

Challenging Northern Hegemony: Toward South-South Dialogue in Latin American Studies A Perspective from India

by VASUNDHARA JAIRATH | University of Delhi | vasundhara.jairath@gmail.com

Références

Hernández Castillo, Rosalva Aída, coord.

2010 *Bajo la sombra del Guamuchil: Historias de vida de mujeres indígenas y campesinas en prisión*. México: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social; Grupo Internacional de Trabajo Sobre Asuntos Indígenas.

Leyva Solano, Xochitl, Aracely Burguete, et Shannon Speed

2008 *Gobernar (en) la diversidad: Experiencias indígenas desde América Latina: Hacia la investigación de co-labor*. México: CIESAS; FLACSO Ecuador; FLACSO Guatemala.

Rojas-Viger, Celia

2006 «Femmes professionnelles latino-américaines à Montréal: Conditions d'insertion dans le milieu universitaire et au marché du travail» *Les Cahiers du Gres* 6 (1): 25–43. ■

The United States of America, which has stood in a historical relationship of dominance vis-à-vis Latin America, has also remained the center of academic pursuits on the region. There is, of course, its geographical proximity to account for this concentration. However, the concentration in the United States of advanced centers of learning on the region may also be viewed within this broader unequal relationship. In this article I do not concern myself with a detailed history of this dominance. Instead, I draw on my own location in India to present a starkly contrasting picture. I do this to point to the gap between two regions of the global South, Latin America and South Asia, and the several challenges for scholars in South Asia working on Latin America. The disproportional distribution of resources between the United States and a region like South Asia is in many ways merely reflective of the global political economy. In this article I look at the repercussions of this global political economy for the field of Latin American studies, an aspect that is often ignored in the way that it has been shaped. It is also worth stating at the start that a call for greater dialogue and collaborative work between Latin America and South Asia is not limited to these two regions but may be seen as a call for such work more broadly between all countries and regions of the global South.

In contrast to the umpteen centers of Latin American studies in the United States, India has only three. Two of these are based in New Delhi—at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jamia Millia Islamia—and one in the former Portuguese colony Goa, at Goa University. The Delhi University, where I am based, provides history students with the option of taking an undergraduate-level course on Latin American history in addition to American history and Russian history. However, out

of the 68 colleges affiliated with Delhi University, only one actually offers this option. In contrast to the number of centers that teach courses and pursue research on Latin American society and politics, there exist a far greater number of centers for Latin American languages and literature. The state of the centers for Latin American studies is further reflected in the number of faculty they house. The Goa University Centre for Latin American Studies has two faculty members, while the center at JNU has all of one faculty member who works on Latin America in a center for Canadian, U.S., and Latin American studies. The dearth in India of teaching and research institutions on Latin America is, therefore, stark to say the least. It is hardly surprising then to note the obstacles for a doctoral candidate like me who chooses to undertake a comparative project between India and Mexico as part of my research.

Three significant issues may be highlighted in this regard. The first has already been noted above—the absence of thriving centers of learning on Latin America for students with such academic interests. Without a community of scholars that work on the region, students are disadvantaged from the start. Those who do pursue such an interest are often left to fend for themselves, starting from the task of gaining access to books and other literature. My own experience in pursuing my master's in Mumbai, when I chose to work on race in Brazil, led me to gather books all the way from Bangalore in the south to New Delhi in the north. The lack of attention to this field has meant few universities and institutions house a substantial collection of academic literature on Latin America. The matter of books and resources brings us to the next big obstacle, that of language. While literature in English on the region is itself limited, the

academic community is ever more removed from ongoing debates in Latin American social sciences as a result of this language barrier. Even where Spanish and Hispanic literature is pursued in several centers across the country, as mentioned above, this mastery over language and literature has rarely translated into the field of social sciences. These issues are then compounded significantly by a third and key element, a question of resources. In many ways the lack of resources of educational and research institutions is not specific to the field of Latin American studies in India and constitutes a more generic resource crunch, particularly in the broader field of social sciences. With increasingly little political will of the Indian government to encourage academic dialogue between the two regions, most scholarships for academic exchange between India and countries of Latin America are limited to the field of science and technological innovation, areas of focus chosen by the State. Research travel grants are scant and limited to short-term projects. Academic dialogue, particularly with other countries of the global South, besides a few exceptions like Brazil, are low on the agenda of the State, which is more focused on its race to achieve superpower status.

If one were to explore the range of funding institutions across the United States, Canada, and Europe, where most funding sources are concentrated, one might chance upon several fellowships and grants for area studies, particularly for regions of the global South including Latin America. However, with the exception of Sephis, which has been in financial crisis for a few years now, there are few funding institutions that emphasize South-South academic collaboration. Instead, while such fellowships may especially target scholars of Latin America, scholars from

other parts of the world are merely ignored, particularly those from the global South, which is pressed for resources. As a result, we have a community of scholars of Latin America that either belong to the region or are predominantly based in the United States and to some extent in Europe.

