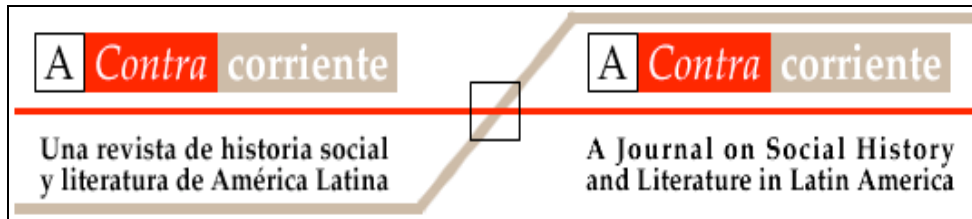


Note



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Area Studies Beyond Ontology: Notes on Latin American Studies, American Studies, and Inter-American Studies

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The story is by now a familiar one. Area studies support, reinforce, and often shape state policy requiring attention to the geographical and intellectual premises of these fields. In the case of Latin American studies, as it is practiced in the United States, it would be fair to say that there has been a long-standing preoccupation with the way that the field replicates and even depends on a power imbalance that enables US scholars to direct their gaze towards the south. Beginning roughly in the 1980s and as a consequence of a number of intersecting developments relating to globalization, neoliberal economics, and the theoretical insights of postmodernism, scholars in Latin American studies and American studies felt an urge to dismantle the geographical borders of their fields and to reconsider the ideological framings of their work as well. Latin American studies, which had always been mindful of the United States as a dominant

factor, began to emphasize space as flow, as liminal, as transnational.¹ American studies arguably underwent a far more radical transformation as it sought to become post-national and to leave behind its history as the ideological justification for American exceptionalism.² It comes as no surprise, then, that in the midst of these reconsiderations and refigurings a boom of inter-Americanist research advocated a hemispheric, cross-national approach to the study of the Americas. Such work, building on a long legacy from Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca to Simón Bolívar to Herbert Bolton, suggested that one way to deflate the hegemony of the United States in the region was to narrate the hemisphere otherwise, as a pan-American story of intersections, influences, interventions, and invasions.³

The post-1980 surge in inter-American research proved that there was a logic to understanding the Americas hemispherically, but before long it set off another wave of preoccupations.⁴ This time the worries centered on where inter-American studies are best located institutionally, in Latin American or American studies, and there was further concern about whether such an expansion of the fields of American and Latin American studies did not actually constitute yet another phase of intellectual imperialism.⁵ How to open up area studies without replicating imperial practices? How could American studies really be post-national? While inter-American studies appeared to offer an open geography, thereby bypassing the problematic concept of the nation and loosening the United States as the central signifier for the New World, inter-Americanists quickly became preoccupied with borders, boundaries, and questions of location.

¹ For a variety of analyses of these trends see Román de la Campa, Neil Larsen, and Lars Shoultz.

² A number of Americanists began to describe their work as “post-national.” See, in particular Donald Pease’s edited volume *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*.

³ Two scholars that have been central to advancing the work of Inter-American studies are Earl E. Fitz and Djelal Kadir. Their approaches differ substantially, but they share the conviction that a comparative, hemispheric approach to the study of the cultural production of the Americas is superior to nationalist oriented research.

⁴ Inter-American studies has a long history, and I am only focusing on a more recent phase here. For background on the various periods of inter-American research see my essay “Inter-American Studies or Imperial American Studies?”

⁵ For more on this point see my essay “Inter-American Studies or Imperial American Studies?”

I have the sense that inter-Americanists have come to the end of the road on this topic, that we have pretty much said all that can be said in this regard, and yet, there is this persistent lingering. For example, the American Studies Association has dedicated its annual conference to this question or some facsimile of it on numerous occasions over the past ten years. Its theme in 2006 was “The United States from Inside and Out,” and in 2007 it was “América Aquí: Transhemispheric Visions and Community Connections.” The idea that American Studies and Latin American studies will have to grapple with the borders that define their areas of study seems somewhat inevitable. Inter-American studies, however, ideally should have been able to avoid such questions since its primary identification was not with a defined geographical space but with a comparative method. And yet, inter-Americanists have continued to be preoccupied with mapping the borders of their field.⁶

Much in the same way that Latino studies has become overwhelmed by questions of who and what is Latino, inter-American studies has become overshadowed by an incessant preoccupation with who should practice it and how to define it. The problem is not so much the questions, but the way that they are framed. The tendency has been to frame these questions ontologically rather than ethically. In the simplest sense we have seen the “what” privilege the “why” in our critical questions about the field. This structuring of our research has meant that, ironically, inter-American studies has found itself organizing its modes of inquiry on precisely the same flawed grounding as the earlier versions of area studies. Let me explain.

