

Coping with Regional Identities in Crises: Perspectives from Latin America

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Abstract

The following article reflects on the place of Latin America, its past and present challenges, in a global context. Faced with the question around “Why Latin America Matters?”, we elaborate multiple answers from the Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS). This centre for transdisciplinary and transregional studies proposes the collaboration of Latin American and German institutions to reflect and produce knowledge about the ways in which different social groups in Latin America faced and face the transitions between violence and peace, confront inequalities, environmental crises, and the ways of reconfiguring identities in crisis contexts.

Resumen

El siguiente artículo reflexiona sobre el lugar de América Latina, sus desafíos pasados y presentes, en un contexto global. Proponemos responder a la pregunta sobre “¿Por qué América Latina importa?” desde el Centro Maria Sibylla Merian de Estudios Latinoamericanos Avanzados en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (CALAS). Este centro de estudios transdisciplinarios y transregionales propone la colaboración entre instituciones latinoamericanas y alemanas para reflexionar y producir conocimiento sobre las formas en las que diferentes grupos sociales, en América Latina, enfrentaron y enfrentan las transiciones entre violencia y paz, las formas de confrontar las desigualdades, las crisis ambientales y el lugar de las identidades regionales en contextos de crisis.

Latin America matters. It matters because it exists, as Africa matters, as Asia matters. As matters the world and the social, economic, political and environmental problems that arise from our presence in it. But Latin America has a particular identity, history, territory, time and space that differentiate it from the rest of the world. As a region that suffered the reasons and consequences of colonialism, it offers a long tradition built, sustained and re-interpreted in multiple and changing historical contexts that obliged continuous self-reflexivity on subjection, dependency or inequality, and new forms of conviviality, or interculturality. This reflexivity, which is the product of a particular combination of political commitment and academic production from and for Latin America, has contributed to the vis-ibility of the problems and particularities of the region in the global world.

It is one of the continents with the highest levels of inequality, comprising countries with a problematic institutional continuity, crossed by deep poverty and informality, reaching 80% of the population in some regions. In particular, it is a region inhabited by a multiplicity of identities that have entered history without asking permission and have disputed a place in history and its right to exist. In the case of indigenous communities, for instance, they were not only defeated by Western colonial empires, but also persecuted, exterminated and/or incorporated into the 19th century's nation-states under construction, in a permanent tension that enabled new identity constructions (Quijada, 1999; Briones and Del Cairo, 2015; Gleizer and López Caballero, 2015).

For this reason, it is obvious that historically in Latin America – and the fact that colonisation and decolonisation occurred so early in the region helps to explain this phenomenon – a series of eth-nic and social conflicts, actions and collective movements converged with a cultural, academic and technological production that discusses and problematises the challenges of the region. In this long tradition of theorising and fighting ethnic and social inequality, injustice,

and violation of human rights, Latin America offers extensive and intensive expertise to provide in current debates on how to deal with social, intercultural and economic crises. This is a particularity and a specific contribution from Latin America towards thinking about social problems in global terms.

Latin America, like the rest of the world, is going through and has gone through various moments of crisis: both rapid and convulsive changes, and slow but lasting transformations. This perpetual state of evolution, which is the experience of modernity itself (Berman, 1982) and which contains the idea of crisis, is particularly intense in Latin America.

As the covid-19 pandemic painfully illustrates, global crises taking place in the 21st century are calling into question hegemonic lifestyles, economic structures, ecosystems and models of social or-ganisation all over the world, and therefore are challenging globalisation itself linked to global capital-ism and the ways of life it implies. For its long history of colonisation and decolonisation and the so-cio-political implications, social practices and theoretical reflections these consequences of global capi-talism provided and provides, Latin America is placed in a very privileged epistemic position to face these crises. The region has been especially remarkable for its output of creative cultural and political strategies to address the multiple emergencies that have called into question the established social and political order in modern, postmodern and current times.

Linked to globalisation from its beginnings, that is from the outset of European colonialist ex-pansion towards the West, and the 'invention' of America as its other (Todorov, 1982), Latin America is very familiar with the pernicious effects of increasing homogenisation of economic, political and cultural models, and the hegemonic imposition of a capitalist world-system that, in its desire for profit, tried to universalise itself and obliterate all differences (Wallerstein, 2004). Early Latin American de-colonisation processes made possible different models of political and economic emancipation, pro-moted new cultural paradigms and innovative socio-political concepts for managing present conflicts and efforts of reconciliation with the past, confronting tensions involved with social

inequality, multi-ethnicity, interculturality, racism, mass migration, and the ecological limits of economic growth. In facing these challenges, theoretical and empirical approaches have been generated in Latin America that are of great importance not only for the region, but also for the general understanding and solving of the current problems of humanity.

