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

Commentary

Thinking through biography

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Abstract

This Afterword considers the articles in this special issue of *Radical Americas*. Reflecting on how a biographical lens can illuminate the past, it draws out some of the key findings of the special issue articles and interrogates their significance for understanding militancy in Latin America in the late twentieth century. Specifically, it explores what life histories can tell us about space and scale, and the opportunities and the costs of militancy during the Cold War in Latin America. It contends that there is more to learn and gain from thinking through a biographical lens going forward.

Keywords biography; militancy; Cold War; life histories; revolution; Latin America

Over the years, when teaching the history of guerrilla movements in Latin America, I have asked students what it would take for them to drop everything and set off for the mountains to take part in a revolutionary insurgency. More often than not, they look bemused. Some stare at their laptops in search of answers or look out of the window as if to identify which mountains I might be referring to. Those who answer tend to circle around hypotheticals – to empathise with people and places from the past. 'If I had suffered

repression as X did; if my brother had been killed as happened to Y; if I was a student at Z university; if democratic change were not an option...,' they say, '...then maybe...' But the prospect of abandoning family, friends, home, study, work and potentially dying – or even going so far as to embrace a sacrificial pledge – 'to die like Che' – in order to change the world is invariably and, for the majority, impossibly difficult to comprehend.

Students' incredulity in a classroom at the London School of Economics in the twenty-first century speaks – at least in part – to the significance of understanding context and contingency in their broadest possible sense. And this in turn means recognising the complex multiplicity of factors underpinning revolutionary militancy in Cold War Latin America. As this special issue demonstrates so well, such factors could include any mixture of politics, timing, affective relationships, ideology, curiosity, chance, religion, culture, formative familial and childhood experiences, place and, of course, individuals' identity or subjecthood. The revolutionary zeitgeist enveloped in the idea of being *consecuente* (living by one's beliefs and being prepared to defend them to their ultimate consequence) did not appear from nowhere, ready-made and applicable to all. It was imbibed and resonated for reasons that can only really be grasped by understanding – in depth – who these individuals were and the trajectory of their lives up to that point. Political structures and statistics, broad patterns and sociological analysis are important. Ultimately, however, biography – the effort to historicise individuals' lived experience and subjectivity – hold the key to understanding the decisions that people took, why they did so and what happened (or didn't) as a result.

The contributors in this special issue demonstrate clearly the part that a biographical lens can play in this regard. They provide explanations for individuals' radicalisation and their decision to embark on militancy, the effect that this had on their everyday lives and broader collective projects and the way that cultures of militancy evolved. In doing so, they show how life histories can profoundly add to our understanding of Latin America's revolutionary past and its consequences. In Rodrigo Véliz Estrada's words, it provides 'detailed information on the construction of personal conceptual tools' that individuals used to navigate and 'evaluate moments of political crisis and radicalisation'.¹ However, the articles here also reveal the significance that life histories can have when it comes to shifting historical knowledge, altering the way we think about topics that we thought were relatively straightforward to comprehend and explain, such as who comprised revolutionary movements and what the implications of militancy were over time.

The variety of sources that this issue's contributors use to probe such questions is inspiring and instructive of biography's methodological potential. Once assumed to be the recompilation of personal papers to chart one famous (male) individual's story from cradle to grave, here, life histories draw on oral testimonies, anthropological fieldwork, youth records, secret police files, school records, fiction, poetry and theology to zoom in on different moments in a variety of different people's lives. In examining a life or a specific group of lives, they not only tell us a lot about the people who lived through and helped shape events, ideas and developments, all of which are in themselves, of course, worthy subjects of historical enquiry. They are also, as special issue editors Timo Schaefer and Jacob Blanc note in their Editorial, able to answer broader questions about militancy and subjecthood in late-twentieth-century Latin America. The result is a fascinating new window into the intersection of multiple temporalities and spaces, overlapping scales and the (often-fraught) relationship between individuals and collectives.

