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Special issue: *Life history and cultures of militancy in Latin America's Cold War*

### Editorial

# Life history and cultures of militancy in Latin America's Cold War

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Since the early 2000s, historians have transformed our understanding of the Cold War in Latin America. No longer do scholars describe Latin American events in this period as merely a reflection of the global conflict between two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. No longer do they relegate local actors to the historical margins. Rather, recent scholarship has described the power and, to a degree, the autonomy of domestic social and political dynamics in shaping the region's Cold War conflicts. Those conflicts had their roots in layers of local history that interacted with the geopolitical struggle between the two superpowers, and which were, in various ways, influenced and radicalised – but never entirely controlled or subsumed – by Cold War ideologies and by the interference of, particularly, the hemispheric Northern colossus. It was a combination of superpower conflict and long-standing local tensions, and not merely the meddling of outside powers, that made Latin America into one of the Cold War's 'hot' conflict zones, with hundreds of thousands of victims and enormous social and political costs in most countries of the region.<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Radical Americas* uses a biographical lens to probe the relationship between local dynamics and global ideological tensions in Latin America's Cold War. Such a perspective has been suggested by recent approaches to biography in Latin America, which, according to the eminent practitioner Mary Kay Vaughan, have been 'less interested in a person for his or her unique contribution

to history or the arts and more interested in how an individual life reflects and illuminates historical processes'.<sup>2</sup> The historical process illuminated by the contributors to this special issue shows the emergence of a culture of militancy among the Latin American left during the Cold War. A biographical approach allows the contributors to the special issue to consider dynamic processes of political radicalisation alongside – and in the context of – individuals' formative social and cultural experiences.

Instead of treating militancy as simply a means to a (political or ideological) end, the articles in this special issue reveal the experience of militancy – the adventure it promised, the fear and joy it created, the dilemmas it presented – as a dynamic cultural field. Writing about militants from countries including Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba and Brazil, contributors pay special attention to how militants made sense of a tension that characterised their experience across those different national contexts. On the one hand, Latin American militants were driven by a sense of vanguardism that isolated them from the social world on whose behalf they were claiming to act. This isolation was often heightened by the necessity of operating clandestinely in order to evade state capture. On the other hand, militants were driven by a search for new forms of belonging and solidarity. Some militants were inspired by emancipatory understandings of Christianity, others by the writings of Che Guevara, but in each case, militants attempted to remake their social relations in the image of a world that would express their fraternal values. It was from the interaction of those two imperatives – in tandem with their contradictions – that a militant culture emerged in Cold War Latin America.

While paying attention to biographical details adds important dimensions to the study of any historical era, it is particularly apposite for our understanding of the phenomenon of political militancy during Latin America's Cold War. Latin American militants in this period were committed not only to a project of radical social transformation, but also – and equally – to one of radical self-fashioning. In part they were caught up in the youth culture of the time, which for millions of people in and beyond the West converted the passage towards adulthood into a series of morally inflected choices about how to be in the world. But militant Latin Americans were also concerned with self-fashioning because of the influence of Che Guevara who, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, turned into, perhaps, the most influential ideologue in the region. Many militants were drawn to Guevara's explicit goal of making one's personal transformation a core element of how to make revolution and create a communist society. 'To construct communism,' wrote Guevara, 'at the same time as creating a new material base, we have to create a new man.'<sup>3</sup> Creating this 'New Man' was necessary in order to root out 'defects of the past' which 'move into the present in the individual conscience', and which 'we must make a continual effort to eradicate'.<sup>4</sup> According to Guevara, rooting out such defects was the job of a vanguard whose members – 'ideologically more advanced than the masses' – were motivated not by the petty individual rewards of capitalism but rather by the vision of a new society, and whom the masses would eventually follow.<sup>5</sup> For Latin American militants, the self thus became a kind of Cold War battleground, a field on which (if nowhere else) their political vision might triumph if only they showed enough self-discipline, but on which their political vision might also flounder in the face of the obstinacy of selfish bourgeois habits and attitudes.

The contributors to this special issue use biographical approaches to probe this battleground of the self within their militant subjects. In order of their appearance in this issue, the five articles are as follows. First, Lucía Rayas explores the personal, emotional and epistemological meanings of clandestinity – the process through which militants across Latin America went 'underground', what that meant for themselves and their loved ones and comrades and, finally, how scholars can endeavour to study something as profoundly intimate – and methodologically elusive – as the experience of being clandestine.<sup>6</sup> Second, Rodrigo Véliz Estrada examines the life of a Mayan-K'iche' social Christian activist named Emeterio Toj Medrano, offering an important insight into the political and personal battles that unfolded during Guatemala's Cold War, a perverse paragon of the sort of political violence and polarisation that rocked Central America in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Third, Michael Rom focuses on one of Brazil's better-known political militants and memoirists from the 1970s, Alfredo Syrkis, probing the intersection of his political ideologies and religious encounters, including his Jewish upbringing and his exposure to the syncretic Afro-Brazilian religion of Umbanda.<sup>8</sup> Fourth, Rafael Pedemonte examines the experience of Cuban students who studied in the Soviet Union, seeking to build transnational communism between the world's largest communist state and Cuba, the most symbolically important communist nation in the western hemisphere.<sup>9</sup> And finally, Jeffrey Rubin's article brings our understanding of Latin America's Cold War to a chronological endpoint in the early twenty-first century,

through his study of the Movement of Rural Women Workers in Brazil, a fascinating case study of gender, militancy and campaigns for social justice and equity at the turn of a new century.<sup>10</sup> To help summarise the themes of this special issue and also offer some of her own reflections on militancy and life history, an Afterword from Tanya Harmer brings the issue to a close.<sup>11</sup>

