

Thinking about Peace Research in 21st Century Latin America¹

Susan Hoppert-Flaemig² and Egoitz Gago Anton³

With the end of military dictatorships in the Southern Cone and the signing of peace accords that followed the civil wars in Central America, most violent conflicts in Latin America have been considered to belong to the past. Consequently, the region has been overlooked by peace researchers. Nevertheless, for many countries within the region, violence has only further escalated over the last 30 years. Countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico are now considered to be some of the most violent countries in the world.⁴ Fuelling both violent conflict and the maintenance of structural injustice are economic inequalities and impunity, lack of the rule of law, and continuing human rights abuses. These issues have prompted various theoretical explanations. A peace research perspective, however, which challenges prevalent definitions of war, conflict, and peace, is often missing from these explanations.

This special issue of *Peace, Conflict and Development: An interdisciplinary Journal*, aims to provide innovative insights into peace research in Latin America. To that end, the selection of articles and book reviews are representative of a vibrant and provocative trend in research, mainly led by young scholars. Peace research, here, is understood as a multidisciplinary field that explores and understands peace, violence, and conflict as complex and linked from the local to a macro-structural perspective. In particular, it aims at addressing the root causes of violence, exploring ways of

¹ We dedicate this Special Issue to our dear PhD colleague Elizabeth Kerr who died of cancer on 4 January 2013. Elizabeth contributed to this collection of articles by helping us to articulate our ideas of strengthening peace research on the Latin American region. We are very grateful for her valuable support; we miss her brilliant ability of constructive criticism in our academic work, and we miss her as a great friend.

² Susan Hoppert-Flaemig is a PhD researcher in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, UK, working on security politics under the Leftist FMLN Government in El Salvador from a Critical Security Studies perspective. She is co-editor of the book "Latin America between Conflict and Reconciliation" (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2012).

³ Egoitz Gago Antón Holds a Political Science Degree by the Basque Country University and a doctoral degree in Peace Studies by the University of Bradford. Dr Anton field of expertise is the impact of social organisations affected by violence in public policy and social processes. His research covers peace movements, victims of violence and ex-combatants in the Basque Country, Northern Ireland and Colombia. His current research focuses on social peace practices in Colombia.

⁴ According to the UNODC, Honduras and El Salvador have the highest homicide rates in the world with 82 and 66 respectively per 100,000 inhabitants per year. Colombia, Venezuela and other Central American countries have homicide rates that are among the highest in the world. UNODC (2011). Global Study on Homicide.

overcoming structural inequalities, and promoting equitable relations between and within human collectives.⁵ It also aims at multi-level analysis, which includes not just potential conflicts between states, but also between and within groups of people.⁶

There is little contemporary work in and about Latin America that explicitly refers to peace research. The International Peace Research Association founded its Latin America section following a conference in Mexico in 1977 - the Latin American Council for Peace Research (CLAIP, for its Spanish abbreviation). According to its former chair, CLAIP focuses on democratisation processes and social movements, but only few publications are available.⁷ Other authors analyse interstate relations, focusing on peace in terms of stability and the absence of armed conflicts between states.⁸ The analysis of interstate relations is an important part of peace research, but there are other dimensions to be considered.

The scarcity of peace research in the region does not imply that there is no “peace discourse”; quite the contrary, questions of how to establish a culture of peace are being discussed all over Latin America. However, public debates have not yet transformed into strong academic thinking. In this regard, the purpose of this special issue is twofold: on the one hand, it aims to raise new awareness about the on-going and emerging violent conflicts in the region; on the other hand, it furthers possible options for overcoming conflicts, offering examples about some of the encouraging efforts for peace currently unfolding throughout the region.

In this sense, we have identified four fields of study that could be considered as contributions from Latin America to peace research.⁹ First, given the persistence of severe economic and social inequalities, research on structural inequality is fairly strong in the region and it has already been addressed by dependency theorists and liberation theologians in the 1960s and 1970s. During the last two decades research shifted more towards themes about the emergence and consequences of the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, including the resurgence of the political Left.¹⁰ A particular focus of the debates was on economic inequality and its consequences for social cohesion.¹¹ Over the years, debates became more diverse and now also include other dimensions of inequality that link to questions of ethnicity, gender, and environment. In this volume, Susanne Simon and Belinda Lorenza Fontana, reflect on these issues.

⁵ Rogers, Paul and Ramsbotham, Oliver (1999). Then and Now: Peace Research – Past and Future. *Political Studies* 47, 740-754.

⁶ Rogers and Ramsbotham (1999).

⁷ Ursula Oswald Spring (2006). Latin American Perspectives on Peace Research, In: Alan Hunter (ed.) (2006). *Peace Studies in the Chinese Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate. p.59. See also Richards, Howard and Alacantha, Maria (1981). *Peace Research: A Latin American Perspective*. In: *Peace and Change*. Vol.7, No. 3, pp. 27-33.