This nuanced understanding of cultures of militancy in turn contributes much to recent historiography that has moved us beyond histories of a few (male) revolutionary leaders and their followers.² Far from providing further deification of revolutionary idols, the articles offer new insight into revolutionary movements' rank-and-file cadres – the 'everyday revolutionaries' Marian Schlotterbeck has written about so well in the case of the militants of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) in southern Chile. For Schlotterbeck, listening to life histories, understanding 'what happened in people's lives and how they felt about it' not only addressed silences in Chile's recent past but also shed light on 'revolution not as a dream but as daily life'. In doing so, much as the contributors in this special issue have done, she uncovered a 'multiplicity of understandings of revolutionary change' as well as how and why 'people came to make revolutionary politics their own'.³ Like Schlotterbeck, the contributors in this special issue shed light on what gave strength and meaning to militancy for those involved, and why, in some cases, militants decided to distance themselves from a cause they had once committed themselves to. As Schaefer and Blanc note in their Editorial, we learn an enormous amount about vanguardism, personal transformation, belonging and solidarity from engaging with life histories of militancy.⁴

These themes, and the special issue as a whole, provide intriguing insights into revolutionary militancy, its spaces and scales, opportunities and costs. They are thought-provoking, challenging and stimulating, raising questions for all those interested in life histories and militancy in twentieth-century Latin America. This gets to the heart of the value that a biographical lens has to offer. To echo Sarah Maza's call to historians of childhood, the potential of writing history 'through' biography rather than 'of' individuals' lives is vast.⁵ A biographical lens has the power to disrupt historical narratives, to get us to think across and between the conventional, yet often artificial, historical periodisations, sub-categories and topics our discipline has established. As Matthew Guterl noted, the potential of examining broader questions through a life is that it allows us to rethink 'what we can write and imagine' – to explore 'new mappings of time and space and change' and, in doing so, view 'new features of the landscape'.⁶

Space and scale

When I was researching and writing the history of Beatriz Allende's life, I came to appreciate this process of drawing new maps by following an individual as they travelled from place to place over time.⁷ The beauty of a biographical lens, I found, was that it can lead historians in overlapping and unexpected directions to spaces that would have been inaccessible, or at least difficult to see, without the people they were studying. Imagine someone moving through life with a spotlight trained on them, illuminating places and people they come into contact with. The spotlight concentrates our attention on the locales, events and individuals in their immediate vicinity. And it can do so over time. In just one day, the spotlight might move from place to place, bringing together a wide variety of people connected in varying degrees of intimacy to our subject. Over a month or years, even decades, it might return to light up familiar spaces and people multiple times, shy away from them or expand to new unexpected and unfamiliar places. As the biographer watches, they learn about the different worlds, spaces and communities their subject inhabits, and how they mesh together in one imperfect but enlightening whole.

The resulting picture is very different from that produced by those who begin their investigations in a neat, bounded space such as a political institution, religious community, named decade (long or short) or a presidential term. It tends to be messier and overlapping – a collage of sorts – and in being this way, it can unsettle assumptions about the way the world is ordered, understood and imagined. As Jeffrey Rubin reflects in his study of the lives and militancy of women involved in the Movement of Rural Women Workers (*Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais* or MMTR), individuals hold 'multiplicity' within them. This multiplicity – at least in the case of the women he spoke to over decades – reflected the women's relationships with their immediate families, their communities, their region, their union, their church and, of course, 'the whole process of gender'.⁸

