Beyond Prejudice and Pride: The Human Sciences in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Latin America

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Beyond Prejudice and Pride
The Human Sciences in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Latin America
By Julia Rodriguez*

ABSTRACT

Grappling with problematics of status and hierarchy, recent literature on the history of the human sciences in Latin America has gone through three overlapping phases. First, the scholarship has reflected a dialogue between Latin American scientists and their European colleagues, characterized by the “center/periphery” model of scientific diffusion. Next, scholars drew on postcolonial theory to undermine the power of the “center” and to recover the role of local agents, including both elites and subalterns. In the wake of numerous studies embracing both models, the way has been cleared to look at multiple dimensions simultaneously. Histories of the human sciences in the complex multicultural societies of Latin America provide an unusually direct path to integration. Moreover, this dynamic and multilayered approach has the potential to address ambivalences about authority and power that have characterized previous analyses of the production and application of knowledge about the human condition.

THAT SCIENCE CROSSES geographic, national, and cultural borders is by now a truism. New conceptual ideas such as the circulation of knowledge and contact zones are conspicuous in the field. Recently, calls to globalize science have intensified, urging historians of science from all areas to think beyond our nationally bounded training.1 The history of science in Latin America is almost by definition transnational, characterized by recurrent interaction between foreign and local ideas, actors, and institutional structures. The region has been a cultural crossroads and a rich site of scientific ideas, inspiration, and evidence since 1492.2 Scholars have long been aware of the region’s integration with Europe, Africa, North America, and even Asia and are increasingly demonstrating the extent to which Latin American history is “critical to how we understand world pro-

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2 For recent overviews of the field see Maria Portuondo, “Constructing a Narrative: The History of Science and Technology in Latin America,” History Compass, 2009, 7:500–522; and the website HOSLAC: History of Science in Latin America and the Caribbean (www.hoslac.org).

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cesses.”3 Observers have been intrigued by Latin America’s role in scientific breakthroughs or unusual applications of global science, such as Argentina’s role in the development of fingerprint classification or Mexico’s unique state-sponsored anthropology.4 Some of the insights are specific to their Latin American settings, such as the development of schools of tropical medicine or studies of rare and local flora and fauna. Others are relevant for their creative use of resources, often resulting in distinct laboratory styles and local applications. Yet others reflect unique instances of the interplay between science and society—such as the rise of psychoanalysis as an enormously popular and culturally relevant phenomenon in Buenos Aires.5 Such stories of scientific relevance and connection can help to correct misperceptions of Latin America as a scientific backwater. But they also run the risk of presenting the region as the site of odd or unusual events. For the Latin Americanist historian of science, the promise of insight goes beyond these curiosities. In fact, the field is moving past the specific and anomalous to focus on methodological contributions that have a bearing on other areas.

If Latin America is a producer, and not just a passive recipient, of universal science, the problem arises of how knowledge moves from one particular location into general circulation. And what about the impact on and relevance for the local setting? Latin America, it turns out, provides fertile ground to explore both sets of questions within the framework of what the historical geographer David Livingstone calls the “geographies of science.” Livingstone’s concept embraces local conditions as a critical ingredient of the transnational production of scientific knowledge, in opposition to purist ideas of knowledge as a “detached enterprise, impartial and impersonal in its interrogation of nature,” separate from social context. Yet the ultimate aim is not just microhistories of place: “Scientific findings . . . are both local and global; they are both particular and universal; they are both provincial and transcendent.”6

Looking at Latin America, the historian Ricardo Salvatore points out in the introduction to his edited volume Los lugares del saber [Sites of Knowledge] that local knowledge production, especially in the human and social sciences, has almost always resulted from the merging of situated ideas and disciplinary frameworks that are by their nature transnational. He poses some helpful questions for our inquiries: “What does it mean to

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construct knowledge in and from a particular place? How does the transnational current of objects, texts, and experts contribute to the enterprise of knowledge? What occurs when a knowledge or disciplinary project acquires a local or national character? When and why does a body of knowledge become transnational and therefore seemingly ‘out of nowhere’ in particular?” Salvatore’s thoughts also complement Lauren Benton’s suggestion—formulated in the context of recent reconceptualizations of Latin America’s place in world history—that we seek out “wormholes,” stories and instances that “thread through seemingly unconnected parts of the globe, linking noncontiguous regions.” Benton calls for nothing less than “a reorientation of world history and a repositioning of Latin America within it,” citing historical processes of commerce and law as obvious starting points.7

