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Where Are the Cities? On Not Excluding (Much More Than) Half of the Latin Americans in Latin Americanist Geography

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Where Are the Cities? On Not Excluding (Much More Than) Half of the Latin Americans in Latin Americanist Geography.

Latin America as a whole is the second most urbanized region in the world. Central America, the hemisphere's least urbanized sub-region, is urbanizing at a pace only surpassed by sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, after careful review of CLAG publications since 1972—over 1,200 articles, essays, and book reviews in total—I was only able to identify 97 articles focused on cities, 130 including book reviews.¹ Even the slightly higher figure only accounts for 11 percent of all CLAG publications.² In other words, despite the urbanized nature of the region, CLAG's publication record continues to depict an overwhelmingly rural landscape.³ While there are many reasons for this, at its core, I believe, is the enduring legacy of Carl Sauer and his Berkeley School of Geography in the current approach to Latin Americanist geography in the United States. Sauer romanticized rural fieldwork and openly voiced an anti-urban bias (Skeels 1993). Moreover, many, if not most, of his descendants continue to do fieldwork in the image and likeness of the maestro and continue to mentor new generations of Latin Americanist geographers in the U.S. (e.g. Bebbington 1990; Coomes 1992; Doolittle 1979; Knapp 1984; Zimmerer 1988). To be sure, geographies of rural areas, of high mountains and forests, and of *campesinos*, “traditional”, and indigenous communities, are of paramount importance to the overall story and understanding of our region; the contributions that geographers have made in such areas are not up for debate.

I am concerned, however, that the insistence on rural settings has become a disciplinary practice that reflects and perpetuates an idea of Latin America as an “exotic venue” attracting visitors, including the scholar, due to “being appealingly different in environments, landscapes, peoples, and practices” (Gade, 2002, p. 12). The city in this view is not one of these exotic,

authentic spaces of Latin America but rather, an unappealing deviation from the mundane urban living back at home in the U.S.⁴ It is imperative that we not continue to ignore the fact that 81 percent of Latin Americans do not live in *el campo*; certainly our flagship journal should aim to redress the perpetuation of this imagined rural geography. The time is right to reposition Latin American cities as key politicized spaces that distinctly “expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places” (Hubbard et al., 2002, p. 62). A truly critical Latin Americanist geography that engages with “the most crucial scholarly and social debates of our times” (Gaffney et al., 2016, p. 1) needs to seriously consider getting its boots dirty... in concrete.

Is There Space for the Urban in CLAG?

I begin with a brief anecdote from the 2018 Conference of Latin America Geography in San José, Costa Rica. In July of 2017 I offered (a bit late but still nearly a year in advance) to lead a field trip to my field site, an informal urban settlement in San Jose known as La Carpio. As one of the most marginalized communities in the country frequently stereotyped as a nest of illegal Nicaraguan migrants and crime, I saw this as an opportunity for CLAGistas to visit a place where, I suspect, even the vast majority of Costa Ricans have never been to and couldn't pinpoint on a map. The CLAG 2018 conference committee ultimately denied the request due to planning challenges but also, quoting the email I received, because “we are trying to create the safest and most enjoyable conditions possible for CLAG, the collaborating institutions, and all the conference participants.” In the end, the three field trips offered constituted a typical tourist itinerary: a coffee farm, the cloud forest in Monteverde, and the Caribbean lowlands where, I assume, hugging a sloth was a bonus. Despite not being able to include a field trip in and around

the city where the conference was actually taking place, I was still able to lead, ironically enough, an “informal” field trip to the informal urban community. I am sure that the few participants that day can attest to the insightful stories told by residents of the community and to the political possibilities people create for themselves in everyday urban life that speak directly to critical theoretical debates within geography. I wonder about the degree to which we miss these stories because of prevalent negative preconceptions of Latin American urban spaces, which make them some sort of chaotic aberrations to be avoided in favor of the imagined idyllic rural geography of the region?

