

At Issue

## Colonial and Post-colonial Latin America

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A decade ago, the historian Forencia Mallon connected the relatively new field of subaltern studies to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Until then, scholars working on Latin America had stressed class in their Marxist methodological approaches to the region. But now that the Soviet Union had fallen, Mallon argued, what were progressive Latin Americanists to do? The answer was the substitution of the new methodologies of the subaltern for the more restrictive class-based analyses as a basis for inquiry. Odder than the answer itself was the notion that, somehow, a teetering late Cold War Soviet Union had proved the inspiration for decades of Marxist analysis of Latin America – that without the Soviet Union, years of progressive scholarship now had to be rethought. Though she likely did not see it as such, Mallon's focus on the end of the Cold War as a point of departure for subaltern studies, was itself a comment on the sway of great power conflict and the intellectual climates it generated in shaping foreign discourses on Latin America. To be sure, Mallon was never an apologist for imperial rule; in fact her scholarship is anti-imperial in tenor and content. But, like other scholars formed in the 1960s and early 1970s, her analytical approach to Latin America was defined and redefined over time in intellectual climates shaped first and foremost outside the region, and in a manner that tended to place little emphasis on methodologies developed in Latin America itself. This is sometimes called imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

Mallon's vision of the intersections of progressive scholarship on Latin America and the state of great power politics underscores an important similarity between Latin American Studies and African Studies outside of Latin America and Africa. Like many leading African studies specialists of Gavin Kitching's generation, non-Latin American Latin Americanists were profoundly influenced by Vietnam, the American Civil Rights movement, the Prague Spring, Paris 1968, and Ch Guevarra. These and other episodes that resonated internationally pushed the political center of academia in wealthy countries to the left. But while Latin Americanists and Africanists from wealthy countries believed they were helping to break the chains of imperialism, this was only true in part. To be sure, there was an anti-imperial component to political change in the academy. In the United States, for example, the creation of Latin American Studies and African Studies in the post-World War II period was closely tied to government financial backing for such programs that were meant by Washington policy makers

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a15.pdf>

to support imperial objectives. By the 1970s, to the dismay of many in government, African Studies and Latin American studies in the United States were foci of anti-imperial thought. Writing and teaching in the Chile of Salvador Allende's great moment of democratic socialism, Andr Gunder Frank represented another example of the new anti-imperialism. Frank was as convinced as other non-Latin American (and some Latin American) dependentista scholars that dependency theory spoke to the Latin American colonial "reality." Their struggle was with imperialism, its agents among Latin American lites, and conservative non-Latin American scholars who still dominated the Latin America "area" in different disciplines in many countries. Chief among the latter was Oxford University's only Professor of Latin American history, D.C.M. Platt who argued vociferously at the time that structuralist analyses of empire and history were simply without foundation. Dependency theory was a model fought over outside Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

The model failed to nudge Latin America toward radical social and political change. While decrying imperialism, the model itself was an imperial imposition on societies whose problems could not be reduced to theories that were mathematically aesthetic, but weakly grounded in regional and national problems, and the ways in which subalterns and others shaped social change. This started to become painfully clear to some progressive Latin Americanists in the late 1970s, for example, when the Guatemalan military launched its genocidal war on aboriginal communities. Despite that United States imperialism in Guatemala clearly played a strong role in how and why the Guatemalan government went to war so ferociously against its own people, dependency theories and other foreign approaches of the time could not explain the violence, social breakdown, and intensity of ethnic conflict. The methodologies that had driven progressive non-Latin American scholarship were inadequate. Non-Latin American scholars began to understand Guatemala in the 1980s only when they started to set aside the imperial essentialisms of their progressive academic intellectual milieu.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Guatemala, they were forced to do that by Rigoberta Mench and a host of other Guatemalans who demanded that the foreign academic community rethink everything from what constituted "human rights" to the place of aboriginal cultures in Latin American societies. Indeed, the 1980s marked the first time that Latin Americans figuratively took non-Latin American scholars by the scruff of the neck and shook them out of an imperial lethargy.

Gavin Kitching's self-conscious decision to "leave" Africa speaks to the imperialism inherent to how some scholars understood post-colonial societies. Mallon's reliance on the fall of the Soviet Union as a marker is odd. Kitching's decision to quit Africa rings of an unsatisfied child in the playground who decides to take his proverbial ball and go home. "I am shocked," Kitching states in response to an academic from Ghana who reacts cynically to the celebrations in 1980 at the founding of Zimbabwe. What was it about the African scholar's "drunken" comment that shocked Kitching? Why would he respond with "shock" to two words uttered in a bar, as though those words gave any insight at all into what his colleague was thinking? What business did Kitching have assessing another scholar's ideas on the basis of two words? Kitching entered African studies a decade earlier with rigid ideals about what post-colonialism should mean. The suggestion that African societies might not be so easily categorized "shocked" him. The impossible simplicity of what he anticipated prompted his departure from the field when historical change did not go his way.