For historians of science, a smart centering of Latin America is not easy. It requires an integrated, multisite, multistrata, and often multilingual approach; the types of questions we ask are equally important. In the past forty years, approaches to the complexities of transnational human sciences in Latin America have varied in their emphases, vacillating between a focus on external and internal structures as well as between theory, practice, and experience. We now find ourselves at a promising moment of integration of the foreign and the local, of ideas and outcomes. To that end, historical studies of the human sciences, especially in the rich and complex multicultural societies of Latin America, provide an unusually direct path to such an integration.

**THE HUMAN SCIENCES IN LATIN AMERICA**

While location to a great extent determines the material reality for all scientific fields—for example, providing access to raw data, dictating the need to study abroad or contend with a lack of funds and equipment—the human sciences are embedded in place in particular ways. A distinction of the human sciences is that they relate directly to behavior and often contain assumptions and prescriptions for individuals and population groups alike.8 Economic, psychological, and “racial” forces are routinely accounted for in the human sciences. Moreover, the human sciences engage questions of environment versus biology, scrutinizing the details of the local milieu. In Latin America, an additional particularity of the human sciences is that their subject matter frequently invites comparison with Europe and “universal” humanity. Here, science debates have routinely engaged questions about whether “we” are superior, inferior, or the same, about why “we” have fewer institutions or less government or popular support for our work. Explicitly or implicitly, they have raised comparative questions about “our” racial stock and national characteristics. (The question of who this “we” included more often than not remained murky and confused.) But the actual subjects of human science research in Latin America were in practice always local—for example, the science looked at Argentine criminals, Mexican mental patients, Andean Indians.

Grappling with these problematics of status and hierarchy, recent literature on the

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history of the human sciences in Latin America has gone through three overlapping phases. First, the scholarship has reflected a dialogue and at times a struggle between Latin American scientists and their European colleagues over method, approach, and worldview. This literature was for a while dominated by the “center/periphery” model of scientific diffusion. Studies took as their starting point the realities of geopolitical and scientific imbalances of power faced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin American scientists. They assumed that, given their place in the postcolonial world order of the late nineteenth century, Latin American scientists had to embrace global science and in fact sought membership in a “universal” science defined by the countries of the Northern Hemisphere.

In a subsequent wave of literature, scholars drew on postcolonial theory to challenge this rigid view, undermining the power of the “center” and eventually seeking to recover the role of local agents, including both elites and subalterns. In this phase, historians turned to close examinations of national and local science, including the relationship between science and the state, especially in institutions of education, public health, and “social control,” such as prisons and asylums. They brought out from the shadows scientists who in their day were both nationally influential and internationally recognized, but who had been overlooked in the scholarship, such as the Argentine police scientist Juan Vucetich and the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz. By and large, these studies at the local and national levels sought to appreciate Latin American science on its own terms, often finding instances of phenomenal, and previously unacknowledged, local achievement.

Studies emphasizing local science necessarily shifted our vision. However, the importance of the old “centers” cannot be ignored. In the wake of the numerous publications embracing both models, the way has been cleared to look at multiple dimensions simultaneously, for a more subtle and finely tuned picture. While there continue to be published many studies of national science in Latin America, insightful and sophisticated in their own right, a small number of ambitious studies aim to address the multinodal and multilevel connections and processes, seeking, again, those “wormholes” of relevance. After some forty years of scholarship shifting between global and local themes, between prejudice and pride, we are now poised to move “beyond” the global/local dichotomy. Aside from providing good stories, such a dynamic and multilayered approach has the

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9 The earliest publication to map out the center/periphery model was George Basalla’s article “The Spread of Western Science,” *Science*, 1967, 156(3775):611–622. Basalla’s model influenced a number of Latin American science studies, such as Elena Díaz et al., eds., *La ciencia periférica: Ciencia y sociedad en Venezuela* (Caracas: Monte Avile, 1983); for an early inversion of the model see Marcos Cueto, *Excelencia en la periferia: Actividades científicas e investigación biomédica en el Perú, 1890–1950* (Lima: CONCYTEC, 1989).

