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"IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST" LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES AND U.S. INTERESTS ABROAD

Cliff Welch

While living in the United States in the 1880s, José Martí, the great Cuban writer and revolutionary, coined the catchy phrase used in my title. By the time of Martí's death in 1895, the United States had not yet become an imperial power in the Caribbean and Latin America. But Martí had prematurely recognized how the U.S. would later become like a beast gobbling up its neighbors to the south. "I know the monster," he wrote, "because I have lived in its lair, and my sling is that of David."

Those of us who do research and teach about Latin America should remain ever mindful of Martí's premonition. The heritage of the United States, coupled with its economic and military power, often places its national interests in opposition to those of its less powerful neighbors. We North American Latin Americanists are--like Martí--in the belly of the beast, and we should not forget how our position here can twist our approach to Latin American Studies.

As Grand Valley's four-year-old program in Latin American Studies continues to grow, its faculty should remain alert to the ethical dilemmas posed by Martí's insight, as we conduct research and teach students. If the program is to have integrity, its discourse should be distinct from the discourse of other interested parties, such as the U.S. government and U.S.-based transnational corporations. A Latin American Studies scholar might choose to work for the government, a corporation, or some other organization, but it would be unethical for that scholar to present his or her product without revealing his or her association with a non-academic sponsor. To serve our community and international constituents well, we should endeavor to satisfy no other logic than our own informed visions. This is as true for Latin American Studies as it is for the newly initiated programs in East Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. But it is easier said than done.

Unethical practices have haunted Latin American Studies since its inception in the United States, argues Mark T. Berger, an Australian scholar at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Since the field took shape in the early years of this century, its practitioners have often been closely associated with the U.S. foreign policy establishment. "Latin American Studies," he writes, "appeared as a complement to the rise of US hegemony in Latin America Overall, the historiography legitimated US hegemony in . . . Latin America" In other words, as Latin American Studies matured as a discipline, the discourse of its practitioners could not be distinguished from U.S. foreign policy. Born from the belly of the beast, LAS lacked an ethics from its conception.

The origins of Latin American Studies coincided with the Spanish-American War of 1898, and with the violent conquest of the Philippines and Cuba. Nurtured in war, most early practitioners were diplomatic historians who sought both to reflect and to shape U.S. policy. One example is John H. Latané, a Johns Hopkins University history professor whose book *Diplomatic Relations of the United States in Spanish America*, first published in 1900 and revised in 1920, credited U.S. foreign policy with "freedom" in Central America at a time of unprecedented U.S. military intervention in the region. Because of U.S. policy, Latané wrote, the Central American republics were "freer from wars and revolutions for a longer period than at any other time in their collective history." The continued "weakness and backwardness" of these nations, Latané wrote, left Washington no alternative but to "continue to protect" them and to "supervise their affairs." Latané and many other early Latin American Studies academics expressed such beliefs. Their writings served to legitimate the paternalistic justification of U.S. intervention in the region, despite the deadly toll of military occupation and its aftermath in such countries as Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Cuba, and Haiti.

The early scholars rested their arguments on premises not unlike those voiced by State Department officials and presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt. They believed that the Anglo-Saxons who predominated in the U.S. were a superior "race." In fact, writes Berger, "Anglo-Saxon assumptions about U.S. civilization as the highest form of civilization in history" peppered their writings. Because Anglo-Saxons "possessed special virtues and responsibilities," the early Latin Americanists typically characterized U.S. expansionism not only as desirable but also as inevitable. This was Social Darwinist thought writ large, at the level of international affairs.

Latin American Studies scholars built their arguments in favor of U.S. interventionism on historical as well as paternalist and racist cornerstones. Latané and others long emphasized the "common history" of the Americas as a basis for the "inevitable" integration of the hemisphere. The commonalities stressed always included the historical experiences of European discovery, colonialization, and national independence. Economic and political integration were seen as final steps in this progression of events. Given its unique Anglo-Saxon majority, these scholars concluded, it was only natural for the strong, civilized U.S. to dominate the Americas as a whole.

