

Why the Immigrant Rights Struggle Compels Us to Reconceptualize Both Latin American and Latino/a Studies

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What is Latin America? Who is a Latin American? To what do “Latin American Studies” and “Latino/a Studies” refer? To what ought they refer? These are not new questions. But they are in my view all the more pressing in light of the transnational processes sweeping the Western Hemisphere and the world as globalization proceeds. These processes compel us to reconceptualize Latin American as well as Latino/a Studies. Among the most salient of these processes are a worldwide upsurge in transnational migration as global capitalism reorganizes economies, labor markets, and social hierarchies in every locale in accordance with its logic of integrated transnational accumulation.

We know that Latin America—both the name itself and the reality which is purported to denote—is itself an invention. If that invention is going to have any relevance in this new century beyond a “colonial matrix of power,” to use Walter Dignolo’s phrase, it must refer to all those peoples who have become inextricably bound up over the past 515 years within that matrix. This includes the 40 million people of Latin American descent in the United States, some 20 million of them immigrants. Immigrant communities in this country, as elsewhere around the world, are increasingly transnational communities. The patterns of assimilation into a particular nation that corresponded to an earlier era in the global system have given way to ongoing bi- and multi-directional flows of people and culture, and to the rise of truly transnational social structures. “Latin American Studies,” let us recall, emerged in U.S. universities as an object of Cold War “area studies.” The knowledge that was supposed to be generated by these “area studies” would help guide U.S. foreign policy and resolve problems of stability, development and integration of these areas into the post- World War II capitalist world order. What use did the powers that be, and their organic intellectuals, have for integrated, world-historic knowledge of Latino/a population in the United States? “Latino/a Studies” emerged from a very distinct dynamic, that of struggles to establish in the North American academy ethnic, racial, diaspora, anti-colonial and multicultural studies in the wake of the civil rights movement and other popular, national, and radical movements in the United States and around the world. But much of Latino/a studies became swept up in a nation-state framework of inquiry and more parochial and disabling U.S. race/ethnic relations paradigms.

Today, more than ever, the historical, socioeconomic, political, and cultural forces and dynamics shaping the reality of Latinos/as in the United States are the same ones that shape the lives of the 500 million people living south of the Rio Bravo. To consider inquiry into the reality of U.S.-based Latino/a populations as “Latino/a Studies” and inquiry into that reality south of the Rio Bravo as “Latin American Studies” is patently absurd. But it is more than that: it is epistemologically bankrupt and politically disempowering. It renders invisible to “Latin American Studies” the 40 million Latinos/as in the United States and cuts them off from the larger reality in which their lives are grounded at a time when our struggles and fates are more than ever shaped by our engagement with global-level processes and structures.

These Latino/a and other immigrant communities took the political stage by storm with unprecedented mass demonstrations across the United States that involved millions of immigrants and their allies in Spring 2006.² The immediate trigger was the introduction in the U.S. Congress of anti-immigrant legislation, but, more broadly, the protests represented the unleashing of pent-up anger and repudiation of what has been deepening exploitation and an escalation of anti-immigrant repression and racism. Dominant groups and the state were terrified by the mass mobilizations and they responded with a wave of repression, including stepping up raids, deportations, and anti-immigrant hysteria. What is the larger backdrop to these developments?

The latter decades of the 20th century began a period of massive new migrations worldwide, generated by the forces of capitalist globalization. A low-end estimate by the United Nations placed the number of immigrant workers in 2005 at some 200 million by the new century, double the amount of 25 years earlier. During the 1980s eight million Latin American emigrants arrived in the United States, nearly equal to the total figure of European immigrants who arrived on U.S. shores during the first decades of the 20th century, making of Latin America the principal origin of migration into the United States. This wave of out-migration from socially and economically devastated communities in the Hemisphere accelerated in the 1990s, and in the first decade of the new century, as globalization and neo-liberalism ravaged the region, displacing millions and generating a social disaster of unprecedented magnitude.³

The same capitalist globalization that triggers this mass migration also generates an escalating demand for immigrant labor. The division of the global labor force into citizens and non-citizens, immigrant and native workers, is a major new axis of inequality. The maintenance and strengthening of state controls over transnational labor creates the conditions for “immigrant labor” as a distinct category of labor in relation to capital, replacing earlier direct colonial and racial caste controls over labor worldwide. Most transnational immigrant workers become inserted into segmented labor markets as low-paid, low-status laborers under unstable and precarious work conditions without the political or labor rights accorded to citizens. They are racialized to the extent that cultural and physical markers can be used—or constructed—to demarcate these workers. Class, race, national borders and transnational processes all come together to generate explosive relations of exploitation and oppression, as well as new forms of resistance.