Grasping this multiplicity has an impact on the way we understand the dimensions – the space and scale – of militancy. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate so well, life histories reveal the inadequacy of examining formal ideology or party membership alone as factors that drew people to revolutionary politics and sustained them as militants. Similarly, one event is unlikely to explain radicalisation, without consideration of the reasons for its impact and resonance. Considering one university campus without a sense of the worlds from which students travelled to get to it takes us only so far. Ignoring the private sphere and affective relationships when explaining public activism is similarly risky. As the articles in this special issue illustrate, militancy and its meanings are rooted in gardens and intragenerational homes, study halls, and on beaches and baseball fields. Overall, in fact, the spotlights following Alfredo Syrkis and Emeterio Toj Medrano in Michael Rom's and Véliz Estrada's articles respectively; Cuban students in the Soviet Union in Rafael Pedemonte's article; the women whom Rubin interviewed who formed the MMTR and the many unnamed individuals who lived clandestine lives that Lucía Rayas traces, reveal the expansive and diverse nature of militancy and revolutionary politics in late twentieth-century Latin America.⁹ Rather than pointing to a homogenous phenomenon, the more we learn, the clearer the plurality becomes.

We also learn about significant influences on militancy that have been relatively ignored to date. The importance of religion in particular stands out, with articles underlining the need to pay further attention to both non-Christian religions and social Christianity's pivotal role. In addition, we gain appreciation for the possible interconnectedness of different religious influences and their relationship to militancy. As Rom writes, Judaism and Umbanda were both pivotal features of Syrkis's lived experience.¹⁰ And through Syrkis, we gain insight into the significance both religions and their followers hold in Brazilian

political history. The articles in the special issue also underline the importance of grasping contingency and causation, and the ways in which different interconnected factors at a national, local, familial and individual level combined to produce particular outcomes. In this respect, we tend to think of state terror as leading directly to militancy, and activism as a form of resistance and defence, as demonstrated clearly by the radicalisation of Syrkis and Toj, but Rubin underlines the possibilities that the late Cold War period and a transitional moment in Brazilian politics in the 1980s and 1990s offered to conceive of new forms of militancy.¹¹

It is also interesting to note that the scale and space that militants inhabited changed, contracted and expanded, depending on the exigencies of the place and moment in which they found themselves. During times of heightened danger and clandestinity, Syrkis's world contracted as he fell back on a small group of trusted friends – friends, Rom speculates, whose 'common ethnic background likely enabled the trust necessary to embark together on a risky activity'.¹² We also learn from Rayas of profound solitude born of clandestine lives, even if part of collective projects.¹³ Or of apparent isolation arising from expressions of dissidence and autonomy among Cuban students in the Soviet Union, charted by Pedemonte, such as daring to have a romantic affair or succumbing to the 'bedazzlement' of ice-skating and being punished by the collective.¹⁴

Grasping the way that space could shrink to a solitary and isolated existence within a broader collective endeavour can also challenge depictions of militancy that focus on adventure and the expansion of people's worlds. I was reminded of one interviewee with whom I corresponded when researching Beatriz Allende's life. I had been interested in who Beatriz met, where she travelled and the skills she learned as a militant within a clandestine transnational revolutionary project. Her friend, however, wrote, unsolicited, to me to volunteer a different perspective. 'I would like to, humbly and without wanting to intervene, give you my opinion on something that always influences a militant's future and marks their behaviour', he wrote to me:

LA CLANDESTINIDAD. Yes, that double game in the personal life, not of a normal militant, but someone who plays with their emotions, their affections, their friendships, their day-to-day, daily work because they perform this function that can't be known by the rest of their *compañeros* and especially their family ... [I ask you] to please analyse this clandestine part [of Beatriz's life], what it signified not only to understand her in terms of not knowing what she did but there is much more, you lose your privacy, that is to say, you don't have any, you live behaving like someone very normal, but, you aren't, [and] this double life leaves a lot of marks.¹⁵

For historians of clandestine militancy, comprehending this space and its legacies for individuals is immensely difficult, but thinking through biography to understand the effect it had on the parameters of everyday life certainly helps.