The unethical relationship between LAS academics and the U.S. foreign policy establishment extended to the career paths of many scholars. There was a revolving-door relationship between their jobs as teachers and researchers and the desires of the government to make use of their expertise. Berger demonstrates that some of the most prominent Latin Americanists fit this example. Leo Rowe, who taught at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania, also served as head of the predecessor inter-American body of the Organization of American States (OAS). Dana Munro of Georgetown University took time out from teaching and writing to work in the State Department. Arthur Whitaker of Penn State University, to name but another of many examples, did the same.

Another tendency for area studies scholars has been membership and occasional employment in "liberal internationalist" organizations established with big business capital in order to provide corporations with a tax-free philanthropic cover for the collection of intelligence useful to their investment interests in Latin America and other world regions. Several such organizations were established after World War I, many of which continue to function in much the same way today. These include the Council on Foreign Relations, located in New York (and represented locally by the World Affairs Council), the Rockefeller Foundation (Rockefeller has huge mineral holdings in Latin America), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Latin America has been a major consumer of U.S. steel and exporter of iron ore), and the Brookings Institute (which puts corporation-funded scholars in government service from its Washington, D.C. offices). All of these organizations and think tanks were established, in part, to facilitate a complementary relationship between big business, U.S. foreign policy, and professionalized foreign area studies, such as Latin American Studies.

These organizations, Berger argues, help foster unethical relations between academics and the powerful by controlling the way grants, fellowships, jobs, and status are distributed among scholars. Those scholars whose views were in synch with the interests of donors and influential policymakers tended to be rewarded and promoted. The corrupting influence on scholarship of this arrangement was recently revealed by a document written by the prominent Latin Americanist Riordan Roett, a political scientist with the Washington-based School of Advanced International Studies. Hired by a major bank, Roett was asked to analyze the investment climate in Mexico and, in his confidential final report, he emphasized the need to "eliminate" the Zapatista peasant movement in Chiapas in order to enhance that climate. The memo caused quite a scandal in the profession when it was exposed to international scrutiny through worldwide Internet transmission.

This is not the only example of the questionable ethics of Latin Americanists in the present day. There is plenty of evidence for the relevance of Berger's critique of the origins of LAS. Demonstrating the revolving-door syndrome, recent presidential administrations have attracted Latin American Studies scholars to their foreign policy teams. President Carter hired Robert Pastor; Reagan-Bush employed Elliot Abrams and Jeanne Kirkpatrick; and Clinton appointed Anthony Lake, another Latin American specialist, as National Security Advisor during his first term and CIA director in his second. When such luminaries appear at academic conferences to update their credentials in the profession with their colleagues in the Latin American Studies Association, graduate students and young faculty hover around them, hoping to make a good impression and nuzzle their way to power. A corrupting tendency lies in this on-going practice, though one difficult to avoid: it is probably better to have a knowledgeable scholar in these government posts than ignorant political insiders.

Today's U.S. foreign policy agenda in Latin America is one which favors the development of "free market democracy." Trained and promoted in the belly of the beast, most LAS scholars would find it just as difficult to argue with this agenda as their predecessors found it difficult to argue with the past era of U.S. paternalism and

interventionism in the region. However, hindsight makes it easy to see the damaging results of past U.S. policy and begs contemporary scholars to use critical perspective in the assessment of current affairs. Teacher-scholars in LAS programs like ours have an obligation to nurture diverse viewpoints and to offer an "inverted hemispheric" perspective which puts Latin America on top. This kind of counter-hegemonic thinking will serve students best when they enter the job market. We need not denounce U.S. policy, but we should question it and offer students an example of ethical scholarship by making them aware of the powerful forces which shape assumptions and influence the career paths of Latin American Studies professors.

Berger's thesis is a provocative one, and his evidence places the field squarely at the service of U.S. foreign policy during the first five decades of the century. It helps give us pause to analyze our work as Latin Americanists today. Although trends in the field since the national debate over the war in Vietnam have pushed Latin Americanists toward greater independence and more ethical behavior, Berger's thesis can be accurately applied to the present state of the field. Powerful economic, political, and ideological forces insist on the field's conformity to U.S. policy interests. As we build Latin American Studies at Grand Valley, we cannot forget that, from the point of view of the Latin Americans we study, we in the United States live in the beast's lair.

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