Like many Latin Americanists, Kitching was a devotee of dependency theories which he describes as having informed his longstanding, crude assessment of why African leaders were corrupt and destructive – they were imperial agents. Kitching is, in the end, a product of the early methodologies to which he subscribed. Dependency demanded a rational clarity that simply made no sense. When he was certain he understood Africa's problems and prospects, he was fine – and able to dismiss what he describes as the drunken outburst of his colleague from Ghana. When there was no longer a certainty, he could no longer stand the field. Since when was it a prerequisite for inquiry in African studies or in any field that we have all the answers up front?

As a non-Africanist, I shudder just a little at how focused the responses to Kitching in this issue are on non-African thought and scholarship. Where are the Africans? One legacy of Kitching's blindered vision of Africa seems to be an absence of the analysis of African society by Africans. Where are the methodologies and approaches defined and explained first and foremost by African intellectual traditions? Here and in some other areas, there seem to be crucial differences between the intersection of ideals, politics, and scholarship in Latin America and in Africa. Most important, Kitching's experience and what it represents of a generation of foreign (non-African) scholars suggests a grimmer present and a more uncertain future for Africa than for Latin America. African scholarly and intellectual viewpoints and traditions are not front-and-center in this and in other debates. This may well reflect the difference between a continent in the disruptive long-term throes of dramatic poverty and violence, as opposed to Latin America, a region where people routinely think of Africa when they imagine what could be worse than what they have. In many regards, there is more cause for optimism about Latin America, not in the narrow terms of imperial versus independent cultural legacies but, rather, in regard to how little it really matters to Latin American scholars what the rest of us think. This difference may well locate our Latin America-related debates in a healthier context. Mallon abandoned an academic struggle that began with the Cuban Revolution, was punctuated by Allende's Chile, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and the guerrilla struggle in El Salvador for a new methodological direction and new hope. Kitching simply left his field entirely. Kitching seems to think his departure makes a difference one way or the other. Without the certainty Kitching would require, I suspect that Mallon recognizes that subaltern studies never really took hold in any country (with the possible exception of Puerto Rico) with the lan that characterized the field over the past ten years in wealthy nations. And in the end, what she thinks won't change Latin America, nor should it.

There are other differences that explain, perhaps, the intensity of Kitching's exit as not unrelated to Africa's particular problems. During Kitching's adulthood, Africa underwent a transition from colonialism to post-colonialism. The transition was clear. It was sought after in many colonies, inspired in many cases by the same sorts of left politics that gripped students and others in many parts of the world. It was vigorously anti-imperial, a rich rejection of race-based colonial politics, and reflected common political experiences across new national borders in Africa. For the foreign scholars who looked to Africa, the links between their politics, their scholarship, and their optimism for a bright post-colonial future in Africa were self-evident. In Latin America at the same time, historical processes were more ambiguous as were the dedication to and political investment in historical change of most scholars.

In Africa, the transition was clearly one from colonialism to post-colonialism. In Latin America, there was no such clear dichotomy. In the way that colonialism was understood in Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, most Latin American nations had achieved their independence from colonial powers by 1830. This meant that by the time scholars and political leaders began to speak of a “post-colonial” Africa in the late twentieth century, the term post-colonial had no meaning at all in Latin America. Non-Latin American scholars had coined the term “national period” to describe the post 1820 period in the region. By the 1950s and 1960s, the break from Portugal and Spain was a distant historical memory with little political resonance for Latin Americans or for the foreign scholars that studied their societies. At the same time that Latin American nations had long since become “post-colonial,” they were also seen increasingly as essentially neo-colonial, opening a debate that had equivalents in Africa but that were overshadowed there by the confidence in post-colonial projects. Andre Gunder Frank, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and other “dependentistas” conceived of a new imperialism that was primarily American and that held up Latin American countries as colonies. Progressive foreign scholars had a more difficult time than their equivalents in Africa with the contradictions of the post-colonial or independent Latin American nations and conceptions of dependency and informal empire in the region. Paths to political and economic freedom were less certain, less clear than for the African nations that had thrown off the shackles of empire.