Opportunity

In spite of the costs of militancy, about which more below, the life histories in this special issue can tell us a lot about the opportunities it offered. As Schaefer and Blanc note in their Editorial, in many cases, these related as much to personal transformation and belonging as to political projects and ideological commitment.¹⁶ Using a biographical lens, Pedemonte's study of collective spaces led him to shed light on the people who conformed and embraced such space, rather than simply those who resisted it – those who came to 'deepen their sense of ownership' over the Cuban revolutionary process they were part of.¹⁷ From classrooms and collective living spaces, far from Cuba, his study of those who travelled sheds light on what practising revolution for Cuba meant to young Cubans studying thousands of miles away from home as well as those sent to monitor them. In a way that would be impossible to comprehend through institutional archives or diplomatic agreements alone. We learn from these individuals the meaning of place and subjecthood, of belonging to a national revolutionary project from abroad and of a deepening attachment to that project through acceptance and the embrace of 'a rightful revolutionary morality'. Consider, for example, students' decisions to sanction their classmates for defying expected behaviour or Pilar Sa's decision to give up a promising singing career to go back to Cuba to contribute to the revolution as an electronic engineer.¹⁸

From the women whom Rubin has listened to over decades, we also learn that an open, pluralistic and innovative feminist-democratic militancy provided a route by which members could '*ser gente*': that is, consider themselves 'to truly be people, accorded dignity and capable of acting'.¹⁹ This could entail tensions within and between militants. But it did not come to dent the women's sense of protagonism. In this respect, I was reminded of the way the years of the Unidad Popular in Chile are remembered as an era when people – usually marginalised and silenced – considered themselves as the architects of history and embraced a sense of *historicidad*.²⁰ In other words, as well as working towards a socialist future, they gained a new and profound new sense of subjecthood, purpose and belonging.

This transformation not only changed individuals, but it also changed language, as Rayas notes in her article on clandestinity, producing a whole new lexicon in the process, revolving around '*leyendas*', '*chapas*', '*buzónes*' and a shared collective understanding of what it meant when someone mentioned a friend was '*en la clande*'.²¹ This is not the only way in which language changed as a result of the Cold War in Latin America. Dictatorships and state terror did much to destruct and distort existing language, as well as introduce new concepts and vocabulary.²² As Rayas indicates, the history of such transformations of everyday life and society through people's vocabulary for interpreting the world around them would do much to broaden our understanding of the Cold War's reach and legacies.

Costs

Perhaps the most searing insight a biographical lens offers, though, is what we learn about the human cost that Cold War-era militancy entailed. This is not something discernible only via statistics of those murdered, disappeared and tortured by military dictatorships and genocidal violence. Numbers alone, while horrific testaments to the brutality of Latin America's Cold War, only begin to tell the story of the profound impact that the conflict had, what it meant as an everyday lived experience and the enduring legacies that persist in the present. This cost occurred at multiple levels. It involved self-marginalisation, isolation and solitude, as noted above. It involved 'physical confrontation' among friends divided by the Sino-Soviet dispute. And it could also involve 'severe control' when it came to the regulation of love and sexual desire and the suspension of 'life decisions'. Indeed, new scholarship on the impact of militancy on love and family sheds important light on the underlying revolutionary projects themselves, their ambitions and limitations.²³ Take the 'paradox of silence amid speech' that a lesbian couple endured in the context of the MMTR's feminist-democratic community.²⁴ Or the punishment classmates subjected each other to in the Soviet Union.²⁵ It should be noted that this totalising cost of militancy over individuals was not always exactly total. As historians like Emily Snyder have argued, it was mediated and resisted within revolutionary circles.²⁶ And there were also those who jumped ship – quite literally, Pedemonte tells us the case of students travelling back from the Soviet Union, or Alfredo Syrkis, who simply left.²⁷ But it is important to recognise the price that militancy often expected individuals to pay and the ways in which this altered the way that people loved and lived.