In a certain sense the impulse to revamp area studies in the 1980s was based on the revelation that area studies had been driven from its inception by an ethical-political agenda. One which we might say was highly *unethical* in its belief that certain segments of the world were entitled to generate knowledge about other segments of the world and to

⁶ A series of panels at the 2007 American Studies Association took up precisely this question. Of interest, is the fact that the same questions had been posed at a session entitled “Where Does Latin American Studies End and American Studies Begin?” of the 2006 ASA. Certainly the topic would not be exhausted by a single panel. I mention this continuity simply to indicate the fact that this issue remained of interest to scholars.

then base foreign and economic policy on such hierarchies. Seen from this view, the ontological partitioning of the world into area studies was exposed for its flaws.⁷ The flaws were two-fold: ontologically it was argued that these categories were inadequate to describe the world and ethically it was argued that these categories advanced US neo-imperial ideology. The timing of these reconsiderations of area studies intersected, though, with a moment when US academics were increasingly hesitant to highlight political vision in their work. In the wake of deconstruction and post-structural relativism, any effort to foreground the ethical dimensions of one's research seemed akin to ideological tyranny. So, the consequence was that, even though the critique of area studies had begun largely as a critique of how American exceptionalist values had codified the study of world regions within US academies, no other competing ethical project was offered in its place. Consequently, the bulk of scholarship advocating the practice of inter-American studies concentrates on ontological motives. For instance, Paul Jay explains the motive for Americanists to practice inter-American studies as grounded in "a broad critique of the narrow, nationalist conflation of the American and the United States," that has "sparked vigorous efforts to resituate the study of United States literature and culture in a hemispheric or Pan-American context" (Jay 45). In very general terms the master narrative of US exceptionalism and Latin American barbarism was retold as a multi-vocal narrative of pan-Americanism. Consequently, Inter-American Studies was often defined as a

⁷ Much research exists on the ideologies of Latin American studies as practiced in the United States. Richard Morse, writing in 1964, suggested that many US Latin Americanists were unconscious of their own colonialist attitudes towards the region, and he claimed that their work often revealed a "subconscious hostility" towards their object of study (170). Mark T. Berger's *Under Northern Eyes* provides a history of Latin American studies in the US; he argues that: "The professional study of Latin America is embedded in a long tradition of viewing Latin America through northern eyes" where "most Latin American specialists, like US policy-makers, are estranged from Latin America" (19). Walter Mignolo, Morse and Berger point out that Latin American Studies, like any academic practice in the United States, reflects prevailing discourses of power. Alberto Moreiras also describes this tendency in Latinamericanism: "Latinamericanist knowledge aspires to a particular form of disciplinary power that it inherits from the imperial state apparatus" (32). In a corollary fashion, much research was dedicated to unraveling the ideological infrastructure of the myth and symbol school that shaped earlier American studies and perpetuated the notion of exceptionalist America. On this see Bruce Kuklick.

corrective to the geographical mistakes of area studies and American studies, but of course the field was also a corrective to the ethical assumptions of these fields as well. The question that I am interested in posing is this: How would our concerns about the practice of inter-American studies change if we began by considering the field as an ethical intervention rather than an ontological one?

Before addressing this question, it might first be necessary to defend it, since I suspect that most academics who are working in post-nationalist, post-area studies projects imagine their work to be primarily a form of critical intervention that is driven by a desire to unravel epistemic hegemonies particularly those associated with the nation-state and US imperialism. Much of this work owes a debt to the critique of nationalism offered by post-colonial scholars like Homi Bhabha in the 1990s. It is worth revisiting these ideas now since I believe that they continue to shape our thoughts about the connections between ontology and regional studies.

Bhabha's work on nationalism focuses on the idea that national identities are both pedagogical and performative, where the pedagogical functions as the "narrated" national essence and the performative is the subjective, discontinuous narratable aspect of the nation. Bhabha argues that it is the disjunction between these two areas of national identity that produces an opening for the emancipatory agency of liminal space. "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological maneuvers through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha 149). Donald Pease makes a similar argument when he speaks of the divide between internalized and externalized models of national identity:

The national narrative sustains its coherence by transforming internal divisions into the symbolic demand that the subjects conscripted within its narrativity misrecognize the figures it excludes as simulacra of themselves. But when these figures surge up at these internal divides, as unintegrated externalities, they expose national identity as an artifact rather than a tacit assumption, a purely contingent social construction rather than a meta-social universal. (5)

At the center of these interventions was the critique of the essentialist features of nationalism, of their violent exclusions, and normative narratives. Such moves clearly had an ethical motive of dismantling the oppressive features of nationalism and they were no doubt salubrious. The idea that nationalist narratives serve to regulate and control identity, arguably, has become an assumed feature of most contemporary scholarship.