As in Africa, there were models for change. But whereas in Africa the examples of inspiring and lasting post-colonial struggle were many and became the path for a majority of nations struggling for change, in Latin America they remained isolated, less clearly a pragmatic or ideologically viable course -- according to foreign scholars on the left. The key examples in the Cold War period were the Cuban and Nicaraguan Revolutions. Each revolution inspired a new generation of Latin Americanists in many countries. Both account for a politicization of Latin American Studies and a strengthening of the academic left in many nations inside and outside of Latin America. They also produced heightened Cold War tensions that, in turn, made Margaret Randall, E. Bradford Burns, and some other Latin Americanists in the United States public foils for the Cold Warriors in the White House. The Cuban leadership saw their connection to African post-colonial struggles; Cuba became involved in protracted war for Angolan liberation that, despite appearances in the west at the time, left Soviet leaders furious with Cuba’s independent action in the war. The war also left deep social and cultural scars on Cuban society. The death toll among Cuban soldiers was enormous and had deeply negative repercussions on how Cubans viewed their government. But while Cuba identified with and maintained close ties to newly independent African countries, it remained an exception unlike its African equivalents. Most important, no other Latin American country was ever able to follow the Cuban anti-imperial lead. But in addition, despite Florencia Mallon’s investment in the Soviet model, and even as they backed Cuban progress on health care, education, literacy and in other areas, scholars on the left in Latin America and elsewhere often spoke freely about Cuban shortcomings. In looking at Cuba or Nicaragua, few progressive Latin Americanists wore rose colored glasses as brightly colored as those Kitching once wore.<sup>4</sup>

While the United States treated Nicaragua as a pariah state and a Soviet satellite, the Marxist model there was incomplete and, in the end, short-lived. Like Cuba and unlike the

African post-colonial projects, it became an exception that lacked the strength to overcome the colonial component of Latin America's late twentieth century reality. If anything, Latin Americanists in wealthy nations held few illusions of the sort Kitching harbored and were skeptical about the Sandinistas' prospects. Fidel Castro himself had warned Daniel Ortega to anticipate an American invasion. Nicaragua inspired the ominous invention of low intensity warfare that included Central American fighting forces working in part as proxies for United States aggression. There were other cases that were even more short-lived. Under Salvador Allende, scholars from all over the world came to Chile to help effect meaningful change. The longevity, ferocity, and liberal economics of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet that followed underscored the seeming impossibility of a true post-colonial model in Latin America. Even so, but to a lesser extent than among Africanists, foreign scholars remained invested politically, professionally, and ideologically in Latin America's destiny. When David Stoll challenged the autobiographical details of the region's most important human rights icon, Rigoberta Mench, most in the non-Latin American academic community rallied to her side. The US-centered Latin American Studies Association, the largest academic organization of Latin Americanists, regularly takes strong political positions in favor of human rights. But none of this represents an investment as strong or as clear as that of foreign Africanists and their investment in the post-colonial national projects in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

There is likely another factor in the relative distance – compared to Africa and Africanists -- between foreign Latin Americanists and socio-political change in the region they study. To a far greater extent than in Latin America, African universities are influenced by foreign scholars. While in a number of African countries, foreign Africanists hold teaching positions, in Latin America foreigners rarely hold such positions. Academic traditions in different countries that include a powerfully nationalistic concurso for teaching positions often make foreign appointments impossible. Scholarship in Africa is often influenced by leading investigators at key non-African universities. In Latin America, humanists and social scientists are often unaware of current important scholarship in North America or Europe. The methodologies, approaches, and themes of inquiry of Latin American scholars are often very different from what is at the focus of Latin America related inquiry outside of the region.

Finally, while problems of race in Latin America's past and present are every bit as significant as in Africa, they are less stark than the black versus white dichotomy exacerbated by decolonization as a process intimately tied to a rejection of white colonizers and white political cultures. In fact, in Guatemala, Peru, Panama, Brazil, and elsewhere, peoples of color have been organizing as never before over the past five years. Changes reflected in the rise of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and the aboriginal political movements in Ecuador mark a dramatic seizure of Latin American politics by indigenous peoples who will likely have little time or patience for subaltern studies, depressed foreign academics, or cranky Canadian Latin Americanists.

#### Notes:

1. Florencia E. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," American Historical Review, vol. 99, no. 5 (December 1994):

- 1491-1515; Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," American Historical Review, vol. 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1475-1490.
2. See D.C.M. Platt, Mickey Mouse Numbers in World History: The Short View (London: Macmillan, 1989); Andre Gunder Frank, Lumpenburguesa: lumpendesarrollo; dependencia, clase y politica en Latinoamrica (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Periferia, 1973); Rodolfo Puiggros, Andre Gunder Frank, and Jorge Abelardo Ramos, Polmica sobre los modos de produccion en Iberoamrica (Buenos Aires: Agrupacin Universitaria Nacional, 1974); Mark T. Berger, Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and US Hegemony in the Americas, 1898-1990 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); James William Park, Latin American Underdevelopment: A History of Perspectives in the United States, 1870-1965 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).
  3. See, for example, Diane M. Nelson, A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
  4. Piero Gleijeses, Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
  5. Arturo Arias, ed., The Rigoberta Mench Controversy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); David Stoll, Rigoberta Mench and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

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