Repression and xenophobia against immigrants from Third World countries, of course, is ingrained in both U.S. and Western history. As indirect mechanisms have replaced colonialism in the mobilization of racialized labor pools, states assume a gatekeeper function⁴ to regulate the flow of labor for the capitalist economy. U.S. immigration

enforcement agencies undertake revolving door practices—opening and shutting the flow of immigration in accordance with the needs of capital accumulation during distinct periods. Immigrants are sucked up when their labor is needed, and then spit out when they become superfluous or potentially destabilizing to the system.

But these gatekeeper functions become more complex—and contradictory—as transnational capital comes to be increasingly dependent on immigrant labor. Latino/a immigrant labor became structurally embedded in the North American economy by the turn of the 21st century. Although immigrant labor sustains U.S. and Canadian agriculture, by the 1990s the majority of Latino/a immigrants were absorbed by industry, construction, and services as part of a general “Latinization” of the economy. Latino/a immigrants have massively swelled the lower rungs of the U.S. workforce, often displacing African American and white ethnic laborers. They provide much of the labor for hotels, restaurants, construction, janitorial and house cleaning, child care, domestic service, gardening and landscaping, hairdressing, delivery, meat and poultry packing, food processing, light manufacturing, retail, and so on.

Now more than ever, employers and the state must sustain a vast exploitable labor pool that exists under precarious conditions, that does not enjoy the civil, political, and labor rights of citizens, that face language barriers and a hostile cultural and ideological environment, and that is flexible and disposable through deportation. It is the *condition of deportable* they wish to create or preserve, since that condition assures the state the ability to super-exploit with impunity, and to dispose of without consequences, should this labor pool become unruly or unnecessary. Hence, a reserve army of immigrant labor must remain just that—*immigrant* labor, and, therefore, undocumented. Sustaining this reserve army of immigrant labor means creating—and reproducing—the division of workers into immigrants and citizens.

This requires contradictory practices on the part of the state. From the vantage points of dominant group interests the dilemma is how to deal with the new “barbarians” at Rome’s door. This contradictory situation helps explain the frightening escalation of hostilities and repression against Latino/a immigrants. The system needs Latino immigrant labor, yet the presence of that labor scares dominant groups and privileged, generally white, strata. Political and economic elites fear a rising tide of Latino immigrants will lead to a loss of cultural and political control, becoming a source of counter-hegemony and of instability, as immigrant labor in Paris showed to be in the late 2005, uprising in that European capital against racism and marginality.

The preferred solution for capital and its political representatives are “guest worker” programs that would convert immigrants into a quasi-indentured labor force, alongside campaigns to criminalize Latino/a immigrants and to militarize their control. The state must lift national borders for capital, but must reinforce these same national boundaries in its immigrant policies. In its ideological activities, it must generate a nationalist hysteria by propagating such images as “out of control borders” and “invasions of illegal immigrants,” given the special oppression and dehumanization involved in extracting their labor power.

The migrant labor phenomenon will continue to expand along with global capitalism. Just as capitalism has no control over its implacable expansion as a system, it cannot do away in its new globalist stage with transnational labor. Immigrant labor pools that can be super exploited economically, marginalized and disenfranchised politically, driven into the shadows, and deported when necessary, are the very epitome of capital’s naked domination in the age of global capitalism. Therefore, bound up with the immigrant debate in the United States is the entire political economy of global capitalism in the Western Hemisphere, the same political economy that is now being sharply contested throughout Latin America with the surge in mass popular struggles and the turn to the Left. The struggle for immigrant rights in the United States is, thus, part and parcel of this resistance to neo-liberalism, intimately connected to the larger Latin American—and worldwide—struggle for social justice.

No wonder protests and boycotts took place throughout Latin America on May Day 2006 in solidarity with Latino immigrants in the United States. The immigrant rights group that I am involved with, the Los Angeles-based *March 25 Coalition*, which played a key role in organizing the Spring 2006 mobilizations, sent several delegations to Mexico in 2006 to show solidarity with those protesting electoral fraud, and with the struggle in Oaxaca. It is also lobbying Latin American governments and social movements to brandish as their own the banner of the immigrant rights struggle in the United States.

As the peoples of Latin America on both sides of the Rio Bravo transnationalize their collective struggles we need a parallel intellectual and epistemological transnationalization in the academy. This would start with acknowledgment that “Latin American Studies” must include the reality of Latino/s in the United States and other transnational processes that go beyond the geographic map of Latin America, and that “Latino/a Studies” is but a component of a more expansive historical and contemporary domain beyond U.S. race/ethnic and cultural studies. This, of course, is just the beginning. We need to develop a global perspective across all fields and disciplines in the social sciences and humanities as we rethink what it means to study/engage particular regions, peoples, cultures, and histories in the global system.

Endnotes

1 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, Blackwell, 2005.

2 William I. Robinson, “Aquí Estamos y no Nos Vamos”: Global Capitalism and the Struggle for Immigrant Rights,” *Race and Class*, 48(2).

3 On these topics, see William I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and Latin America*, Johns Hopkins, forthcoming.

4 Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, Routledge, 2002.

