

David Lehmann on the Politics of Identity and the Crisis of Multiculturalism in Latin America: An Interview

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David Lehmann is Emeritus Reader in Social Science in the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, UK. He was director of Cambridge's Centre of Latin American Studies in 1990–2000 and 2010–11.

Lehmann describes himself as ‘part sociologist, part anthropologist, dedicated to ethnography and comparison.’ He started fieldwork in Chile, focusing on land reform and the challenges of development during Allende’s times, and by the 1980s, increasingly shifted to work on religious movements—Catholic and Evangelical, mainly in Brazil, and then Jewish, particularly in Brazil, Israel, the UK and the US. He is the author of several books, including: *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Economics, Politics and Religion in the Post-war Period* (Polity, 1990), *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Polity, 1996), and with Batia Siebzeher, *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas* (Hurst, 2006), in addition to numerous articles on these and related subjects. His Cambridge website hosts a fascinating summary of his impressive bio-academic journey and contributions to the study of Latin America up to 2006, narrated in his peculiarly vivacious, reflexive, and at times ironic way.²

In recent years, Dr. Lehmann has been engaged in a major study on the spread of ideas about multiculturalism and interculturalidad/interculturality in Latin America, especially in Mexico and Brazil, focusing on the relationship between the politics of recognition, affirmative action, and social justice. He recently put together a collective volume, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Latin America* (Routledge, 2016) and will soon publish another book on affirmative action in Brazil. Both are at the center of this interview in which Lehmann claims that addressing these most recent issues requires understanding the ambiguities of the politics of recognition, along with its promises and results. Following are some of his pungent and refreshing ideas on how to approach and interpret the tension-

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ridden relationships between the politics of recognition, affirmative action, and social justice in Latin America.

Multiculturalism: The Politics of State Recognition

Luis Roniger (LR): You recently compiled a collective volume, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Latin America*, and are about to publish a book you authored focusing on affirmative action in Brazil and how it came about. One of the key questions these books tackle is how to address the current consequences, achievements, and shortcomings of multiculturalism in Latin America. Could you elaborate particularly on the unexpected problems and dilemmas that multiculturalism has generated?

David Lehmann (DL): I must start out by saying that for all its internal contradictions and vacillations, the wave of recognition by governments of the validity of the indigenous cause and of the long history of spoliations, depredation, and exclusion inflicted on indigenous groups and Afro-Americans should be welcomed as a positive step in Latin American history. Such a characterization may be crude and may overgeneralize, but as a political statement by governments which will endure beyond their own lifetimes as state policy, it is to be applauded. Remember that Latin American countries are almost the only signatories of the ILO [International Labour Organization] Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 169. Only six other countries in the whole world are prepared to make this sort of admission. It is in this context that our book speaks of crisis, and the crisis of which it speaks has to do with the gap between multicultural policies and the cause of social justice, and the inconsistencies and, to some extent, the self-deceptions that affect engagé social science when it deals with these questions.

The unexpected problems that arise have to do with: (1) the extent to which governments can circumvent the demands of universalistic concepts of social justice and the law by having recourse to the rhetoric of indigeneity, of identity, and of recognition; and (2) with the failure of social anthropology, inside the cloistered world of academia, to resolve the conflict between the discipline's relativist vocation and the commitment of its practitioners to supporting indigenist movements, which favors their essentialist rhetoric. When I say 'essentialist,' however, I must be careful, for the rhetoric of identity as practiced in Latin America has nothing of the sharp edge, let alone the xenophobia, which has characterized the nativist political factions and parties that have arisen in Europe and the United States, and we should not forget that.

The other well-known element of crisis, which is not a subject of our book, is a crisis of confidence in the willingness or ability of governments to deliver on the promises enshrined in Convention 169

and in the constitutional changes governments have made, recognizing their countries as ‘multicultural,’ ‘plurinational,’ and the like, and in the creation of state institutions devoted to the indigenist cause. The implications of the promises should, however, be divided into two: on one hand, an expectation of material changes linked to land tenure, to educational advantages, to juridical change, and to the principle of prior consultation on mining ventures in indigenous territories; and on the other, rhetorical or moral changes consisting of ceremonial, symbolic spatial, and public aesthetic expressions of recognition. For example, Bolivia is now an indigenous state, in the view of some people, yet as Andrew Canessa explains in his contribution to our book, this does not mean that the state has undertaken a redistribution of wealth or income to indigenous peoples. It means that in Bolivia all sorts of sites and occupations of national prestige have become colored with indigeneity and have come under the control of indigenous people, ranging from the famous architectural fantasies of El Alto (La Paz’s satellite city of hundreds of thousands) to the capital’s chic neighborhoods. It is something like a revolution of the national imaginary.

