

Contention and Nonviolent Action in Latin America: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue of the *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* (MARLAS) contributes a fascinating set of articles and essays to the literature on contention and nonviolent action. These new texts are multi- and interdisciplinary, as well as multilingual, and bridge the gap between theory and practice by bringing scholars and activists into conversation.

Our hope is that this special issue will play a role in building epistemic communities in the hemisphere that disrupt colonial hierarchies, decolonize knowledge about nonviolent action in the region, and enrich our understanding of the multifaceted ways in which people resist oppression.

Latin America has long been a space of innovation for “people power,” noncooperation, and other forms of resistance against violence and oppression, influenced in part by Liberation Theology within the Catholic Church and secular Marxist thinking, in addition to indigenous communal structures and solidarity. From the murals of Diego Rivera calling for revolutionary social justice in Mexico to the Nueva Trova movement of protest music in Cuba denouncing the excesses of imperialism, and the postmodern challenge to grand narratives, such resistance has been woven into cultural and artistic contributions in the region just as much as political, legal, social, and economic forms of contestation.

This year is an ideal time to mark the importance of nonviolent action and contention in the politics, societies, and cultures of the Americas: 2018 represents the 30th anniversary of the “No” vote on the Chilean plebiscite that marked the nonviolent movement’s victory in that country and the beginning of Pinochet’s downfall; the 30th anniversary of the “Citizen Constitution” in Brazil that marked the end of a two-decade military regime and the victory of intense civil society mobilizations for human rights; the 40th anniversary of the World Cup held in Argentina, when the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo attracted international attention and condemnation of the atrocities of the Dirty War;

the 50th anniversary of the massive student movement in Mexico that culminated in the Tlatelolco massacre; and the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King at the height of the Civil Rights era in the United States. For scholars, this is the 20th anniversary of the publication of the book *Activists Beyond Borders* by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), one of the most influential works that established a new field of study around transnational activism, and marks the 90th birthday of the “father of Liberation Theology,” Gustavo Gutiérrez (Gutiérrez 1988).

While countless scholarly works have analyzed contention and nonviolent movements, an explicit focus on Latin America helps to establish a common regional context for understanding the dynamics of contention and updates some of the older literature on the subject, such as the collection edited by McManus and Schlabach in 1991. The inclusion of contributions by both scholars and activists, in Spanish and English, from a range of disciplines in the social sciences, humanities, arts, and history, helps to provide a more pluralistic and potentially richer space for dialogue and intellectual exploration. This approach attempts to bridge the disjuncture between scholars, often based in the Global North, who claim to be objective observers conducting basic research primarily targeted at influencing scholarly debates, and scholars who see their research as motivated mainly by a desire to influence policy, contribute to social change, or attempt to decolonize hierarchies of knowledge production from subaltern positions, which tends to be more common in Latin America and the Global South (Mu and Pereyra-Rojas 2015). Below is a brief summary of the contributions.

In her essay, Alejandra Aguilar-Dornelles shines light on Caribbean women’s activism in the intellectual and artistic milieu of the 1970–1990s, offering us a lens to appraise how literary and cultural production by women can offer critical insights into the depths of, and alternatives to, social injustices, exclusions, and gender inequities in the region. Art often offers us a chance to reflect on real, still-controversial gender, cultural and socio-economic issues, and Ana Moraña’s interpretation of the Argentinian film *XXY* directed by Lucía Puenzo, (2007) opens a window onto social and personal conflicts and emotions surrounding intersex identities and argues that “bodies speak” their own representations of difference. Yudy Campo and Cristhian Cruz reflect on the trajectory of the *Movimiento de Mujeres por la Vida* in Colombia amidst sexual and political violence targeting women and reveal the work of women in Cauca who fight against the continued lack of accountability on the part of state and non-state actors, especially over the past two decades. Their own political organizing for the creation of a new vision for their communities and country has as its basis a participatory model that enables grassroots-led defense of territories and a dignified life for campesin@s, indigenous, afrodescendants, and others. Peace is a “common good” yet to be constructed, beyond any formal peace agreements to settle the long-standing conflicts in the country.

Turning more specifically to social movement strategies, Christian Martínez Neira and Gonzalo Delamaza examine interethnic coalitions of indigenous and nonindigenous activists that resist the building of hydroelectric dams in southern Chile. Their comparative approach looks at two conflicts (Ralco and Neltume) from the perspective of internal decision-making, interrelational dynamics, and political contexts facing contentious actors, thereby yielding important insights into what brings actors together and/or pulls them apart in environmental and social conflicts around megaprojects. Ana Ikeda zeroes in on anti-U.S. military base civil resistance in Manta, arguing that the

Ecuador No Bases Coalition played a key role in maintaining pressure against the U.S. imperialist presence but also insisted on accountability once the government of Rafael Correa proved to have a similar agenda to close the base. In Bolivia during the pro-democracy campaigns in 1977–1982, Stephen Zunes notes the importance of nonviolent mass action and grassroots democratic practices in the success of social movement coalitions in bringing down the Hugo Banzer dictatorship, and their impact on Bolivia’s current political context.

In the area of transnational advocacy, Raúl Diego Rivera Hernández describes the persistence of local communities and the detailed work of international human rights, social-psychology, and legal experts (GIEI, Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts) in dismantling purposeful dissimulation and disinformation surrounding the brutal violence of Mexican state and nonstate actors. Determining the truth about the whereabouts of citizens forcibly disappeared during recent massacres, such as occurred in Iguala, Guerrero, in 2014, has taken committed grassroots work. The findings may have had some influence on the recent June 2018 decision by a Mexican federal tribunal to form a new Truth Commission. In addition, Jeffrey Pugh details the work of the Regional Institute for the Study and Practice of Strategic Nonviolent Action in the Americas (Quito, Ecuador) to interconnect local participation, knowledge, and transnational network support in a novel approach to the pedagogy of activism and nonviolent action.

Overall, the contributions presented here capture many of the threads woven into the construction of “people power” in Latin America, which persists and resists despite the stumbling blocks of sexism, racism, classism, elitism, and oppression. Positive change can and does occur. ¡Pa’lante!

References

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