Alongside these assumptions, though, were corollary concerns that any conceptual groupings inevitably carried with them repressive tendencies. Thus, the antidote to the hegemonies of nationalism and especially to US hegemony appeared to be found in attention to the particular, to deconstruction, and to counternarratives of difference—all strategies that combat the repressive features of ontological categories with anti-ontologies, sub-ontologies, or counter-ontologies. The operative axes that drove the critical questioning of the ontologies of region, nation, and identity, paradoxically were themselves ontological, even if there were only so in their refusal of ontology. The solution to the hegemonies of area studies seemed to be found in work that rescued subaltern voices that had been silenced, that crossed borders and challenged the structures of power, and that deconstructed identity markers. But such work is a shell game since every rescued voice implies another that has not been heard, and every border crossing leads to the creation of new borders, and every deconstructed identity marker leaves another less capacious but nonetheless no less repressive identity marker in its place. The point is not to abandon such work, but to recognize that attention to the particular, deconstruction of identity markers, and crossing borders are moves that when offered as a political end-in-themselves are self-perpetuating because they depend on that which they negate.

Once it has been shown that structures of knowledge legitimate regimes of power, troubling those structures appears to circumvent the problem of relying on another regime of power. Except that there is always-already another regime of power and structure of knowledge waiting to replace the exposed. So, for instance, if one suggests that the answer to the regulatory fiction of American exceptionalism is found in an inter-

American perspective, then the next step would be to criticize inter-Americanist research for excluding other perspectives such as those that are transatlantic or of the Global South, and so on. Every new mapping once it has effectively displaced its predecessor is equally vulnerable to critique. The process is endless and, while often useful for reshaping the way we think about the world, without a clear ethico-political motive of addressing hegemony or imperialism the practice in-and-of-itself has limited critical impact.

The key problem, and it is perhaps the most daunting one for those of us who work on the cultures of specific parts of the world, is how to question the ontological parameters of our work without becoming overwhelmed by them. When is it useful to attach regional designations to cultural practices and when are such labels alibis for repressive thought structures? What if our critical work is permanently engaged in a dialectic of disentangling and reifying thought processes? It is my sense that these questions have already been well posed, especially through the work of Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, but the fact that we return to them again and again suggests that these questions have become both paradigmatic and paralyzing.

So, the first and primary reason why the ontological overshadows the ethical in reconsiderations of area studies results from the focus on a variety of anti-ontologies as antidotes to regulatory fictions of identity. Another impediment to engaging with the ethical implications of our research relates to the failure to appreciate questions of degree. If structures of knowledge that carry labels like truth, nation, freedom, equality etc. have been shown to function repressively and often violently, then aren't such concepts inherently flawed? Page DuBois claims that it is false to assume a binary between violently imposed truths and relinquishing the "will to truth:"

there are other ways of describing the truth—as the correspondence between words and things, between knowledge and reality, as a multiple, polyvalent assembly of voices. Truth can be understood as a process, a dialectic, less recovery of something hidden or lost, rather a creation in democratic dialogue. Truth that is produced in struggle and debate, the truth of democracy, of difference, need not be imagined as a secret, as known only to a few to whom that secret manifests itself" (147).

DuBois's point is that all truths are not equal, just as all national identities are not equal, just as all definitions of freedom are not equal. Certainly the nationalisms of George W. Bush and Evo Morales are not the same. The challenge is to find a way to disentangle these "truths" since the answer to categories of containment is not found in rejection, but in nuance and degree. This means rethinking Althusser's famous maxim that the "State is a 'machine' of repression" since, while true, such a position fails to account for the complexity and range of state repression (n.p.). The anti-state view forecloses appreciation of the serious differences between George W. Bush's state of exception and the neoliberal state of Bill Clinton, or between the Cuban state under Fidel Castro versus that of Gerardo Machado.

