

Centering the Periphery, Non-Latin Latin Americanisms: The Case of Austria

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I followed with interest the debate on “Centering the Periphery: Non-Latin Latin Americanisms” (*LASA Forum*, winter 2007). Unlike my colleagues from the Netherlands or Germany, I was neither surprised nor amused by the idea of working and writing in the periphery because Austria was beyond periphery. There simply was no tradition of research on Latin America (although we had the Habsburg “Casa de Austria”-connection and the naturalista-experience of Bohemian-born Tadeo Haenke, our “Austrian Humboldt”).

The founding of the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Vienna in the 1920s (a bulwark of catholic science) opened briefly a window of opportunity for research on American civilizations, however without followers after WW II. (An interesting case is Friedrich Katz, today emeritus at the University of Chicago, who studied there in the 1950s but without chance to find a job).

When Latin America, as part of the Third World, aroused interest among a young generation in the 1960s, there was no other way than to do it amateurishly, learning by doing. This was the typical experience of half a dozen pathfinders who went to Latin America, without a safety net, to find *el buen revolucionario* (I myself, Leo Gabriel, Wolfgang Dietrich, Elke Mader, Georg Grünberg). Initiated, in my case, to Latin America by Cornell University (teaching literacy to adults in the “Cornell-in-Honduras-program”), I undertook a kind of intellectual vagabondage through Latin America beginning in 1966, doing all kind of jobs, travelling a lot, working with a development cooperation, establishing myself as a correspondent and risk analyst, but always keeping contact with academia, first via the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh (my thanks to Carmelo Mesa-Lago), then via the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá (mis agradecimientos to Fernando

Cepeda). Thus, I became very early an Austrian (the first?) member of LASA.

The decade of the 1980s was for all of us adventurers the moment for homecoming. In the meantime, in Vienna a privately organized Lateinamerika-Institut had opened its doors. We returnees did our best to introduce and expand the field of serious research but encountered all varieties of problems, not the least the distrust of the university establishment with its pretension on research monopoly. However, as the first “Director Académico” of the Lateinamerika-Institut, modest progress was made in the late 1980s, including an experiment with an interdisciplinary course on Latin America, and integrating ourselves to CEISAL (Consejo Europeo de Investigaciones Sociales de América Latina) that anchored its legal residence at our Lateinamerika-Institut (something that, before 1989, was very important to the Eastern European colleagues because travel to Vienna was allowed).

The turning point came in 1990 when the Republic of Austria created for the University of Vienna a Chair for Latin American History (in German horribly “Lehrstuhl fuer aussereuropaeische Geschichte”—for Non-European History). I won via *concurso público*. All of a sudden, distrust ended, and most of the scheming stopped as well. Synergies between the Chair and the Lateinamerika-Institut set creativity free. For the first time, cohesive research debate on Latin America within the university realm became possible.

Progress was made. In one of our recent evaluations, we were able to show the number of Austrians doing serious work on Latin America (265). This is proof that Latin American Studies is no longer an exotic subject in Austria. The “critical mass” has been achieved. A quality explosion occurred lately. I tried to document it by editing a volume (“Lateinamerikanistik: der oesterreichische

Weg”. Muenster-Vienna: Editorial LIT 2005), having 30 mostly younger authors describe how they got into regional studies and contributed in their discipline to the international debate. I think, *modestia aparte*, that we have come a long way within a very short time and can show professional standards.

We certainly should publish more in English, because a mouse click in HAPI reveals absences. But even publishing in German, the question is: How “useful” are we Austrian Latin Americanists? In a conventional sense, not at all—fortunately. We do not have to defend an empire, play international power politics, generate financial profits, worry about trade balances. But we can provide our students, through alternative lectures, teaching and writings, with perspectives that debunk misleading rhetoric, take apart false arguments, point out the arrogance of metropolitan positions. Our students, thus, are given the opportunity to show solidarity with the “other Latin America.”

And we are proud for advancing on a journey towards a partnership of scientific discourse in which our Latin American *colegas* are no longer merely “shepas” but work together with us, hand in hand, to produce and exchange knowledge for our mutual emancipation process.

By the end of 2007, I myself will enter the state of emeritus, saying adiós to the University of Vienna with a cultural studies-volume on La Habana (“Havanna”. Editorial LIT 2007). In 2008, I shall continue anew as guest professor in Colombia. Our position in Vienna, renamed “Chair for the History of the Americas,” is in good, strong, and young hands, showing consolidation and advancement and coordinating our strongest asset, the Course for Advanced Latin American Studies, which, a European first, will convey the title “Master of Arts in Latin American Studies.” ■