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### ■ AQ FEATURE

# The Future of Latin American Studies

BY [Charles Hale](#)

## The prospects have never been better.

The field of Latin American studies has been a target for critics ever since it became a prominent feature of the U.S. academic landscape in the 1960s. Earlier critiques were quite severe, often permeated by the premise that studying Latin America from the North (and even the very concept of “Latin America” as an object of study) connoted the region’s racial and cultural inferiority. This was further aggravated by the inability to fully disentangle Latin American research from U.S. economic and geopolitical interests. Even the most apparently benign scholarship was considered to be a reinforcement of North–South hierarchies of knowledge and power.

Ironically, some of the critiques came from self-identified Latin Americanists who were determined to change the field from within. A different line of questions has come from the outside, citing theoretical or methodological deficiencies in relation to well-established humanities and social science disciplines.<sup>1</sup> While some critiques have been less constructive than others, this scrutiny has, in fact, inspired self-reflective creativity and innovation in Latin American studies. As a result, the field is not only stronger, but well-positioned to address the challenges of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

Two such challenges stand out. The first is the rise of global studies, both as an area of teaching and as a force of institutional reorganization (e.g., global studies institutes that displace traditional area studies centers). The global studies approach is a call for conceptual innovation, based on the view that scholars bound to a particular region are ill-prepared to grasp increasingly globalized processes of historical change, and that these processes are changing the way we study and learn, leaving area studies behind. The second, closely related challenge is the monumental shift from book to byte, which has called into question the structure and function of libraries, and transformed priorities for the acquisition of global scholarly resources.



A discussion of Latin American architecture at the University of Texas-Austin. Photo courtesy of

Flickr user UTSOA.



Budget constraints make both challenges especially potent. With declining resources for acquisition of conventionally published materials, there is a widespread assumption that digital access could be a substitute for *in situ* contextual study of materials. Yet given the high cost to research libraries of acquiring and subscribing to digital scholarly resources (especially online subscription database access), area studies collections risk getting deemed non-essential in the face of hard budgetary choices.<sup>3</sup> Financial considerations are equally relevant to the challenge posed by the rise of global studies. University administrators are likely to see establishing or expanding global studies courses or centers as a cost-efficient way to consolidate area disciplines: cover the world and internationalize the curriculum, for less.

## Principles of Innovation

How can Latin American studies build on the resiliency the field has demonstrated since the 1960s to meet these new challenges? A first step is understanding the four principles that, in my view, underlie the discipline's success and resiliency.

First, we always insist on deep contextual understanding—language, culture, history—as a requisite for delving into a particular topic of study. No matter how radical the change in the structure and objectives of U.S. academia, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where this principle would not remain a priority. It is hard not to feel mild distrust for original research on Latin America (or any other world area) by scholars who cannot speak the relevant language, who lack an experience-based sense of the people and place, and who are not conversant in the region's history. At the University of Texas at Austin (UT), this principle is reinforced by the fact that high numbers of students and faculty are Latino/a or Latin American. We make immersion—whether in the Rio Grande Valley or Rio de Janeiro—a hallmark of our pedagogy, and we take pride in the edge such experiences give our students.

Beyond academia, the argument grows stronger still: the job market needs students with global sensibilities, who are comfortable in diverse languages and cultures and capable of seeing the world from standpoints other than their own.

A second underlying principle is the indispensability of interdisciplinary study. Such a collaborative approach is rarely given priority in university organization and budgetary allocation processes, for various reasons, principal among them the inability to resolve a basic tension: how to take full advantage of the methodological tools and cumulative theoretical wisdom of a number of disciplines, while refusing disciplinary boundaries and creating a substantially new, but equally rigorous, field of study.

Latin American studies is best served by moving beyond this question altogether.