But Bolivia is an extreme case, and each country is a case on its own: Chile is something like the inverse of Bolivia, with an elaborate bureaucratic apparatus for land purchase and allocation—the CONADI (Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena), yet in the national imaginary and rhetoric, recognition of indigenous peoples, their history, and rights has been grudging. In Brazil, despite elaborate constitutional provisions for the demarcation of indigenous territory, the cause has been harmed by environmental destruction and mega development projects, and now it is once again, after a period of relative calm, being openly and violently challenged by landed interests, whose shock troops go, as usual, unpunished. The government of the Workers’ Party (PT) showed little interest in environmental protection and, while providing strong support for affirmative action in favor the black population, invested little in the indigenist cause.

Double Bind of Ethnic Identity

LR: Some of the contributions in *The Crisis of Multiculturalism* talk about strategic essentialisms and invented traditions seemingly generated in Latin America by the push toward multiculturalism. Can you elaborate on this issue?

DL: There is a double bind here. On the one hand, organizations and leaders arise, and policies and laws are proclaimed which recognize painful shared and collective histories of race-based oppression and exclusion, and which therefore set out restitutive measures to try to undo the consequences of those histories. Note that this is not the same as laws to punish acts of racial discrimination by individuals or organizations, or to reform patterns of institutionalized racism. On the other hand, it is widely recognized, certainly among social scientists and to some extent beyond the academic

community, that affiliation with a racial group or membership in an ethnic community is a subjective matter, and also that the markers of membership and affiliation can change over time.

It has also been widely observed that in Latin America and possibly elsewhere the political effectiveness of calls for class solidarity has been crushed by the steamrollers of deindustrialization, agricultural modernization, and globalization. In these circumstances, claims to citizenship in terms of the rectification of historic racial injustices have found a voice and an audience. So, where once upon a time social movements with a base among small farmers, landless people, and the rural proletariat campaigned for land reform under broad slogans such as ‘Land to the Tiller,’ rural mobilization today tends to make claims based on historical dispossession, notably of land once controlled by indigenous peoples, or even by fugitive slave populations (quilombos in Brazil). Although perhaps most Latin American indigenous peoples now live in urban areas, there is not a parallel phenomenon of substitution of earlier working class movements.

These demands have a cultural dimension, for example in intercultural and bilingual education, recognition of indigenous legal institutions, and sponsorship of artistic expressions. But when it comes to the allocation of land, things get complicated, as is well illustrated in the volume’s papers by Luis Vázquez, Maité Boullosa-Joly, and Véronique Boyer on Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil respectively. One reason for this is that the translation of a claim to ethnic identity into entitlements to specific pieces of land is an essentially contestable process, which becomes even more conflictive when the land in question is owned or controlled and cultivated by third parties. Another reason is that claims to ancestry, especially when it goes back hundreds of years and is almost entirely undocumented, are also essentially contestable. These claims take place in a context shaped by the definitions, policies, and laws decreed by the state, and so the claimants are moved, and even obliged, to adapt their claims and even their named affiliations, to the opportunities provided.

Inevitably voices of doubt are raised and not always discreetly. This is the double bind: the state provides opportunities for ethnic or racial groups, but when people present themselves as beneficiaries, eyebrows are raised and doubts expressed. One sort of response is to question how people could work to take advantage of anything at all. Are they not supposed to be living a communal life innocent of any kind of self-interested action? Another sort of response is simply to question the authenticity of claims to a particular ethnic affiliation: How can you prove your ancestry? If you are an Indian, why don’t you speak an Indian language? Why don’t you go around wearing sandals and a manta, or woolen cloak? Or even, You’re not poor enough to be an Indian.