The answer is not to be found in an antinomy between Truth and relativism or between Nation and nations. Such patterns of thought depend on a binary between the particular and the totalizing, where the particular is valued over the universal. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note in *Empire* the formation of power today no longer obeys traditional hierarchies, a fact that calls for a new vision of how best to challenge these power structures:

The affirmation of hybridities and the free play of differences across boundaries, however, is only liberatory in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions. The structures and logics of power in the contemporary world are entirely immune to the 'liberatory' weapons of the postmodernist politics of difference. In fact, *Empire* too is bent on doing away with those modern forms of sovereignty and on setting differences to play across boundaries. Despite the best intentions, then, the postmodern politics of difference not only is ineffective against but can even coincide with and support the functions and practices of imperial rule. (142)

The practical impact of such observations has significant consequences for area studies since the destabilizing of the intellectual and geographic cartographies that have shaped critical responses to the traditional practices of American and Latin American studies may be more *similar* to structures of power than *different*. Historical documents from the Monroe Doctrine to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to the USA PATRIOT Act teach us, in fact, of the ways that the United States has repeatedly extended its "sovereignty" beyond the physical borders of the nation-state. Hardt and

Negri consider this practice to be a fairly recent phenomenon, but I would argue that dominant power has historically depended on an interplay between strategic territorializations and deterritorializations.⁸ Isn't imperialism precisely indicative of the simultaneous extension and preservation of the boundaries of power? Isn't the fluidity of its domain the source of its hegemony? And, if this is true, why would we think that loosening borders, crossing boundaries, and breaking down barriers were in-and-of-themselves acts of resistance?

In one stark example of the ways that the breakdown of categories of space can reinforce repressive state power, contemporary military tactics used by the Israeli Defense Force use theories by Deleuze and Guattari to rethink their approach to the shape and space of urban warfare. Eyal Weizman explains that,

as far as the military is concerned, urban warfare is the ultimate Postmodern form of conflict. Belief in a logically structured and single-track battle-plan is lost in the face of the complexity and ambiguity of the urban reality. Civilians become combatants, and combatants become civilians. Identity can be changed as quickly as gender can be feigned: the transformation of women into fighting men can occur at the speed that it takes an undercover 'Arabized' Israeli soldier or a camouflaged Palestinian fighter to pull a machine-gun out from under a dress. (n.p.)

The use of theory by the military has a long history and is often manipulated, the point to this example is simply to demonstrate that flow, loose borders, reconceptualized space, and shifting identities only function as acts of resistance in worlds where power plots a clear and contained course and identities are stable. The celebration of deterritorialization and the opening of borders as acts of resistance in-and-of-themselves in the context of extraordinary rendition, the bare life of refugee camps, and the permanent borderless war on terror fail to recognize the true nature of power. If rebels and the military use fluid space and flexible boundaries in the same ways, then it is not the use of space that holds political potential. The political differences between these actions are revealed when we ask *why* they use space in particular ways.

⁸ For more on this practice in the context of the United States and American Studies, see my essay, "E Pluribus Unum/ Ex Uno Plura: Legislating and Deregulating American Studies post 9/11."

If the challenges to the oppressive ontologies of Latin American and American studies offered by inter-American studies have largely depended themselves on ontological variations—anti-ontologies, sub-ontologies, or counter-ontologies—and if these practices can be shown to unwittingly mimic the exercise of imperial power, then perhaps it is time to foreground the ways that these ontological battles have served to eclipse other ways of framing our work. My suggestion is that we reflect on the purpose and place of Latin American, American, and inter-American studies from a different vantage point—one that does not privilege the ontological drive to create or deconstruct categories, but is grounded rather in ethical considerations. For example, rather than tell the story of inter-American studies as one which redraws a flawed map of the hemisphere, I suggest that we foreground the ethical motivations that lie behind the study of the Americas, regardless of the specific geographies in question. This would mean that the “why” of our work would take place over the “what.” Ironically, the distrust of ethical groundings that accompanied the poststructural turn has often resulted in strategic essentialisms that, while oriented towards the particular, inevitably serve to construct boundaries and imply value systems. What if we were to reverse this trend and consider the ontological via the ethical? Such a practice would, in turn, result in a rethinking of the loosening of geographic boundaries as the panacea for structures of power and knowledge. The result would be to understand the study of regions and nation-states as both necessary and contingent. Under this scenario, the specific topoi—whether US, Latin American, or inter-American—would not offer an implied source of scholarly value, but rather the question of the value of research would emerge as a consequence of how, why, and to what end particular places or combinations of places were studied. Such a position would also deflate the current trend of imagining that research that resists geographic boundaries necessarily avoids the pitfalls of promoting intellectual imperialism and national exceptionalism. Certainly borders and boundaries deserve scrutiny and destabilization, but these gestures only make sense within a larger ethical-political project of challenging universally negative and historically material practices such as inequity, disenfranchisement, racism, impunity,

imperialism, neoliberalism, tyranny, and more. It goes without saying that an intellectual project that foregrounded the ethics and politics behind studying the regions of the Americas would necessarily be in a state of permanent questioning, revision, and critique. Rather than ask these questions through the backdoor as has taken place in recent debates about American, Latin American and inter-American studies, my suggestion is that they take center stage. Only then can we take area studies beyond ontology.

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