In this respect, the price of clandestinity, as well as the experience and culture of it, as Rayas reminds us, is a subject that historians have yet to investigate seriously.²⁸ However nostalgically or romantically stories of clandestine life are told, loss and pain are present. In my current research on exile and militancy in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, I am struck by the fact that many of my interviewees have no way of contacting or identifying the friends they knew, worked with and, in some cases, lived with or loved. The pseudonyms they used – the *chapas* and *leyendas* they adopted to protect their identities – not only served to separate and compartmentalise people at the time for security and political reasons, but have also led to atomised memories and histories of the period. Many today are unable to reach out to those they shared militancy with or know what became of those they encountered. They remain ephemeral and lost to the past, ghosts traceable only through individual memories. In short, clandestinity left few archival records and the use of *chapas* and *leyendas* did exactly what it was meant to do: to hide the people that used them and render them invisible.

This human cost also has implications for historians' ability to comprehend and access the past from the present. Rayas's thought-provoking article on clandestinity poignantly exposes the impact of a culture of silence around militancy on our ability to comprehend or map the contours of militancy.²⁹ The silence so many militants were trained to live by and embody is problematic for historians to navigate for various reasons, and this is even more the case when considering the ethics of doing so. Specifically, there

is the question of *whether* to ask to trespass and extract information, to break down barriers carefully learned and constructed over years – and decades – in the process.

After all, reading and learning from the articles in this special issue, it is clear what historians gain from listening to testimonies of lived experiences. But the question of what interviewees gain and/or how we might benefit together is one that is worth questioning further. For Emeterio Toj, sharing his life history was a means of leaving ‘a more systematic record of his political experience for future generations’.³⁰ Recovering rank-and-file testimonies and a multiplicity of voices and shining a light on lived intersectional experiences is also an important democratising and decolonial endeavour. But, as Véliz Estrada also notes in his article, the academic output can also feel extractive or, at the least, a limited way of giving back to those who have shared their stories. Naming them and remembering them obviously has political connotations for the present, making the point of how history is made by the many and not the few. Véliz Estrada’s co-authored work with Toj underscores the potential that exists for collaboration.³¹ But are there other ways for the fruits of such labour to reverberate back to their subjects, and to embed themselves in future generations; to directly benefit those who have shared life histories and their communities or the contemporary causes to which they devote themselves?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in what insights and lessons progressive activists, revolutionaries and feminists in the present day might draw from the kinds of historical biographical lenses this special issue has explored. And, in turn, how the breadth and depth of understanding they afford could potentially help shape militancy for the future. In this respect, the special issue challenges us to think about what it would take to recognise and write difference more meaningfully into militant circles as the women who forged the MMTR did, at least initially. It asks us to consider how this might strengthen cultures of militancy going forward and how best to avoid the tensions and costs that past militancy entailed.

Future directions

My students’ bemusement when questioned about what it would take to drop everything to head for the mountains not only related to context and contingency, but it also exposed the limits of the question itself. It echoed a reductive understanding of what militancy entailed for many who chose to join left-wing movements, what opportunities were involved at a personal as well as political level and what different spaces of militancy might look like on the path to, or beyond, the mountains. Rather than framed as a decision that entailed ‘dropping everything’, in other words, perhaps the questions are: what would they gain? At what price? And what would they first need to learn and experience to mediate this decision? For Emeterio Toj, Véliz Estrada, notes, radicalisation was a ‘long and meditated decision’.³² This special issue succeeds in persuading us to recognise how a multiplicity of factors led to these decisions, rather than them being spur-of-the-moment student impulses.

For historians, looking forward, this special issue also illuminates how little we knew and how much we still have to learn about the multiplicity of lived experiences within the militant left during Latin America’s Cold War. Véliz Estrada and Rom are right to point out the need for a more inclusive understanding of religion and its relationship with politics. When it comes to the Cold War in Latin America, this special issue also begs the question of how life histories might inform other cultures of belonging and personal transformation beyond left-wing militancy, such as how they might help us examine those who worked for, supported or collaborated with dictatorial regimes and why.³³ In the current climate of right-wing and fascist resurgence throughout Latin America – and the world over – understanding lived experiences may just help us to identify and think through ways to counteract the rise of militancy in the other direction.