Of course, the responses are not always like this, but such impolite questions are known to lurk in the minds of the seasoned bureaucrats who administer the application of indigenist legislation. For my part, while recognizing the difficulties, I do not think it is right for the state to interpose legalistic obstacles to claims that are essentially demands for citizenship, put forward on behalf of historically excluded populations, especially when the state itself has opened up the opportunities through indigenist legislation, and especially also when the same state allows so many crimes perpetrated against indigenous peoples to go unpunished, as currently in Brazil's Amazonia, or against the population at large, as in Mexico. A shift in bias, toward a slightly more substantive interpretation of the law, would be welcome.

Such a shift was seen in 2012, when the Brazilian Supreme Court decided unanimously that the classification of people by the color of their skin, or by their self-assigned race, for resource allocation via affirmative actions was not in contravention of the country's Constitutional precept of equal treatment—a subject treated in my own chapter on Brazil. Several judges explicitly couched their remarks in terms of the need to change a pervasive pattern of racial exclusion in society, rather than in terms of a restrictive legalistic interpretation of the Constitution, as has tended recently to be the case in the United States Supreme Court.

Multiculturalisms, Cultural Dimensions

LR: Are the ups-and-downs of multiculturalism in Latin America a reflection of US, European, and global trends, or is Latin American multiculturalism different?

DL: It is very different, starting with the word itself. For the most part in Spanish-speaking countries the leaders of indigenist movements and those advocating for the rights of blacks and Afrodescendants, speak more of interculturalidad, as do sympathetic intellectuals, social scientists, and policymakers. They might use multicultural as an adjective to describe a country—UNAM has a program called 'México País Multicultural'—for it does not make sense to speak of a country as intercultural. Interculturalidad is a form of politics of recognition, but it is also a politics of inclusion, which Europeans, overall, have a hard time saying about multiculturalism.

In Britain multiculturalism as a descriptive rather than a normative term has the connotation of separation in the sense of ghettoization, or populations 'leading separate lives'—a phrase often used in Britain, especially with reference to predominantly or even overwhelmingly Pakistani or Bangladeshi Muslim neighborhoods. It is also used in the more institutional sense of an obligation or commitment by the state and by institutions to 'make allowances' for cultural and religious variation in the provision

of education, for example by allowing Muslim or Jewish organizations to establish state-subsidized schools where teaching emphasizes their religious doctrines and heritage, or by making special provision for them in state schools, or by downgrading or relativizing Christian religious commemorations like Christmas. These last are guaranteed to make headlines in parts of the British press that are fiercely nationalist, borderline xenophobic, anti-European, and highly influential. Turning to the normative resonance, multiculturalism is found in an inclination to oppose or resist the state's inhibition about forcing people to conform to inherited social norms in ways of dress and perhaps above all in the use of language—an inhibition often labeled pejoratively as 'political correctness' on account of a claim that the state is all too ready to recognize the victim status of certain populations and thus, again, to make allowances for them. I say 'inclination' because we are not talking here about a doctrine, a theory or even a policy, but rather something like an atmosphere, perhaps a field of disputes over the coexistence of people of different religious/cultural backgrounds.

In France, they speak of *communautarisme*, a normative concept which dominant political opinion rejects, sometimes vehemently. Like *laïcité*, it is sometimes twisted to serve political interests and highly aggressive agendas to devalue, stigmatize, and even delegitimize Islam. But it also has its defenders, who sometimes prefer to avoid the word itself. The defenders criticize actions by the state to disqualify and even outlaw the wearing of certain sorts of dress, for example, though this prohibition has not taken root, or the widespread *de facto* prevention of construction of mosques by the use of local planning procedures.

Brazilians seldom use *intercultural* and may use the word *multicultural*, though neither refers to policies or programs, let alone to countries. When Brazilians speak of the rights of ethnically or racially distinct populations, they refer hardly at all to cultural topics; rather, they are speaking of land or of material resources, especially the demand for preferential access for blacks principally to university and to public sector jobs. The possession cults, also known as *cultos afro*, are recognized as religions with the same status as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. In any case, possession cults are a heritage and a religious practice shared by Brazilians of all racial affiliations, not only those of a particular racial or ethnic identity.

