

Violence, Participation and Knowledge Production: Learning from Latin America

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First of all, a big thank you! I have been coming to LASA for decades, and it has still not sunk in that I could receive this award and an award that some of the people I have so admired and learnt from received, such as Orlando Fals Borda and Ricardo Falla and others. And I am delighted to share it this year with Anthony Bebbington.

The award offers me a chance to reflect on what has driven me in my intellectual journey, and above all, on what I have learnt from Latin America. That's my central point. Latin America has been a constant source of new approaches to knowledge and its production for me, and also what it means to combine scholarship and activism, which is the interconnection recognised by the Diskin Award. This leads me to the overarching framework for my comments. Scholarship and activism are not two counterposed activities. They are deeply complementary. But this must be justified. What is activism? And how can we evidence that rigor and depth is not reduced by a commitment to action for change?

Activism is, of course, about action for change. But I have learnt from work in Latin America that there is a difference between activism as action and agency as conscious action for change. Such agency does not, of course, necessarily include the progressive agendas that I am committed to. This is a big issue at this year's LASA conference. Various panels have problematized the Left-Right spectrum and what is considered 'progressive' in the politics of Latin America today. Terry Karl, in her lecture, suggested that what is Left may be really about the underlying ethics that shape progressive politics. I strongly endorse the notion

of the Left as an ethics of politics. This includes social justice but also responses to violence, security, and peace. *Peace* is not an empty signifier but a process that enables participation which consciously acts on the conditions that generate violence. In iterative form, this then enhances capacity to reduce all expressions of violence. The consciousness behind agency for change that is progressive centers on the participatory, horizontal, socially inclusive, egalitarian, and violence-reducing potential of that agency. This is what the poorest in Latin America have taught me. And this comes also from Latin American scholar-activists, such as Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Alfredo Molano, and Oscar Jara, and from experiences I have had the privilege to share with communities and social organizations in Latin America and northern England.

The research that has enabled me to reach this understanding is interactive rather than extractive. I also do the extractive kind and do not claim that all research must be interactive. However, the nonextractive kind is a form of research with which I feel intellectually and ethically comfortable and coherent. As a group of young men I was with in a workshop in San Salvador some ten years ago expressed it, they had abandoned Che Guevara's "hasta la victoria siempre" in favor of "hasta la coherencia siempre."

What I have lived and learnt in Latin America is that standing outside academics' "object" of study can produce important knowledge but not knowledge for change. The distinction between "subject" and "object" of study creates a way of understanding knowledge and approaching

knowledge production that denies the contribution of the so-called object. But working with “subjects” of knowledge produces aspects of knowledge that are unobtainable in any other way. It also enables the ‘subjects’ of scholarship to articulate their own processes of change.

I now want to focus on the following themes. First, why did my experiences in Latin America lead me to two fields of research in particular: violence and participation? Second, what are the methodological and epistemological challenges of scholarship and activism as agency? In conclusion, why it matters today to research *with* as well as *on* citizens.

Violence and Participation

Across my decades working in Latin America, in the past two decades the two themes of violence and participation emerged as deeply interconnected. Don’t worry, this is not a history of my life, but as this is a special moment for me, I want to recall the formative impact of doing my doctoral research in Uruguay in 1975 under military dictatorship, in particular my encounter with Gerardo Gatti, a Uruguayan printer and trade unionist like my father, clandestine in Argentina before the military coup in that country, and who a year later was kidnapped and disappeared along with his pregnant daughter, Adriana. In Colombia, returning from fieldwork that same year, I met the human rights lawyer Eduardo Umaña, subsequently assassinated. Later, in El Salvador in 1984, I spent months with peasants in Chalatenango, doing an oral history of their movement and efforts to build Local Popular Power, under bombardment. It is in these experiences, among many others, that I first learnt about agency—that form of social action for goals, which educated and non educated activists come to through their self-understanding and critical analysis of reality. This was greatly influenced, in particular in the 1980s, by popular education methods, and the connecting work of the radical wing of Catholicism with poor communities that recognized the value of the agency of the poor. I value my academic knowledge, but I learnt to value the knowledge of experience of those

who have never formally studied. And the dialogues between these knowledges generate mutual understanding of great importance to the possibilities of progressive change. And I learnt that in the midst of state-directed political violence, people still act, such as the families of the disappeared from Uruguay in the 1970s to Mexico today.

I have learnt also how violence reproduces through all the spaces of socialization and over time and can become chronic. Although my most recent book is not on Latin America, but on the phenomenon of violence, it is deeply influenced by what I have learnt about violence and its diffusion in Latin America. It is also influenced by the importance of recognising that all violences matter and why understanding violence as a phenomenon with its own distinctions is the only way to visibilize all the expressions of violence. Only an interdisciplinary lens enables us to understand how aggression, natural to our biological bodies, becomes violence through our social bodies. I came to a thinking tool (not a definition) of violence: “Acts and actions of somatic harm, which bear and generate meanings, that potentially constitute, normalize and destroy social orders” (Pearce 2020).