We can both embrace efforts to move into a truly post-disciplinary space, where methodological and theoretical rigor is defined anew, and affirm those who wish to maintain a single disciplinary anchor,

as long as they are open to exploration and dialogue beyond this “home” discipline. An example of the former is Latin American cultural studies, where practitioners integrate literary, historical, sociological, and anthropological methods while maintaining their own distinctive standards of scholarly excellence. An example of the latter would be linguistic research, which engages anthropology and political science to address fully questions of Indigenous language policy, loss and resilience. This dual approach allows scholars and the field overall to avoid unproductive dichotomies, to showcase original, exciting theories and results, and to assume a central, cutting-edge role in debates about the future of the humanities and social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

Collaboration is the third key principle. It comes in many forms, some self-evident and already widespread, others more unusual. In direct response to the past critique that Latin American studies reinforced the value-laden premises of a “northern gaze,” we now work to conceive topics, carry out research, and interpret results in sustained dialogue with colleagues in the South. The collaboration cuts across cultural, conceptual, and even epistemological differences. At UT, for example, we participate in a network devoted to the study and practice of social cartography. While these techniques originated in the North, one of their most advanced applications today is in the Amazonian region of Brazil. Our driving research questions—related to rights to territory and resources, sociopolitical conflict, alternative development models and the like—have emerged from close dialogue with Brazilians and other Latin Americans on the front lines of this emergent field of study.<sup>5</sup>

Collaboration enables, and often merges with, the fourth and final principle: an emphasis on teaching and scholarship that advances the frontiers of knowledge while making a positive impact on the world. This principle is not without traps and complexities. Latin America was once viewed as a testing ground for interventions designed elsewhere—be they broader development for communities, for-profit investments and reforms, militarization of society, or even coups or revolutions. Today, the use of Latin American studies as a vehicle for ideas, frameworks, or agendas imported from elsewhere should be rejected entirely. Our notion of social engagement now must remain adamantly pluralist, following the leadership of local actors, who play the central role in identifying the problems we study.

With these caveats in mind, the principle of drawing from and focusing on local actors and researchers, including community groups and civil society, will transform our discipline, our understanding of the issues on the ground, and the contribution we make to the future well-being of the region. The Latin American Studies Association (LASA), for example, has developed a program called *Otros Saberes*, in which teams of researchers and intellectuals from civil society collaborate on research that advances scholarly understanding while engaging social problems.<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, UT is working with the *Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* (Center for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology) to channel research on gender violence in Mexico and Guatemala into the creation of a summer institute to train young scholars and strengthen grassroots interventions around this ongoing public health crisis. At Columbia University, a newly formed Center for Mexican Studies is working with organizations based in both the U.S. and Mexico to enhance the capacity for archival preservation, education and scholarship on the history of anarchism in both countries.<sup>7</sup> When scholars and students prioritize social engagement, they make tangible contributions to the social good while gaining theoretical insight that otherwise would be difficult to achieve.

## Looking Forward

These four interlocking principles should continue to serve us well in confronting the challenges that lie ahead. While global studies appear to supersede the need for specialization in world regions, in reality global studies depend vitally on our continued ability to deploy deep, contextualized understanding to specific regions across disciplines.

The need for an updated conceptual or methodological toolkit (e.g., big data, or multi-sited research to capture transnational processes) can coincide with new research topics brought forth by global processes (e.g., the effects of social media on politics, global climate change, security, privacy, and the Internet). But these new efforts are strengthened when we ground them in the particulars of language, culture, history, and place.

In the realm of global scholarly resources, new forms of collaboration are essential. “Post-custodial” archival partnerships, for example, employ teams of librarians and scholars working to build bridges of common interest with libraries and archives in Latin America. In this model, institutions work with local repositories of rare or original archives to organize and digitize the content, thereby allowing access to anyone with an Internet connection. One prime example is the UT collaboration with the *Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional* (Historic Archive of the National Police) in Guatemala.<sup>8</sup> The post-custodial archive model reverses the long-standing pattern whereby enrichment of northern collections required the underdevelopment of their southern counterparts by drawing and shipping original materials to better endowed, more developed universities and countries.

Latin American studies can remain vibrant by embracing change. Steady growth in LASA membership is one of many measures of this vibrancy.<sup>9</sup> While resiliency has limits if budgets continue to shrink, these four principles of innovation provide a basis for looking forward rather than inward. At UT, they have helped us make our academic practice reflect our commitment to building more just and inclusive societies in the Americas. In this way, Latin American studies will not only survive, but provide a model for other area specializations to follow.

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Excellent article! And the four principles apply not only to Latin American studies, but also to other "regional" studies such as African studies, Middle Eastern studies, European studies, etc...

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