Rural Bias and the Legacy of Carl Sauer

Arguing for a new cultural geography, Cosgrove and Jackson (1987) suggested that the concerns of Carl Sauer and “his followers in the ‘Berkeley School’ (...) were rural and antiquarian” (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987, pp. 95-96). While “antiquarian” does not describe the concerns of today’s descendants of Sauer who largely serve as gatekeepers of Latin Americanist geography in the U.S., it seems to me that “rural” still largely applies. Much has been written about the contributions of Carl Sauer and his Berkeley School to the discipline of Geography in general, and to Latin Americanist geography in particular; the paramount importance of fieldwork—and in this I couldn’t agree more—is but one of them (West, 1981; Williams, 2014).⁵ I am interested, however, in Sauer’s insistence in equating true geographical fieldwork with immersing oneself in rural landscapes, and in his absolute antipathy for urban spaces. For while Sauer loved to get his boots dirty, he never did so in the city. For Sauer, rural ways of living and experiences in *el campo* were more authentic (Skeels, 1993). His travels to rural Mexico were what Skeels (1993) calls his “passage to premodernity”; a necessity to travel back to remote

times and places to escape from the modernizing lifestyles of the U.S. Mathewson (1987) too identifies Sauer's "austral impulse" to venture into remote regions south of the border as a necessity out of his antimodernist stance. To Sauer, urban spaces whether in the U.S. or in Latin America were part of the same modernist, unauthentic geography. Extrapolating this to a broader fieldwork philosophy, Sauer equated authentic fieldwork with fieldwork in rural areas or more accurately, with fieldwork in non-urban spaces. Even the Latin American city became but a reminder of the modernist and materialistic monster that Sauer was trying to escape back home.

Indeed, to Sauer, the urge to escape modernity and explore beyond its spaces was a trait shared by all geographers. In his *Education of a Geographer*, Sauer suggests that:

The geographer and the geographer-to-be are travellers, vicarious when they must, actual when they may. They are not of the class of tourists who are directed by guide books over the routes of the grand tours to the starred attractions, nor do they lodge at grand hotels. When vacation bound they may pass by the places one is supposed to see and seek out byways and unnoted places where they gain the feeling of personal discovery. They enjoy striking out on foot, away from roads and are pleased to camp out at the end of the day. Even the urban geographer may have in him the need to climb unpopulated mountains (Sauer 1956: 289).

To Sauer thus, ironically enough, the urban geographer goes against her/his natural geographic instincts when actually spending time in the city. Of course, Sauer's anti-urban bias is well documented. Skeels (1993), for example, argues that "Sauer's life and work were pitted by bouts of anti-urban sentiment and a strong association with the rural" (p. 30). Similarly, to Robert West who studied under Sauer, "one of Carl Sauer's life-long biases, in part an outgrowth of his rural and small-town upbringing, was his dislike of large urban centers. Not surprisingly, this prejudice extended to an apparent disinterest in studies of urban geography" (West, 1981, p. 18). Indeed, according to West, Sauer actively steered his students away from urban studies (West 1981).

As a result of this clear and well-documented rural/anti-urban bias, many generations of Latin Americanist geographers (see Matthewson, 2019 [this issue]) have been engrained not only with a particular idea of fieldwork, but more importantly with *a particular idea of Latin America* as a vast, *rural* laboratory. Sauer argued that “if we shrink the limits of geography, the greater field will still exist; it will be only our awareness that is diminished” (Sauer, 1956, p. 291). Ironically, Sauer’s dismissal of the urban might have bequeathed such limitations to the overall Latin Americanist geography tradition through a biased view of Latin American spaces worthy of geographical research. As it has been the case since at least the 1950s, Sauer’s intellectual descendants continue to dominate the major Latin Americanists geography departments in the U.S. and continue to train students with an affinity for the rural geographies of Latin America (Brown & Mathewson, 1999).