10 For work that looks closely at national or local science see Silvana Vallone, *Los peligros del orden: El discurso positivista en la trama del control social* (Mendoza: EDIUNC, 2009); Gilberto Hochman and Diego Armus, eds., *Cuidar, controlar, curar: Ensaios históricos sobre saúde e doença na América Latina e Caribe* (Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz, 2004); Claudia Agostini and Elisa Speckman Guerra, *De normas y transgresiones: Enfermedades y crimen en América Latina, 1850–1950* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005); and Maria Argeri, *De guerreros a delincuentes: La desarticulación de las jefaturas indígenas y el poder judicial* (Madrid: CSIC, 2005). Studies that focus on overlooked but important figures include Rodríguez, “South Atlantic Crossings” (cit. n. 4); and Mauricio Augosto Font and Alfonso W. Quiroz, eds., *Cuban Counterpoints: The Legacy of Fernando Ortíz* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2005).

potential to clear up the ambivalences about authority and power that have characterized previous analyses of the production and application of knowledge about the human condition.

PREJUDICE: CENTER, PERIPHERY, AND THE AMBIVALENCES OF EUROCENTRISM

As in many other locales, in Latin America the human sciences have played a unique and powerful role. Encompassing the disciplines of anthropology, criminology, psychology, the social sciences (sociology, economics), and, for some, geography, history, and education, the human sciences carry specific and direct sociopolitical implications—in fact, they are often taken as prescriptive or even disciplinary. There is considerable overlap with medicine and public health, especially in the history of applied fields such as criminology and psychology. In Latin America, these fields came into fruition in the late nineteenth century and were further institutionalized and entrenched in the twentieth.12 These disciplines expanded considerably after about 1870, as the chaos of the post-independence period receded and relative stability returned and as many Latin American countries saw a boom in state institution building, focused especially on public works, public health, and education.

The expansion of state science in the late nineteenth century was guided largely by European positivism, as filtered through the lenses of Latin American elites’ visions of progress.13 Positivism framed most if not all discussions of the human sciences until the mid-twentieth century, although it did have its critics earlier, mostly from the Catholic Church. As Edgardo Lander has pointed out, owing to the near-hegemony of positivism in Latin American scientific and intellectual circles, and because the “problems” identified in the social sciences originated in nineteenth-century Western Europe and the United States, many Latin American ideas were largely shaped by assumptions of European superiority. Institutions, organizations, and university curricula were modeled on European ones, and the end goals of social engineering projects often corresponded to a white, North Atlantic ideal.14 Positivism’s influence among late nineteenth-century liberals and scientists in Latin America, according to Jorge Balán, can be seen in the marriage of “progress” and science, “shaped by the French tradition of . . . science in the service of the secular state.”15 (A stark example of Latin American elites’ worship of positivism is reflected in the motto on the Brazilian flag since 1889: “Order and Progress.”)

14 In a further twist, the scientific study of non-European people was by definition “segregated”—left to orientalists and area studies specialists. See Edgardo Lander, “Eurocentrism and Colonialism in Latin American Social Thought,” Nepantla, 2000, 1:519–532, esp. p. 527.
Latin American scientists who engaged with “Western” or European science and positivism in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as the Argentine sociologist José Ingenieros or the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, had exaggerated attachments to its methods but also an ambivalent relationship with it. Transcontinental relationships between human scientists were fraught with contradiction, unevenness, and indecision. On the one hand, Latin Americans were caught between admiration and resentment of towering figures and ideas of European science; on the other hand, European scientists were increasingly humbled and thrown into doubt as their contact with the “field” deepened. As a result, numerous attempts were made to reconcile European models with the messier realities of multicultural societies still staggering under the weight of traditional, semifeudal structures. Yet, as Lander points out, while Latin American leaders and intellectuals embraced European positivism “in their attempt to transplant and install a replica of their understanding of the European or North American experience,” in the process they often ignored the realities of the material and social conditions in their own backyards.

If most practitioners of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century human sciences on both sides of the Atlantic long understood those disciplines as emanating from Europe, historical explorations have shown that what actually transpired in the circulation of ideas, including their sources and impact, was more complicated. For example, Nancy Leys Stepan’s 1991 book “The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America, a pioneering study of eugenics in three Latin American countries, emphasized the specific national interpretations of that powerful set of ideas. While recognizing the North Atlantic point of origin of eugenic thought, the book challenged the center/periphery model by focusing on the unique local dynamics in the three countries. Examinations of eugenics and related fields in Latin American settings, primarily Brazil and Argentina, continue to be an area of intense scholarly interest. Even as Europe and the United States remain the implicit paragons, Latin American iterations continue to capture historians’ interest insofar as the “well-born science” directly raised questions of superiority and inferiority and comparative human traits. Given eugenicists’ focus on specific human behavior, the topic also (like


the history of public health) opens the door to detailed studies of its local and particular courses.