For instance, on one hand Latin America has offered models for interethnic, transareal, translocal, transnational and transcontinental relationships. These were based on the concept of con-tinuous movement and fluidity and seemed to make politically, socially, and culturally viable new dia-logical forms, theorised as the logics of (trans) archipelago contact by the Caribbean philosopher and author Édouard Glissant (1990; 1997), or as (trans) border thinking by the chicana activist, feminist and author Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). On the other hand, the contradictions of capitalism have also been theorised, that is to say its production of 'universalisation' and its multiple forms of dependency, subjugation and attempts at whitening or "whiteness" (Echeverría, 2010) that seek to annihilate all differ-ences by consumption, assimilation, opposition or abjection.

It is against this all-encompassing, falsely 'universalising' and alienating trend that both the so-called 'subaltern groups' and the 'peripheries' located in the global South began to resist from the 1960s. Sim-ilarly, it is as resistance against this nefarious trend that the emergence of new voices, actors and cul-tural facets in Latin America must be understood, which have since then begun to fight (and continue to fight) for its visibility. Thus, the struggle against the different forms of generic, ethnic or (geo)political oppression, and the (re)emergence of local aesthetic manifestations, regional literatures or ethnic modes of expression must be seen as counter-responses or counter-discourses that are op-posed to Western 'universalising' globalisation exposing their 'peripheral' position strategically (in the sense that Spivak had given to 'strategic essentialism' as "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, 1996, p. 214) to guarantee the agency of the 'subal-tern', or in the sense of 'identification' defined by Caribbean post-colonial cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996)).

Because of this long Latin American experience in dealing with crises, one of Coimbra Group Universities with a special focus on the region, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany, forms part of the transdisciplinary research project on "Coping with Crises: Transdisciplinary Perspectives from Latin America" at the Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CA-LAS). CALAS is the second Merian Center established by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF). Highly reputed for its expertise and transdisciplinary approach, CA-LAS is an international research school where four German universities (Bielefeld, Kassel, Hannover and Jena) and four Latin American universities (Guadalajara, Costa Rica, FLACSO in Quito, and Universidad Nacional de San Martín/UNSAM at Buenos Aires) collaborate, sharing and concentrat-ing their expertise (<http://calas.lat/en/about-calas>). Based upon the fact that Latin America is a region that has provided central impulses to discussions on social, cultural, political, economic, and ecologi-cal crisis and offered possible solutions (as "Buen Vivir"), the participating researchers focus on criti-cal questions of how crises and processes of change are triggered, accelerated, decelerated, perceived, and reflected on by different actors in Latin America. Leading questions on which the Merian Center focusses are concerned with past and present strategies for dealing with crises offered by Latin Amer-ica and its important output of critical theory (as dependence theory or the "Coloniality/Modernity" group). In addition, the Merian Center examines how new approaches to problem solving offered by Latin America – including transregional approaches – could be made more effective, institutionalised, or transferred to other World regions.

The research matrix of CALAS consists of four separate but thematically strongly entangled re-search groups: 1) Visions of peace: Transitions between violence and peace in Latin America; 2) Confronting Social Inequality: Perspectives on wealth and power; 3) Coping with Environmental Crises; and 4) Regional Identities in Multiple Crises. Two transversal axes complement these research groups: 1) the theoretical-methodological meta-reflection in Theorising Crisis, and 2) the reflection of the role of centres for advanced studies and academic knowledge-production in Latin America in the Global

Knowledge Society. As CALAS aims to enhance dialogical research and avoid the theoretic-methodological subordination traditionally existing in North-South collaborative partnerships, all CA-LAS research is based on knowledge production generated within Latin American contexts of practice in relation to horizontal, participatory, collaborative, and postcolonial methodologies (Sousa Santos and Meneses, 2009; Caretta and Riaño, 2016). This approach implies reversing traditional worldviews and flows of knowledge in order to place them differently, this time horizontally, making research visible that has shaped specific Latin American approaches and created its own theories, methodologies, and ways to perceive and analyse crisis (García-Canclini, 2014).