I am concerned that the over-representation of Latin America’s “traditional” geographies perpetuates the interests and colonial spaces of the past. According to Gade (2002), speaking of the Sauerian Latin Americanist tradition, “the dominance of the cultural-historical approach has yielded to North American geographers a somewhat particularistic view of the region” (p. 30). This view is decisively rural, exotic, and non-urban. This view cannot be detached from a long tradition of explorer-geographers serving specific colonial, imperialist, and militaristic purposes that date at least to Humboldt. It also cannot be detached from tropes of “tropicality” that just like Orientalism serve as a “potent discourse that constructs the tropical world as the West’s environmental Other” (Clayton & Bowd, 2006, p. 208). The rural/environmental bias of tropical geography is well documented, as well as the connections between Sauer and tropicalist geographers such as Pierre Gourou (Mathewson, 1993; Claval, 2005; Clayton & Bowd, 2006). Indeed, Sauer was an admirer of the French tropical geography that today is criticized for its

simplistic and parochial constructions of the tropical world, particularly its infatuation with exotic tropical landscapes (e.g. Sauer, 1956).

I am also concerned that the Latin Americanist geography tradition, through its discourses and practices, tells a single story of our region. Single Stories, according to Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009), produce misunderstandings, highlight differences, and cement stereotypes; single stories are always *incomplete stories*. The rural bias of our publications indeed reproduces a single story of Latin America. In a recent JLAG article, Marcus (2011) critiques the exclusion of Brazil in Latin Americanist geographic research and the bias towards Spanish-speaking countries and peoples, particularly by U.S. scholars, asserting that “this bias has contributed to dissemination of particular representations and to other broader ways of learning about, and of ‘viewing’ Latin America” that is narrated through the experiences of Spanish-speaking countries (p. 132). And while Brazil has drawn the interest of geographers, it is most often the Amazon region that gets represented in research and publications (Marcus, 2011). Thus, the single story of Brazil is reduced to the Amazon rainforest despite being among the most urbanized countries in Latin America.

The ability to tell the definite story of a people or a place, of course, is a performance of power (Adichie, 2009). Thus, as a USAmerican journal published by a traditionally USAmerican organization, JLAG must seek to not perpetuate the hegemony of USAmerican geography (Garcia-Ramon, 2012). This requires a real effort to diversify the stories, voices, and spaces it represents. Based on our publication history, we seem to continue to be “putting the experiences, priorities, and concepts of the Global North” at the center of Latin Americanist scholarship (Jonas et al., 2015, p. 47). Or, as Monk and Hanson (1982) would have it, we are excluding (much more than) half the Latin Americans in Latin Americanist geography.

A Call for Urban Latin America in Critical Urban Theory

My review of all CLAG publication articles from 1972 until 2019 (JLAG volume 18, Number 1) shows that of the close to 1,200 articles, only 97 deal directly with Latin American cities, 130 if we include book reviews. The apparent disinterest in Latin America's urban spaces, and conversely the infatuation with rural landscapes is, I suggest, an enduring legacy of Carl Sauer and his intellectual descendants who are the gatekeepers of Latin Americanist geography in the U.S. I also believe that urban scholarship of the past created a heretofore unbridgeable gap between our discipline and the reality of Latin American cities, which ultimately alienated urban geography from the Latin Americanist tradition. Quantitative research, so prevalent in the urban geography of the 1970s, even pushed some at CLAG's first conference to wish for Barry Lentnek to drop dead (see Denevan, 2008). The alleged universality of urban models imported from the North marginalized the unquantifiable realities of everyday life in our cities. This epistemological approach could only narrate an urban Latin America perceived as a chaotic aberration within the master narrative of (Euro/North American) urbanization. A more recent example of the incapacity of Euro-USAmerican urban theories to tell the story of Latin American urban spaces can be found in Crowley's (1995) urban model that captured according to the author, "the sense of disorder, of chaos, of a lack of rapport between land uses" that he saw as core to the nature of the Latin American city. Is this colonialist perception of chaos and disorder continuing to drive scholars away from our cities and towards our more "idyllic" and "exotic" landscapes?