When one speaks of multiculturalism US-style, one thinks of populations that are both of immigrant descent—and therefore culturally or linguistically distinct—and also suffer from social exclusion, since if they are not excluded, they do not, so to speak, qualify (*viz.* the Cuban population of Miami). However, one fascinating aspect of blackness in the US is its undoubted cultural dimension: very broadly and simplistically speaking, one observes boundaries marking out differences in accent, in language usage, in popular culture. In Brazil differences in accent and language use are not racially marked in that sort of way, and although certain sorts of music and entertainment (*bailes funk*) are associated with blackness, people do not encounter informal (let alone formal) or symbolic racialized

barriers to their participation. The brilliant recent book *Trans* by Rogers Brubaker (Princeton UP, 2016) points to the way these divisions are being eroded or maybe redrawn in the US, albeit much more slowly than inherited gender classifications, but the contrast still holds in Brazil, where race differences can hardly be coupled at all with cultural variation.

Multiculturalism, Human Rights, Rights of Women

LR: Does the multicultural turn reconcile the human rights of individuals resisting the control of representation by those claiming to speak in the name of subaltern groups?

DL: This is a sensitive topic. A current in contemporary anthropology places a question mark over the subject of human rights on the basis that the liberal, individualist doctrine on which they rest constitutes a denial of subaltern or marginalized cultures. In my introduction to *The Crisis of Multiculturalism* I discuss this with citations of relevant bibliography. The idea rests upon a surprising resuscitation of the opposition between Western modernity and ‘traditional’ societies which was violently criticized 40 or even 50 years ago. It also stands in contradiction with anthropology’s own foundations, since relativist ideas about the value of other cultures are the product of Western (in a very broad sense) philosophy and scholarship.

This question also raises the subject of the role of leadership in the representation of groups which are not only subaltern, but also somehow opaque to the outsider’s gaze. When rights are demanded on the basis of historic entitlements and depredations, they may be presented in the name of populations who do not have formal systems of representation, and whose members generally may lack the competence, knowledge, and power to make their views known in public. They need leaders with these capacities, and sometimes a suspicion grows, or is propagated, that those leaders are not truly representative, or that they are promoting a partial version of their followers’ beliefs, culture, and history. This can be observed in politically sensitive contexts, such as that of Islam in Europe, which produces leaders of many different persuasions whose legitimacy is routinely contested both internally and externally. Journalists and politicians and spokespeople for different currents question the representativeness of this or that individual who is considered too extreme, too moderate, or whatever.

The question of human rights arises notably when it comes to the rights of women, because the notion of gender equality, or even the notion of gender itself, is foreign to so many excluded or despised populations. In *The Crisis of Multiculturalism*, Manuela Picq’s essay describes how a group of women from the Highlands of Ecuador mobilized very effectively, and against the advice even of supposedly

sympathetic figures, to defend their rights at the country's 2008 Constitutional Assembly. As a result, the constitutional provisions that recognize indigenous law also stipulate that it must be applied in accordance with international instruments protecting the rights of women, notably CEDAW, the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Interculturalidad: The Broad Agenda

LR: In Latin America, there is also talk of interculturalidad. What are its specific claims, objectives, achievements, and shortcomings?

DL: In English, the word intercultural is used in educational circles to refer to educational policies or methods designed for children from immigrant families who do not have a good command of the dominant language. In Spanish America interculturalidad refers to a much broader set of policies, approaches, even sensibilities, that have grown up in countries where the social hierarchy is marked as much by cultural as by racial divisions.

The broad agenda of interculturalidad is to enable people to be competent in each other's cultures. The prefix *inter* introduces a connotation of equality or parity of esteem between cultures, so as to counteract the history and reality of cultural dominance, and to recognize indigenous cultures as a part of a country's heritage that deserves the same recognition as other cultures. This of course is quite different from Europe where the 'other' cultures have been brought by migration, often by migrants from countries that had been created and shaped by colonial rule under the now 'host' country, and in any case from countries whose cultures are held in little regard by the host populations, not least because of that same colonial history. Either way, though, hard to deny is the sense that societies are riven by expressions and feelings of cultural superiority and inferiority that match socio-economic inclusion and exclusion. Interculturalidad is a project to overcome that cultural exclusion, but it does not attack the material basis in income and wealth and land distribution. This is why some critics like Slavoj Žižek describe it as a mere gesture to keep the outsiders calm and divided and distract them from their shared class positions.