Research on violence led me to the field of security. In recent years, with colleagues and collaborators from the region, we have tried to generate debates about violence and the kinds of security policies that could reduce it. With colleagues from the Observatory of Human Security in Medellín and with Alexandra Abello Colak and Mexican colleagues, we have co-constructed agendas of human security with rural and urban communities in Colombia, Central America, and Mexico.

One of the most difficult aspects of Latin America is that the Left has tended not to have its own approach to security but to fall back on hard-line security policies loved by the Right. The FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) government went in that direction in El Salvador. Today, from the right, President Bukele’s popularity is due to his recognition of the desperation of citizens living with everyday

violences. His “quick fix” of building the biggest prison in the world has generated great political pay-offs. This involves what others would see as the daily indirect (and sometimes direct) torture in overcrowded prisons of young men, often picked up for having a tattoo. President Petro of Colombia is among the first to rethink security from the Left and to embrace human security. How to rethink policing, as protection of life but also the right to participate in public life remains an ongoing issue for Latin America. I came to recognize this better when I started to apply my learning from Latin America to the city of Bradford where I worked for some 25 years in the Department of Peace Studies.

Following the 2001 riot in Bradford, England, I came to understand the importance of policing, and I took the Bradford police to Medellín in four exchanges. I put my head into those of the people charged with “security” policy on the ground in communities blighted by many violences. Understanding policing that protects and enables participation is critical, and I continue to work with the police in Nezahuacóyotl in Mexico, where they are building a new kind of policing, sensitive to gender and to the multiple needs of poor communities. In Bradford, a deeply divided city, we worked with rioters from marginalized Asian communities whose young people felt they belonged to nowhere and were targeted by the Far Right. We came to set up a Community University based on popular education principles from Latin America and South-North learning. Now in Salford, in the north of England also, we are trying to build a Learning City. Salford is where Engels believed that the working class would transform the world. The idea is to think about how agency can be rediscovered after two centuries of a very particular English history of suppressing it.

New understandings of violence and security therefore bring us back to issues of agency and participation. Participation in varied spaces and levels of public life is an aspect of agency. It became important to understand which kind of participation is an aspect of agency, and researching which kind of participation generates agency as conscious action for change and

capacity to have an impact on public decision-making. With Margarita López Maya in Venezuela and scholars from Brazil and Colombia and three cities in England, we worked on the challenges of participation based on such agency and not just activism. In cities as diverse as Caracas, Medellín, Porto Alegre, Bradford, Salford and Manchester we sought to learn with communities what kind of participation works for them in making change possible.

Methodological and epistemological challenges of scholarship and activism

I have learnt from the complexities of Latin American social and political processes that, as with violence, only interdisciplinary conversations can help us fully understand participation. I trained as a political scientist and historian, but I use anthropological and participatory methodologies for research. These methodologies involve a sensibility to the experiential and other knowledges that living in complex daily realities of fear, exclusion, and insecurities of multiple kinds can generate. It has always been important to critically reflect on the knowledge that is produced and its limitations as well as strengths. Methodological debates are therefore as important as the disciplinary ones. Participatory methodologies require much self-reflection of the academic in order to keep the rigor required of good knowledge production. While they require a sensibility to the possibilities of agency for change, they require understanding of an alternative subjectivity, what I call ‘authoritarian citizenship’. This is where the rights of others are denied in the name of one’s own security. The methodologies themselves can contribute to questioning of such ideas, in my experience.

The past few years, I have been working on elites and violence with qualitative and quantitative methods. I asked myself, when do elites get touched by violence? I spent some days with a coffee grower twice kidnapped by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in southwestern Antioquia, Colombia. I aspired

to come out of epistemological silos and understand the experiential knowledges of a range of social actors.

in a planet threatened by climate change and concentrated and authoritarian power, as well as to the problems facing the region itself. //

Conclusion: Why it matters today to research *with* as much as *about* citizens

Researching with citizens in Latin America has given me knowledge and understanding of wider change possibilities. I have gained knowledge of the emotional aspects of human interaction and what leads young men, in particular, to violence, crime, and early death. This led me to question the way we think we come to know the world. The rational Enlightenment of Europe of the eighteenth century has not enabled us to address inequality, climate change, or violence. It assumed that “man” would be able to control and tame the planet. However, we have nearly destroyed it. That’s why in my book on *Politics without Violence? Towards a Post-Weberian Enlightenment*, I came to the conclusion that we need an emotional Enlightenment of the twenty-first century, of the same global dimensions or aspirations of that previous European-led Enlightenment. This one would not reject reason but would recognize the importance of our emotions to scrutinize our reason and our reason to scrutinize our emotions. It would recognize the value of human agency for change, of the kind I have lived over the decades in Latin America, and the multiple and differentiated experiences and knowledges of Latin Americans, women and men, the rural and urban poor, indigenous and Afro and many others.

My second conclusion is that education based on popular education principles and critical thought (*pensamiento crítico*) is essential for liberating agency and its potential for progressive change without violence, even among the most excluded and those without formal education. In my experience, such people have great knowledge to offer the challenges the world faces. Researching with citizens and social actors in Latin America reveals for me what a potential contribution the region can make to address the global challenges of violence and participation