⁸ See, for example, Mares, David R. (2012). *Latin America and the Illusion of Peace*. London, New York: Routledge; Hertz, Monica (2010). Concepts of Security in South America. *International Peacekeeping*. Vol. 17, No. 5, pp. 602-603; Dominguez, Jorge (1998). Security, Peace, and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: Challenges for the Post-Cold War Era. In: *Ibid.* (ed.) *International Security and Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, pp. 3-28.

⁹ This is not an exhaustive account; other fields may be added.

¹⁰ See, for example Oxhorn, Philip and Ducatenzeiler, Graciela (eds.) (1998). *What Kind of Democracy? What Kind of Market? Latin America in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Pennsylvania State University Press; Levitsky, Steven and Roberts, Kenneth M. (eds.) (2011). *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹¹ See, for example, Fajnzylber, Pablo, Lederman, Daniel, and Loayza, Norman. Inequality and Violent Crime. *Journal of Law and Economics*. Vol. XLV. Pp. 1-40.

Fontana claims that there has been little international attention to ethnic-related potential for conflicts in Latin America, because there are no major "ethnically-based" armed conflicts. However, forms of social conflicts persist and, in some cases, as the author argues, increased. Using the example of Bolivian ethno-cultural politics, Fontana examines the side-effects of the special status Latin American indigenous minorities have been granted. While this special status happened in accordance with international standards, it has also incentivised an instrumental use of ethno-cultural categories that gave rise to social fragmentation and conflictivity. Remarkably, Fontana also suggests that widespread ethnic violence is rather unlikely due to a number of factors that can be seen as mechanisms for fostering peace in the Andean region.

Another example of social conflict is portrayed by Suzanne Simon who examines the controversies around the proliferation and implementation of climate friendly technologies in the case of wind parks in Oaxaca, Mexico. Simon categorises resistance against climate friendly technologies into three different types, all of which fuel social conflict: resistance against neoliberal invasion, resistance of collective landholders against the wind parks, and resistance based on concerns about the environmental effects of wind parks, including on human health. Showing the entanglements of new conflicts with older unresolved grievances such as social inequality, she argues that the dispute resolution mechanisms that were introduced with the NAFTA side accords are inadequate to resolve the controversies and that more sophisticated mechanisms are needed.

Closely related to research on structural inequality are aspects of community engagement and grassroots movements which also feature as key themes in the analysis of conflict areas from a peace research perspective. This second field of study brings our attention to the local level and to more pragmatic approaches of peacebuilding "from below". Due to the long history of social struggles, there is a lot to learn from Latin America about community engagement and social change, as portrayed in the special issue on community development in the region.¹² On this, Miguel Barreto Henriques discusses the role of NGOs in peace building scenarios, particularly the case of the peace laboratories in Colombia. Barreto situates peacebuilding within the historical conflict in Colombia, focusing on the peace laboratories experiences, which are grassroots peace programmes funded by the European Union and the Colombian government. While peace laboratories are connected to the different Peace and Development Programmes, their aim is to find new and alternative ways to peace at the local and regional level, and they serve as a key tool to bring excluded collectives closer to the governmental institutions and to generate peace conditions that could be replicated in different parts of the country. To that end they use a participatory approach that looks for a total inclusion of the individual in the collective, generating peace values and ethics. Peace laboratories stand against the more prominent approaches of resorting to the use of force by the military and Colombian police.

The case of Bolivia as an example of strong community relations that impede large-scale armed violence is also made by Witold Mucha's intriguing comparison of Peru and Bolivia. The author poses the question of why Peru and Bolivia, sharing some historical and sociological characteristics, did not react to conflict in the same way. Mucha determines that this could be explained using the

¹² Pearce, Jenny; Howard, Joanna; Bronstein, Audrey (eds.) (2010). Learning from Latin America: Organising for Social Transformation. Special Issue of *Community Development Journal*. Vol. 45, No. 3.

concept of “resilience”, which means that certain cultural, social, and psychological trends make a group prone to avoid the use of violence. The author describes different historical trends that help to explain the different approaches to violence and compares the cases of Peru and Bolivia. While the lack of a structured approach to social inequality made Peru the scenario for a civil war that caused many deaths, that was not the case in Bolivia, where the existence of solid community relations prevented the outbreak of civil war during stressful episodes in recent history. The author not only explores the question of using or not using violence, but also goes further in trying to discern if it is possible to use the same analysis in other environments.