More recently, scholars from the Global South have set out to de-center urban theory from its Euro-USAmerican bias (Robinson, 2006; Simone 2009; Roy, 2009). Falling under the umbrella of critical urban theory the call is thus not simply for new theories from the North but

for “new geographies of theory” altogether to challenge the totalizing images of our cities as chaotic and disorderly, and to capture the “vast heterogeneities of urban life” occurring daily in them (Simone, 2008, p. 200; Roy 2009). This “subaltern urbanism” gives recognition to “spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the archives and annals of urban theory” (Roy, 2011, p. 224). In Latin America, the works of several scholars provide new critical perspectives and indeed have contributed theory from our own urban realities. One example is Auyero’s (2001) bottom-up argument that clientelist networks in *villas* provide the urban poor with a vital web of resource-distribution and protection against the risks of everyday life. Also, Holston’s (2009) concept of insurgent citizenships articulates the everyday struggles of the urban poor for the basic necessities of a decent urban life as part of a broader claim for citizenship rights. For her part, Caldeira (2017) identifies the impoverished urban peripheries as particular types of auto-constructed spaces that have become sites of invention of new democratic practices and of alternative politics in our cities. The work of these scholars, while not geographers, would be a good start to begin appreciating the Latin American city and its residents through a different lens. Indeed, Latin American cities continue to be spaces of important grassroots action and alternative forms of politics that reflect how the majority of Latin Americans deal with broader socio-economic and political processes in everyday life. In this sense a critical urban geography in Latin America holds three distinguishable promises: 1) to fulfill the goals expressed by the editors of JLAG of attracting scholarship that engages with “the most crucial scholarly and social debates of our times” particularly by scholars from Latin America (Gaffney et al., 2016, p. 1); 2) to contribute critical urban theoretical frameworks from the experience of Latin American cities; and 3) to reflect the diverse set voices and experiences of the majority of Latin Americans who do not often make it

into CLAG publications. In this sense, a critical urban geography of Latin America can help us move beyond the overtly rural, imagined geography of this region that we continue to tell our readers and ourselves through our publications.

Endnotes

¹ I reviewed the titles of all 1,200 publications since 1972, making my own separate list with articles that could be classified under the urban category. When it was not clear from the title that an article dealt specifically with non-urban sites, I also read the abstract in order to get a better sense. Still, the possibility exists that even after following these steps I could have missed articles in which the author(s) conducted fieldwork mostly in urban areas. However, I do not believe that this would alter the observation of a historical rural bias in our publications.

² I do not claim that CLAG's publications represent the complete canon of Latin Americanist geography in the U.S., but they do provide a perspective on research interests through the years.

³ In this essay I use "rural" for lack of a better word, to refer to non-urban spaces and topics. While indeed, most of the non-urban work tends to fall decisively within the rural category, I am also aware that this is not always the case. I also do not claim that there is a distinct rural/urban division, which has been long challenged (for recent debates see Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Roy, 2016). Rather, my concern is with non-urban fieldwork and the little attention we are paying in our publications to urban landscapes.

⁴ Gade (2002) has explored the motivation of practitioners including the lure of Latin America as an exotic venue, untapped spring of unexploited topics, and intellectual bandwagons. Language barriers make it difficult to conduct research in the city. Unlike the self-exalting argument that Latin Americanist geographers are somehow more sophisticated because of the language skills they gather to understand "the unlettered folk encountered in their fieldwork," as Gade (2002, p. 10) puts it, I am not so sure of the language skills required in programs across the U.S. today. I have encountered multiple USAmerican geographers who conduct research in *el campo* who are quite "unlettered" in Spanish themselves. The limitations of such work aside, having poor language skills might be a decisive limitation for conducting research in cities unless you are working closely with collaborators. Further, the idea of a small rural village as a self-contained unit of analysis that facilitates fieldwork, might attract more scholars than the chaotic jumble of "order and disorder" more in line with the Euro-USAmerican perspective of urban Latin America (Crowley, 1995).

⁵ But on the politics of fieldwork and the silences about the practice of fieldwork within the Latin Americanist geography tradition see Sundberg (2003).

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