PRIDE: LOCAL SCIENCE AND EXCELLENCE

Perhaps in reaction to the rigidity and limitations of the center/periphery model, historians of the human sciences turned to closer examinations of national and local scientific dynamics. This trend resulted in a keen look at the relationship between science and the state, a subject almost unavoidable in the history of the human sciences. It is well documented that scientists in Latin America have long enjoyed close contact with the state, holding powerful positions in institutions of health, education, and social control. In the twentieth century, scientists would also be invited to take up new roles in crafting economic, legal, and political policy, both nationally and regionally.

Latin American historiography provides numerous examples of state science, especially under centralized, activist governments. Eugenics, again, was exposed in its distinct national character and shown to be closely aligned with government agendas, if often unfinished and unfulfillable. Another stunning example of state science is the technocratic class of the fin-de-siècle Mexican state called the científicos (literally, “the scientists”). In the words of the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, the científicos embodied a “nationalist orthodoxy” in science, in which anthropological ideas and institutions were harnessed to national myths, including the attempted reshaping of Mexican identity based largely on the assimilation and incorporation of the Indian “Other.”

Scholars have also been drawn to histories of criminology and related fields, with interest in wide-ranging facets such as forensics, prisons, policing, and social control of dangerous populations.23

Many, but not all, of these studies emphasize the disciplinary nature of the applied human sciences—for instance, in asylums and policing; they have also explored how criminology overlapped significantly with anthropology and psychiatry.24

The state is not the only actor, however. A body of work has emerged on the heels of studies of the social control literature that de-emphasizes the role of government officials. These studies instead highlight the local, on-the-ground experience of the human sciences, emphasizing their importance for understanding social, cultural, and political moments. Such work often takes into account the perspective of nonelite actors such as laboratory workers, patients, and assistants and examines the broader social and cultural interpretations of official scientific ideas.25

Methodological tensions have surfaced between these two approaches, centering on questions of scope, agency, and outcomes. In broad strokes, one side points out that science almost always involves elites, even more so in Latin American countries with entrenched oligarchies and self-reproducing elites that included scientists. It also recognizes the significance of global structures, power, and transcontinental ideas. On the other side, local, microhistorical studies often rightly point out the failure of the state to carry out its social reform projects; they also uncover the participation of the disenfranchised or “subaltern” and instances of resistance to state engineering efforts. To a great extent, this scholarly divide is a distraction—we do not, in fact, face an either/or choice, a battle between social history and the history of ideas. On the contrary, increasing numbers of case studies bring these perspectives together, merging local experience and outcomes with extranational factors: geopolitical, intellectual, practical. Highlighting this trend, Salvatore points to new scholarship that looks at “moments of local-global intersection,” allowing us to map intellectual geographies that take local knowledge into account. Increasingly, new investigations strive for what Jeremy Adelman refers to as the “heterogeneous integration” of Latin America, traversing the various and shifting centers, epicenters, and peripheries, as well as the “negotiations, compromises, and institutional syncretisms” involved in that process.26

MANY CENTERS: DYNAMIC AND MULTINODAL SCIENCE

Current work on the history of Latin American human sciences is moving toward this multilayered, multinodal recounting of the circulation of scientific ideas. For example, there has been of late an explosion in histories of anthropology from a variety of angles, including expeditions, archaeology, fieldwork, museums and collections, policy, and


theory. Many of these new histories of anthropology provide subtle insight into latterday Euro-American contact and exchange. Another area now attracting attention is the history of applied social science, such as censuses. New policy histories are often exquisitely sensitive to local/global dynamics—for example, Adelman’s study of Albert Hirschman, the exceptional development economist. Salvatore documents the complicated back-and-forth, incomplete collaboration, and power struggles among U.S. and Latin American policy makers in the initial stages of Pan-Americanism. Additional recent transnational policy histories include Federico Finchelstein’s study of Fascist ideology and policy in Italy and Argentina and Sergio Silva Castañeda’s study of demography in Mexico and Spain.