The CALAS headquarters are based in Guadalajara, Mexico, and act as a central hub with a high international visibility. Three affiliated regional centres, based in Central America (at University of San José de Costa Rica), the Andean region (at FLACSO, Quito), and the Cono Sur with Brazil (at UNSAM, Buenos Aires), secure its pluritopic structure and transnational dialogue. In CALAS and within its focus on “Coping with crises: Perspectives from Latin America”, FSU Jena is interacting especially with UNSAM in Buenos Aires, where the “CALAS Regional Center Cono Sur and Brazil” is located (and co-directed by both universities). The thematic focus of the Maria Sibylla Merian Regional Center concerns “Regional Identities in Multiple Crises”.

In the following lines of this overview on “Coping with Regional Identities in Crises: Perspectives from Latin America”, we will focus on the research program of this regional centre and its basic theoretical convictions (for more detail, see <https://www.gw.uni-jena.de/fakult%C3%A4t/arcosur/forschung/forschungsprojekte/calas> and <http://www.unsam.edu.ar/calas/>).

Latin America unfortunately constitutes one of the world regions with particular expertise in dealing with crises, conflictive identity formation and pluri- or inter-culturality. The ongoing intense public debates on collective identity in (post-) colonial societies of Latin America are deeply related to

multiple crises and demonstrate quite clearly the ways in which crises are linked with identity formation. The foundations of nation-states in Latin America have always implied narratives of national identity based on Eurocentric narratives about ‘whiteness’ and ‘mestizaje’ (‘mixture of races’) (Briones, 1998; Pratt, 2010; Quijano, 2015; Segato, 2015). These hegemonic matrices have included projects of homogenisation, techniques of ‘invisibilisation’, and stigmatisation of indigenous peoples (Ramos et al., 2016; Delrio et al., 2018) and inhabitants with African ancestors (Restrepo, 2013). At the end of the 20th century, an important change with constitutional effects took place in several countries, which led to the recognition of the multicultural origin of all kinds of identities and the necessary pluralism, multilingualism and interculturality of Latin American societies (Zapata, 2018). While creole and white identities have been put into question since the 1990s, indigenous and Afro-American identities have managed to establish deep cultural-political changes, which find their institutional expression in the reformulation of several constitutions. Ever since – and beyond the official formal multi- and pluri-cultural or even national redefinitions of the majority of the Latin American nation-states –, regional, ethnic, ethnic racial, gender, and class identities, as well as processes of reterritorialisation and movements of the subaltern, have struggled against classism, racism, and machismo, while other forms of social-economic and symbolic exclusion have been revived. In this process, the use of the regional level as a framework for identity politics has often followed the pattern of strategically proclaimed geo-cultural differences (de la Cadena, 2007; Hall, 1996; Spivak, 1996).

This focus on “Regional Identities in Multiple Crises” thus explores the multiple configurations in which identity is negotiated, (re)invented, performed and politically, as well as aesthetically, represented (Grimson, 2011; Hammerschmidt, 2019). In doing so, the thematic axis analyses the identity processes related to politics of recognition and ethnic autonomy, as well as recent trends of resurgence of ‘whiteness’, sexism, and racism. Moreover, special attention is given to new forms of identity formations that arise in the context of regional and cross-border self-definitions, south-south migration flows, forms of intersectionality, and alternative forms of literary and cinematic

expressions.

The aim of this research group is the paradigmatic analysis of how interpretive patterns (of the regional level) are used in crises. To that end, the research group concentrates on the following aspects:

1) Identity processes between indigenous peoples, migrants, social organisations, and women's movements, with special reference to the ideological and theoretical implications of concepts such as multi-, trans- or interculturality. This perspective concentrates on different kinds of identity building by social practices, discourses, and narratives based on inclusion and exclusion procedures, especially taking into account processes of intersection and their (intercultural) aesthetic articulations, and reconsiders commonly accepted theoretical assumptions such as multiculturalism in the context of new hegemonic discourses grounded in racism, new xenophobia, violation of human rights, and misogyny.

2) Equivalence and divergence processes between emergent demands and their potential of fragmentation and articulation in Latin American nation-states, with a special focus on new regional identities, local discourse and text production in global contexts. To this effect, we focus on constructions and deconstructions of the region by symbolic inventions and their aesthetic-political potentials, rendering possible new forms of strategic identities that react to crises, including ethnicity, territory, ecology, class, and gender.

3) The crisis of metropolitan narrations on identity, such as the crisis of 'the lettered city', the interrelations between representations of crisis and crisis of representation, identity and intersectionality, or designs of 'subjects in crisis' in current Latin American literature and cinematography.

