Challenges, Opportunities Await Latin American Studies

Jeffrey Gould, director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, outlines his Vision of the future . . .

This is a time of challenge and opportunity for Latin American Studies. The challenge of this decade and beyond is to understand the Americas without the social, scientific, and political guideposts that have been relied upon in the past. That challenge also brings to the field potential opportunities in two senses.

First, Latin American social scientists and critics can now function with significantly less fear of imprisonment, torture, or death—a common fate for dissident intellectuals in the Southern Cone and much of Central America only a decade ago.

Second, today there is far more political space inside both the United States and Latin America for the communication of diverse understandings of social reality.

In the recent past, any serious analyses of the state, business elites, cultural difference, or social inequality would invariably be subjected to a political bottom line. The challenge for Latin American studies is to regenerate the reservoir of creative intellectual spirit that seemed drained by the political warfare of the 1980s . . .

The end of the Cold War allows the United States to develop a policy toward the Americas that is based on a reasoned assessment of mutual interests and objective realities rather than the inevitably distorted images and partial truths that formed part of our previous bipolar understandings of Latin American reality. Two recent events in Latin America perhaps signal such a change.

For all of its ambiguities, internal contradictions, and deficiencies, the U.S. intervention in Haiti on behalf of popularly elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide marks a potentially new moment in U.S. policy, namely a commitment to back democratic change, regardless of the political sympathies of local leaders.

By comparison, when leftists won democratic elections in Guatemala in the early 1950s or in Nicaragua in 1984, the United States tirelessly worked to undermine those governments.

Although democratic rhetoric was a weapon in the Cold War, the new international conjuncture may convince U.S. policy makers to close the gap between stated ideals and practice. At the very least, we can see that many former combatants and exiles from the Central American conflicts have appropriated the international language of human rights and democracy to which the United States subscribes.

The Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas vividly demonstrates how ordinary people can appropriate the language of human rights and use it effectively with a national and international audience. The insurgency in Chiapas also marks a dramatic departure from past conflicts in other respects.

The first guerrilla insurgency in Latin America to emerge since 1989 has not been met by a concerted effort by the United States to crush it directly or indirectly. Second, the rebels are challenging a traditional canon of the radical left in positing that fundamental social and political change can be achieved without seizing state power. Third, the Zapatista movement represents one local response to NAFTA, an international trade policy that clearly represents a long-term trend. Fourth, in response to NAFTA-like pressures of globalization and fueled by the historical demands of several Mayan groups, the rebellion represents a unique version of what in this country is called the politics of identity.

Although the events of neither Haiti nor Chiapas are at all typical of the region they do exemplify something of the challenge for Latin Americanists. For if the end of the Cold War signifies a historical moment in which ideological purity will count for far less than rigorous methodologies and creative intellectual effort, then area specialists must begin to devise analyses that can be understood and acted upon by both policy makers and those new social subjects that are emerging in this uncharted political terrain. And, we must train scholars to carry on this work into the next century.