The history of the social sciences of the mid-twentieth century provides a striking example of Latin America’s rootedness in global intellectual currents. After World War


II, Latin America (especially Brazil) emerged in full force as a “center” of social science theory, producing in particular the well-known school of political economy known as Dependency Theory (DT). This school of thought emerged from a flourishing Latin American social science community in the 1960s and 1970s that produced many new and unique concepts recognized worldwide, including internal colonialism and pedagogy of the oppressed.33 DT was created and popularized by a group of Latin American Marxist academics, including the Chilean economist Enzo Faletto, the Brazilian economist Celso Furtado, and the Brazilian sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who later moved to the right and became president of Brazil (1995–2003). Cardoso and Faletto, in particular, became virtual household names (at least in academic and policy circles) with their 1979 book *Dependency and Development in Latin America*.

While the DT model had global applicability and was in fact adopted worldwide, it was seen then (and now) as a distinctly Latin American response to mainstream Modernization Theory (MT), a philosophy that privileged North Atlantic models of development while ignoring historical patterns of exploitation. Dependency theorists rejected the imitative prescriptions of MT and drew attention to the uneven distribution of global wealth. In this sense, DT was part of a longer thread of postcolonial consciousness reaching back to the Cuban nationalist José Martí and other early twentieth-century critics of Northern imperialism. Yet Ramón Grosfoguel, in recounting the complicated story of DT’s origins, shows that while Latin American dependistas genuinely broke through the hegemonic perspective of the United States regarding development and economic policy, they were nonetheless trapped in cultural and perspectival mind-sets that reflected familiar hierarchies. For example, twentieth-century social scientists in Latin America were largely blind to the inequalities within their own societies.34 The history of DT and international social science in Latin America highlights the need to examine critically origins and impacts on the ground in the localities where theories flourish, as we simultaneously trace their global circulation.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

It is not easy to get multilevel, multidirectional work right, with the local and the global integrated and fine detail and big themes addressed equally well.35 In the history of the Latin American human sciences, challenges remain: accounting for diverse societies; incorporating the subaltern; speaking across the North/South divide; and, finally, exploring more thoroughly the regional (or South–South) connections.36

The stakes of grasping the complex dynamics that play out in the human sciences are high: social science ideas continue to shape state programs, economic and political

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36 See Ori Preuss, *Bridging the Island: Brazilians’ Views of Spanish America and Themselves, 1865–1912* (Madrid/Frankfurt: Vervuert, 2011), a study of Brazilian national identity in Latin American context that demonstrates how transnational history engages not just “center and periphery” but also dynamics among Latin America countries themselves.
policies, cultural attitudes, and social practices, whether they emanate from without or within the nation. (Brazil’s far-reaching recent affirmative action policies are a case in point.) Latin American governments have long harnessed science for concrete social goals and, while rarely successful in administering them in a totalistic manner, have nonetheless had an impact on their populations through forced relocation of minority groups, by the suppression or management of dissent, by delineating social roles for men and women, and by disciplining children and immigrants. Unequal access to power and resources has been both intensified and challenged in Latin America on the basis of theories of gender, class, and (especially) race. Even today, social hierarchies can be preserved or subverted on the basis of powerful ideas about individual and group capabilities and features.

A recent study underscores the relevance of our work as historians who explore trends in the human sciences. In 2013, psychological researchers at two U.S. universities reported that “commonly observed differences in how groups perceive racism may be explained by ignorance about—and even denial of—the extent of racism over the course of history.” They further concluded that “individuals from the majority group may deny racism in the context of current events because they are ignorant about documented racism from the past.” Of course, as historians of science, we approach these conclusions carefully, thoughtfully assessing the psychologists’ assumptions and methodology. And yet, doesn’t this study highlight how the social sciences—fields that lay claim to knowledge about human behavior—are centrally critical to the human experience? Disciplines that claim objective knowledge about society have operational significance in our daily lives. They have the potential to promote segregation and stratification or empathetic and fair estimations of the human condition. The elaboration of their theories is shaped by the multiple locations, origins, and layers through which ideas pass before landing in textbooks, laws, and organizations. Now more than ever, we who study the social dimensions of science are on the path to recognizing more fully the complex, multinodal, and often overlapping transnational and local processes by which we view our neighbors and ourselves. That’s one idea we shouldn’t be ambivalent about.