As the Regional Head Office of the Southern Cone and Brazil, in 2018 UNSAM hosted the Platform for Dialogue "New hate speech and its counter-speeches in Latin America", organised under the direction of Alejandro Grimson and Claudia Hammerschmidt. This platform offered a space for reflection on hate speeches involving indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, women, dissident

sexualities, migrants and political adversaries. The proposal considered the emotions at stake in stigmatisation and anti-stigmatisation processes – such as contempt, invisibilisation, cruelty, resentment, fear, as well as sorority, brotherhood, solidarity, new forms of community care – and paid special attention to counter-discourse formulations, especially aesthetic proposals, to deal with these speeches. One of the main topics was to think on those worldwide phenomena in their local shape and emergence – and the local techniques developed in Latin America to face and counteract them. In doing so, we tried to make out strategies valid for application in other regions of the world.

In a line of continuity with this event, in April 2021 the UNSAM and FSU Jena organised the Platform for Dialogue "Politics, Affects and Identities in Latin America" (in an online format due to the covid-19 pandemic) under the direction of Luciana Anapios and Claudia Hammerschmidt. The starting point of this platform was the recognition that both affects and inequality, including of course violence, play an important role in the construction of identities and social imaginaries and have their specificity in Latin America (Illouz, 2007; Frevert, 2014; Sabido Ramos, 2020). Emotions and affects can be formative and build senses of belonging and community; or, on the contrary, contribute to their disintegration. This illustrates the importance of studying affects and their role in the discursive construction of identities in relation to broader sociocultural dynamics. The objective was to think about the articulation between policies, affections and identities in the various and constant crises experienced by Latin America (Faur, 2007; Gravante and Poma, 2018). Furthermore, we focused on the different ways in which identity is negotiated or reinvented, and how people involved in crisis processes are able to reconfigure an imaginary transnational and/or local arena through which different manifestations of symbolic and material affection circulate. In this sense, the links between affects (in its various dimensions) and the different forms of identification were taken into account, as well as the particularities presented by the regulation of affections as a key to the exercise and power relations in contemporary societies, and the role they play in the production and management of crises. By paying attention to the feelings and affections in cultural productions around identities, the

Platform investigated their potential for dismantling existing power relations and analysed how, in different narrative modes and means, different affective cumulus emerge. In addition, various approaches considered how these affective dynamics articulate or do not articulate with the macro-political processes that many Latin American countries are experiencing in contexts of polarisation, i.e., how links or disarticulations are produced between indigenous movements, movements of African descent, migrant collectives, dissident feminisms and sexualities, or other similar identities, with political identifications. In doing so, this second Platform for Dialogue organised by the CALAS's Cono Sur and Brazil Regional Center, as previously addressed in the first event, was intended to contribute to a situated (affect) theory fitting to identity building processes in other world regions as well, thus providing a global approach from local analysis.

In the global network of society, crisis cannot be solved only at the scale of national or regional units; instead complex, translocal approaches are necessary that take into account local particularities as well as global interconnections. Furthermore, as CALAS suggests, Latin America offers a wide range of expertise for dealing with crises, which should be globally considered.

This starting point for thinking about crises from Latin America involves reflecting on historical and contemporary processes in which different actors must develop strategies to deal with crises that were (and keep being) expressed in multiple ways: political crises, economic crises, social movements, environmental crises, representation crises, institutional violence, migration crises, diasporas. It implies analysing the differentiated impact by which different identities experience these crises and how these identities are transformed by crises – especially women, indigenous communities, dissident identities, migrants, the dispossessed and declassified. It means investigating the way emotions and affections are pierced and transformed; and focusing on the articulation between the various expressions of identities, politics, economics, work, the right to a healthy environment, and their aesthetic, discursive and counter-discursive representations.

To think of these kinds of crises from Latin America is to recognise that reflection on these processes can transform not only the Latin American region. Latin America matters because the answers that emerge from Latin America have something to say about the processes of social transformation anywhere in the world. We look and are looked at regionally, we dialogue from a located point of view and seek answers to local problems – which at the same time are also global. Today, when humanity is facing uncertainty, fascist rights are resurfacing and hate speeches unfolding in new forms and combinations, Latin American experience is fundamental to discuss major issues that concern us all. This perspective helps us to understand different forms of articulation between freedom and equality, to think of the social cost of equality, to disarticulate the organisation of social movements of “the aggrieved of equality” (García Linera and Errejón, 2020), and to reflect on the place of collectivity and community, or on the place of the state in these crises and its limits. Latin America's long (and suffered) expertise and knowledge production in these fields can help develop and offer answers to these past, present and future urgent questions through a delicate combination of political commitment, integration, hope – and remaining uncertainty.

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