Third, state security provision and the right of protection for citizens are topics of increasing relevance across the continent and are addressed by this volume in both Moritz Schuberth's article on vigilantism in modern states and Nicole Jenne's book review on *Mexico's Security Failure* authored by Kenny, Serrano, and Sotomayor (2012). Securitization is not only an International Relations' issue; it also drives the public security discourse of political and economic elites, as Moritz Schuberth shows. He compares informal security structures in Brazil and South Africa, arguing that phenomena like vigilantism are not the result of weak state structures, but should be understood as the outcome of deliberate policy choices. Schuberth points to the deeper historical roots of inequality, racism, and societal polarization that boosted state security decisions, and would ultimately marginalize and ignore parts of the population. He notes that the use of the metaphor of “war against crime” or “war against drugs” by politicians and the media is a securitisation tool that further deepens the polarisation of societies.

The war metaphor has raised a lot of international attention on the severe problems of crime and violence, especially in Mexico, Central America, and Brazil. However, from a peace research perspective, this metaphor does not contribute to a better understanding of the problems. On the contrary, it highlights a short sighted, political, and sometimes violent answer to very complex issues that have their roots in the historical development of these states and societies, as the above mentioned example clearly demonstrate. Scholars of various disciplines such as International Relations, Sociology, and Anthropology have often studied these issues in isolation within their own fields. Peace research, as a multidisciplinary field, can draw on the progress and academic insight from other disciplines in order to understand the complex structural causes of violence.

Fourth, the evolution of Transitional Justice as a field of study is closely related to the region. In her genealogy of transitional justice, Ruti Teitel showed how the establishment of Latin American truth commissions has broadened the concept of Transitional Justice significantly.¹³ Whilst the Nuremberg trials involved international persecution for the first time, dealing with the past in Chile, Argentina, and Central America (and South Africa) during the 1980s and 1990s was closely linked to truth commissions. The Transitional Justice discourse now also comprised topics like truth, reconciliation, and development. Since then, the concept has developed further, and important research on Transitional Justice still deals with Latin American cases.¹⁴

In this issue, Ana Laura Zavala Guillén exposes the lack of gender vision during the Argentinian transition from dictatorship to democracy. Guillén analyses the brutal violence committed against

¹³ Teitel, Ruti (2003). *Transitional Justice Genealogy*. *Harvard Human Rights Journal*. Vol. 16, pp. 69-94.

¹⁴ See, for example the works of Leigh Payne, Kathryn Sikkink, Cath Collins, and Elizabeth Lira.

women during the dictatorship, specially focused on the erasing of women's identity based on a right wing, ultra-Catholic criteria. The stories of women interned in concentration camps, how they were objectified and treated as sexual slaves are extremely shocking and reveal situations of acute cruelty. Nevertheless, Guillén points out that rape, torture and sexual objectification were perceived as minor problems during the military regime, compared to mass killings and disappearances. This issue, linked with a male dominated culture, left gender violence out of the transitional justice process. The analysis identifies the difficulty faced by women in denouncing their ordeal based on issues of identity, shame, cultural orientation and social perception; these issues were left aside during the transition to democracy when decisions were made based on the need to forget and move on.

This special issue brings two further contributions to the peace research discussion in Latin America. Anna Karina Bayer tackles the inclusion of external parties in the peace processes in Colombia. She presents the issue of international mediation as neglected by the academic community and analyses the role of third parties in different peace processes since 1982. The methodology used shows an innovative approach to international mediation, based on Clausewitz's conception of the relationship between the "aim", the "ultimate objective" and the "means", which she applies to every peace negotiation that happened in Colombia, stressing the role of the Government and the main guerrilla groups.

Finally, María Jose Bermeo's article on the role of education in the context of citizen security calls for an extended research agenda on peace education in Latin America. She elaborates on the whole spectrum of the possible educational impact on child and youth involvement in urban insecurity, ranging from propagating violent and abusive behaviour to preventive programmes. According to Bermeo, education can enhance the vulnerabilities of children and youth; when intentionally set up as such, it can become a place for protection, prevention, and, ultimately, the transformation of conflicts. Peace education here means the provision of knowledge and practices "that engage learners in transforming violent conditions by identifying and addressing the structural and cultural dynamics that generate violence." It may be added that not only schools can become agents of peace education; universities and other institutions for higher education *within* regions that are affected by urban insecurity should become places wherein practical and theoretical knowledge about conflict transformation is generated and disseminated.

Remarkably, all articles in this special issue point to potential mechanisms, policies, or strategies to overcome or impede violent conflict. Whether discussing conflict mechanisms that can help resolve controversies between the local population and wind park providers in Oaxaca, Mexico, mediating with supranational organisations with regard to ethno-cultural issues in Bolivia, or extending peace education to schools in Central America, this collection of research reveals the true asset of a peace research perspective: concrete opportunities to constructively engage with conflict.