But there is also a lot to be learned about those who chose neither path, either left-wing militancy or support for the right wing. There were, of course, alternative spheres of transformation and belonging in Latin America’s Cold War, such as the cultural movements that do not map neatly onto political alignments or middle-class sectors, which, as Marcelo Casals has shown, shifted political allegiances at different moments.³⁴ Given the degree of contingency involved in these life histories, I found myself wondering how many in Toj’s or Sarkis’s immediate milieus chose *not* to follow the path of radicalisation and militancy, and why? And how did this, in turn, affect their sense of self and belonging, of personal transformation? Were cultures of non-militancy also *in flux*? Where did they find a sense of belonging and solidarity? If clandestinity led to alienation and uncoupling between the self and the world,

did those without clandestine lives feel at one with their immediate communities and surroundings? Understanding these additional perspectives might help us to build, and make sense of, the whole 'mosaic' that Rubin refers to in his article; to step back and begin to piece together the shape and scope of competing and overlapping cultures of militancy during the Cold War in Latin America, their scales, opportunities and costs.³⁵

Notes

- ¹ Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis', 2.
- ² For recent examples, see Crisóstomo, 'Women in the Peruvian revolutionary left'; de Haan (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists*; Becker et al. (eds.), *Transnational Communism across the Americas*.
- ³ Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*.
- ⁴ Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life history and cultures'.
- ⁵ Maza, 'The kids aren't all right'.
- ⁶ Guterl, 'Comment', 130, 138–9.
- ⁷ Harmer, *Beatriz Allende*.
- ⁸ Rubin, 'The whole process of gender', 3.
- ⁹ Rom, 'Martians in the favela'; Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis'; Rubin, 'The whole process of gender'; Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'; Pedemonte, 'Student colectivos in the USSR'.
- ¹⁰ Rom, 'Martians in the favela'.
- ¹¹ Rubin, 'The whole process of gender'.
- ¹² Rom, 'Martians in the favela'.
- ¹³ Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'.
- ¹⁴ Pedemonte, 'Student colectivos in the USSR', 9.
- ¹⁵ Email correspondence from Fernando Gómez, 14 May 2018 (upper case in original; author's translation).
- ¹⁶ Schaefer and Blanc, 'Life history and cultures'.
- ¹⁷ Pedemonte, 'Student colectivos in the USSR', 16.
- ¹⁸ Rubin, 'The whole process of gender', 9.
- ¹⁹ Garcés and Pinto, 'A 50 de la Unidad Popular'.
- ²⁰ Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'.
- ²¹ See, for example, Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*.
- ²² Cosse Larghero, 'Infidelidades'; Chase and Cosse, 'Revolutionary positions', 1–10; Green, 'Who is the macho who wants to kill me?'.
- ²³ Rubin, 'The whole process of gender'.
- ²⁴ Pedemonte, 'Student colectivos in the USSR'.
- ²⁵ Snyder, 'Internationalizing the revolutionary family'.
- ²⁶ Syrkis; Pedemonte, 'Student colectivos in the USSR'.
- ²⁷ Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'.
- ²⁸ Rayas, 'Clandestinity and militant culture'.
- ²⁹ Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis'.
- ³⁰ Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis', 3; Toj Medrano and Véliz Estrade, *Cuando el indio tomó las armas*.
- ³¹ Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis'.
- ³² Véliz Estrada, 'Radicalisation and political crisis', 2.
- ³³ For an interesting insight into the lived experience of the Spanish Civil War as an influence on Chile's right wing, see, for example, Weld, 'The Spanish Civil War'.
- ³⁴ See, for example, Barr-Melej, *Psychedelic Chile*; Casals Araya, *Contrarrevolución, Colaboracionismo y Protesta*.
- ³⁵ Rubin, 'The whole process of gender', 6.

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