Interculturalidad appears in the sphere of education, where it advocates bilingual education for indigenous children, and at the level of higher education its curriculum includes the proper recognition of the accumulated knowledge of indigenous peoples. It also appears in the law in the official or sometimes unofficial recognition of indigenous systems of dispute settlement and occasionally of criminal justice. This is known as legal pluralism.

Activist Scholars vs. Non-Judgmental Research

LR: There seem to be difficulties in combining a commitment to multiculturalism as reflecting tolerance of diversity and the distance research needs for recognizing dilemmas, tensions, and contradictions of policies and political strategies. In your opinion, should researchers be involved in supporting groups seeking state recognition and social justice, acting for instance as expert witnesses, consultants and policy-makers, or should they refrain from such an involvement and let their research speak for itself?

DL: This is a touchy subject among scholars. As you well know, Max Weber, in his 1918 lecture ‘Science as a Vocation,’ spelled out a clear position that scholars had to leave their political opinions at the door of the lecture hall, though he recognized it was not easy to do so. Leaping forward to the atmosphere of cultural and political contestation in the 1960s and 1970s, we recall that the notion of objectivity in social science became almost a dirty word, and scholars would openly declare their sympathies.

This was understandable especially after revelations of the use of social scientists in counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia and the notorious Project Camelot in Latin America. But still, scholarship maintained an aura, or a language, of neutrality or impersonality so that we were still invited to consider as true, or at least *vraisemblable*, say, Paul Friedrich’s ethnography of Mexican ejidos, or the many monographs which emerged from the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, or the writings of Brazilians Carlos Brandão (on popular religion) and José de Sousa Martins (on the Amazonian peasantry among other subjects). Whatever sympathies the authors might express, their texts ‘rang true’: they bore the mark of dispassionate observation, and it was possible to quote them as evidence in support of an idea or thesis.

But then came other fashions and powerful writers, notably, but not only, Foucault, who tried to persuade us that all such observation was irremediably biased and that what remained was not an indescribable reality but instead the discourse deployed by various, always interested parties, to interpret it, each according to its lights. There was no possible separation between description and interpretation. From this one might draw several lessons: that to try to draw the distinction is a waste of time or even a deception; or that it is still worth trying, since people will read our accounts as if they were a reasonable description, irrespective of what Foucault or other authors have said.

Among students of ethnicity, and especially indigenous and race-based social movements, as well as students of gender, in Latin America the conclusion drawn too often is that this gives us the right to

subordinate our research to a cause and to write it up in an explicitly engagé style, for example branding people as racist, or even taking sides in fieldwork situations, as Shannon Speed has done in her work in Chiapas (see her *Rights in Rebellion: Indigenous Struggle and Human Rights in Chiapas*, Stanford UP, 2007). Charles Hale has given this sort of thing a name: ‘activist anthropology.’ In my view, this is going too far. These are, of course, matters of judgment, because research does have its biases and also because scholars are perfectly entitled to take political positions based on their research.

Two sorts of line must be drawn, however: one is between direct involvement in the research site and advocacy for general causes, or indeed provision of expertise as consultants or witnesses in human rights cases. The other line concerns style: I think that the adoption of partisan style in writing up and publishing research is wrong. We are scholars; we are neither detectives nor accountants nor judges. I also know from personal experience doing research on intercultural universities in Mexico that it is not at all easy, and could well be imprudent, for an outsider to try and dig too far into backstories and hidden agendas. There are further dimensions to this story, as indigenous students from Latin America, usually from an activist background, find their way to graduate school. There they undertake doctoral research on their own people and their own stories, sometimes in collaboration with people who are themselves researching their peoples or similar topics and subjects. I think the pitfalls and potential conflicts of interest raised by this pattern of interaction are self-evident, although obviously, I do not therefore think that this progression should be discouraged. The problem is the atmosphere of unquestioning loyalty to a cause in which it is undertaken.

To sum up: these are not issues that can be dealt with, and certainly not easily, by written norms or codes of ethics. Indeed, experience tells us that in academic work those codes, though necessary, can lead people down a bureaucratic blind alley. They are questions of judgment and style. But I repeat: doing fieldwork often puts people in sensitive situations, and researchers would do well to recall that, as I said, they are not qualified, nor called upon, to judge.