. Today, mechanisms of global, regional, and sub-regional economic, cultural, political and ecological integration and diversification make it impossible to take any grouping for granted. Any grouping becomes a matter of strategic choice on socio-economic and political grounds; groupings reflect the realities and possibilities of power at many scales.

4. A complication of *local, regional, and national identities*. Many still remember the days when the social sciences and some of the humanities focused on a) mestizos, peasants, and Indians; b) elites/oligarchies and popular classes etc. as their main categories. Today, a host of new categories have emerged. How should they be incorporated into a more inclusive "LACS"? One example: the recent salience of Afro-Latin American peoples and identities is a reflection of the deepening of certain conditions with the full emergence of globality, including the increasing dispossession and devaluation of culture they are experiencing in many countries; "black identities"—named under multiple and often contested categories, including afro-descendants—have become a rallying point for black groups throughout the continent. So with other forms of alterity. There is not a single discipline that can account fully for these processes that include political changes for entire societies (e.g., the reform of national constitutions) and that confound traditional scales given the eminently place-based yet transnational character of multiple Afro-Latin American struggles.

5. A complication of *paradigms, frameworks and methodologies*. It is doubtless the case that formal disciplines continue to prevail in the academic/intellectual division of labor and as organizing principle of scholarly work in LACS. However, the notion of "disciplines" continues to be contested; whereas the disciplines still define their frameworks and methodologies largely in established ways, there is greater room in many quarters to engage in unprecedented modes of analysis. The qualifier of "critical" next to "studies of" is an indication of this reality (e.g., critical race theory, legal studies, development studies, etc., but also in inter-disciplines such as cultural studies, women's studies/feminist theory, science and technology studies

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(STS), sexuality studies, environmental studies, intellectual history, literary theory, hypermedia studies, etc.)

6. A complication of *sites of knowledge production and kinds of knowledge producers*. When LAS emerged in the 1940s, the site of knowledge production par excellence was the university and the chief, if not sole, knowledge producer was the well-trained scholar. Not any longer. Today, the State, NGOs, religious groups, social movements, and so forth are important sites of knowledge production. Non-academic critical or oppositional knowledges tend to flourish in spaces such as the World Social Forum process, and among many social movements. The idea that social movements need to be taken seriously as knowledge producers in their own right is becoming one of most dynamic insights in social movements research in anthropology, geography, and other fields. Notions of cognitive justice, epistemic decolonization, epistemologies of the South, and so forth seek to give shape to this emergent reality. LASA's recently launched initiative, *Otros Saberes* addresses this problem area.

How each institution responds to these challenges, which calls and trends it responds to, and how it pursues its transformative agendas within existing institutional constraints will in turn depend on processes involving faculty, graduate students, fund raisers, and administrators. This micro-political work is also of utmost importance, and perhaps as decisive as the larger trends outlined here. ■

Some Personal Trivia about the Early Days

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I am not sure how many of us had felt the need for some kind of Latin American studies organization, but in my memory it was unquestionably Kalman Silvert who took the first and critical steps to put the idea into action. I had known Kal since he spent 1952-53 in Guatemala doing the research for his study of government in Guatemala. I arrived in Guatemala in late 1950, sent by the Smithsonian Institution's Institute of Social Anthropology, and at the request of Antonio Goubaud Carrera, Guatemala's then ambassador in Washington and principled anthropologist. Guatemala had been visited by a number of foreign anthropologists over the preceding decades, but Kal was the first North American political scientist to do an in depth field study. When he returned to play a leading role in establishing the Seminario de Integración Social we became re-acquainted and our friendship developed. In looking back, it seems to me that I always dealt with Kal when he was taking the lead in developing something. I was to learn much from Kal about leading and developing programs.

In the closing years of the 1950s our paths again crossed. Kal had been exploring Latin America as a member of the American University Field Staff. The Field Staff was an organization that employed academics full time to go into Latin America and send periodic reports on things of interest to academicians in the United States. These reports would be printed and distributed to the members' universities and the staff members would, after spending part of the year in the field, circulate to the member universities, giving lectures on what was going on in the area. In the late 1950s Kal came to lecture at Michigan State where I was teaching.

I first knew Kal when he was at Tulane University, but he then moved to Dartmouth—perhaps after he left the Field Staff or perhaps sharing time between the two. His final move was to a position at New York University where he worked in conjunction with a permanent, but part-time, relationship as Latin American Advisor to the Ford Foundation. It was in his position at Ford that Kal was able to fuel the machinery that led to the invention of LASA. I unfortunately do not recall much about the composition of the group that he drew together to accomplish this, but I do remember that one of the early meetings was at Kal's home at Dartmouth College.

I frankly remember few details of the discussions at that meeting or most of the others. One thing that remains in my memory was that Kal had found someone to design a logo for the organization and he showed it to us for our approval. It would never have occurred to me that it was important to have a logo...indeed, I would never have missed it had it not been designed. But we got one then and we still have it. I recall thinking that a logo should reflect something about the things that it represented. It did not seem to me that this LASA logo was in any way suggestive of Latin America, or academics, or scholarship, or knowledge. But I was assured that these issues were not really important; and I guess they were right because it has served well without any of these apparently iconic virtues. I also remember particularly one of our number had been chosen by someone because he was very young. It was argued that we needed a young person as well as us older people to make the thing work. This sounded like somebody's logic, but not an