Moving away from the logistical barriers of scholars from the global South outside of Latin America working on this region, it is also worth addressing the important academic project at hand in building greater dialogue between countries and regions of the South. The politics of funding and its seminal role in the process of knowledge production has been amply discussed and written about. A continued hold of the global North, in this case disproportionately in the hands of the United States, over financial resources in the field of research on Latin America implies a continued hold over what is studied. This is in no way to insinuate the working of a grand conspiracy that controls every research project, meant merely to serve the corridors of power. It is worth mentioning that a large body of critical and important work has emerged from the United States that has contributed significantly to our understanding of the region and its nuances. However, this has come, if I may state it provocatively, at the cost of South-South collaborative work. The critical importance of such an academic project that creatively brings together the sometimes diverse and at other times strikingly similar conditions of the South in dialogue with each other lies precisely in the political project of decentering the North from its position of dominance in the sphere of critical thinking and knowledge production. While such a process has taken place among the countries of Latin America, something that can also be located within broader processes of growing Latin American

solidarity and collaboration such as the establishment of Mercosur, no conscious effort has been made to establish a broader process of dialogue and exchange in the realm of academic research between Latin America and different regions of the global South.

In the political project of decolonization of knowledge and the social sciences, such relations play a particularly important role. By moving centers of knowledge production out of the dominant North and into the South, we arrive at a process of knowledge production more grounded in the conditions of the South. If the historically constructed division between white Western researchers studying the nonwhite incommensurate other is to be challenged not only at the level of individual endeavor but as a structural and systemic challenge, it is through this conscious move toward greater academic collaboration and exchange among the countries of the global South. Given their long histories of colonization, even while exceedingly diverse, the South is placed in a particularly critical position in the project of the decolonization of knowledge. While this is in no way to point to merely moving the epicenter of Latin American Studies to the South as sufficient in the project of decolonization of knowledge, it is certainly a necessary step in that direction. Further, in the context of a highly globalized world where we are drawn together into a global structure of dominance, control, and exploitation, we have more than one reason to build worldwide solidarities and transnational political alliances in the realm of academics. For those committed to the pursuit of knowledge with an aim not only to understand the world but to change the structures of inequality that sustain it, an active move toward changing the conditions within which academics is pursued is the first imperative.

My own experience in my doctoral research project, which involves comparative work between India and Mexico, has led me to organize several of these thoughts. The struggle for funding to be able to successfully carry out this project has illuminated the disproportionate distribution of resources across the world in the field of social sciences and the consequent inequalities that result in the exclusion of large parts of the South in the field of Latin American studies. It is often assumed that Latin Americans study Latin America, Africans study Africa, and Asians study Asia. Financial and institutional resources are made available so as to reinforce such a practice in a way that South-South collaborative projects find little mention. Most reflective of this is the complete absence of the category of the global South as a region that is worthy of targeted funding. While this does not ignore the inequalities within this South, it does point to identifying regions in the world that occupy similar positions in the global political economy and the need, despite their diversities and differential relations with each other, for greater dialogue, particularly within the field of more actively political research, as in research on social and political struggles.

My research area, which is concerned with indigenous politics in the context of anti-dispossession movements, falls within this arena. The process of data collection and ethnography in a discipline such as social anthropology is deeply marred by a historically unequal relationship between the researcher and the subjects of research; this is valid more generally for all academic pursuits. While postcolonial countries have most often experienced this process in their colonial pasts through the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, they are now faced with the novel challenge of addressing some of these power

asymmetries on their home ground, or, as in my case, in other Third World contexts. As part of the global South we are forced to reckon with the way we ourselves are imbricated in power structures, both global and local, and it is in engaging with this task that we may locate a special significance in the need for greater dialogue and exchange within these regions.

To the limited extent to which I was able to overcome some of the barriers to comparative work between Mexico and India, this has proved to be most educational and illuminating in more ways than one. However, what was merely a glimpse may translate into an important stepping-stone to envision broader processes for collaborative projects across the two regions of Latin America and South Asia. There is much to learn between the two regions, a space of dialogue that has remained unexplored for the most part. While few processes like greater dialogue between Indian and Brazilian social scientists have taken place in the past, such processes have been driven more by international policy and bilateral state relations between the two countries rather than by academic concerns. Instead, a consciously articulated move toward the promotion of South-South dialogue and collaborative research projects serves more pointedly to focus on the issue of decolonization of knowledge and challenging power structures that shape academic institutions and practices across the globe. ■