The articles in this special issue of *Radical Americas* offer three main analytical points of reflection for understanding the cultures of militancy that helped define the personal experience of Latin America's Cold War. These three themes are vanguardism, personal transformation, and belonging and solidarity. By way of concluding this opening section of the issue, we briefly outline each of the three themes.

## Vanguardism

In various ways, each of the articles describes a process of uncoupling between the self and the world. This process was particularly radical when militants made a choice to live clandestinely in order to make the revolution, or else were forced into clandestinity by state repression. While these experiences were shared with fellow militants, they could also create a deep sense of alienation from the rest of society – even as it was the rest of society that militants ostensibly set out to liberate. Rayas describes the sense of isolation that could overcome those who militated in clandestine organisations, away from friends and family and surrounded by other militants with whom affective relationships had to be forged under conditions of fear and insecurity.<sup>12</sup> And yet this uncoupling between self and world was not always experienced as alienation. As a response equally to a closed political system and a generous and idealistic social impulse, it could also signify a person's attempt to leave behind one's false comforts and connect with the realities of impoverished and marginalised populations. This was the experience of Emeterio Toj, who, according to Véliz Estrada, after Guatemala's 1976 earthquake quit his relatively comfortable job as a broadcaster to render assistance to – and, clandestinely, to organise – people affected by the disaster.<sup>13</sup>

## Personal transformation

Cultures of militancy were always in flux, as militants adapted to different levels of repression, toggled between ideologies, or dealt with the fallout of internal conflict. As Rom's case study of Alfredo Syrkis shows, this transformation could develop along several contours of a person's background and trajectory, extending from political ideologies to religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Based in family and cultural understandings of justice and community, militants like Syrkis sought to adapt themselves to changing ideas of what shapes the mind, body and soul of a revolutionary could take. Adaptation was also needed by the encounter between the different classes and ethnicities that were typical of some revolutionary projects – encounters between urban (perhaps atheist) intellectuals and Indigenous (and often religious) peasants, for example. Véliz Estrada talks of the 'slow erosion of inherited common sense' generated in Guatemala's Quiché region by Acción Católica's Bible study classes.<sup>15</sup> And Rubin shows how Brazilian women who had been raised in an intensely patriarchal culture learned habits of independence when they militated in social movements.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Rayas's study of clandestinity documents the most drastic remaking of the self, as it represented at once an intensely personal decision and a surrender of autonomy to hierarchy and iron discipline.<sup>17</sup>

## Belonging and solidarity

The articles describe militancy as an experience that drew people into identities larger than themselves. Some militants were inspired by emancipatory understandings of Christianity, others by the writings of Che Guevara. Cubans in the Soviet Union organised into place-based collectives that fomented revolutionary habits. The experience of clandestinity could be both a source of romance and a shared sense of purpose. Thus, women militants in Brazil's rural workers' movement experienced solidarity as a sense of purpose (a shared identity for working together), albeit one that over time became threatened by fissures within the group. As seen across the five articles, solidarity was often linked to a goal of belonging, but when the sense of solidarity was revealed to be more of a projection than a genuine bond, a given project, relationship or campaign could falter. The efforts to build solidarity, as well as

the instances when those efforts fell short, reverberated across the cultures of militancy forged by the historical actors showcased in this issue.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For overviews of the recent scholarship, see Grandin, 'Living in revolutionary times'; Booth, 'Rethinking Latin America's Cold War'; Harmer, 'The Cold War in Latin America'; and Pettinà, *La guerra fría en América Latina*.
- <sup>2</sup> Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter*, 3. For other examples of this literature, see Harmer, *Beatriz Allende*; James, *Doña María's Story*; Llamojha and Heilman, *Now Peru is Mine*; Schaefer, 'Growing up *Indio*'; and Blanc, 'The last political prisoner'.
- <sup>3</sup> Guevara, 'El hombre nuevo', 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Guevara, 'El hombre nuevo', 9.
- <sup>5</sup> Guevara, 'El hombre nuevo', 12–13.
- <sup>6</sup> Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'
- <sup>7</sup> Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis'
- <sup>8</sup> Rom, 'Martians in the favela'
- <sup>9</sup> Pedemonte, 'Student *colectivos* in the USSR'
- <sup>10</sup> Rubin, 'The whole process of gender'
- <sup>11</sup> Harmer, 'Thinking through biography'
- <sup>12</sup> Harmer, 'Thinking through biography'
- <sup>13</sup> Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis'
- <sup>14</sup> Rom, 'Martians in the favela'
- <sup>15</sup> Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis', 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Rubin, 'The whole process of gender'
- <sup>17</sup> Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'

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