Latin America Studies in Austria:  
An Overview

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In today’s Austria, Latin America plays a marginal role at best. The country has no political or economic interests in the region to speak of and apart from occasional articles in newspapers and magazines and reports on state television, which focus on spectacular events and natural disasters, such as Argentina’s most recent economic crisis, the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, *El Niño*, as well as earthquakes and floods in Central America, it is only mentioned when the alpine skiing teams set up their training camps in the Chilean or Argentine Andes during the European summer. More historically minded Austrians may also associate Latin America with Empress Leopoldine of Brazil, wife of Dom Pedro I; luckless Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, younger brother of Franz Josef of Habsburg-Lorraine; and possibly Mexico’s lone protest against the occupation of the country by the Third Reich in 1938. In general, however, Latin America is a *terra incognita*. At the same time, and somewhat in contradiction to this situation, there are signs that the number of people in Austria working on the region, or who at least show a more or less professional interest in it, is growing (Stumpf, ed., 2000). Moreover, there are efforts under way to strengthen the field of Latin American Studies in Austria. In the autumn of 2001, the Austrian Latin America Institute (Österreichisches Lateinamerika-Institut, LAI) in Vienna started a Master’s Programme in area studies recognised by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the first of its kind in the country.

Starting with a historical survey of research on Latin American in Austria, this article provides an overview of the developments that have taken place in academic studies on Latin American since the 1980s. First, it will look at the situation in Austrian universities, presenting some academics from the humanities and social sciences and their research interests. As no Latin American centre in any Austrian university exists, and essentially all academics mentioned in this article work in different departments and universities, the picture presented here is an impressionistic and by no means comprehensive one. In a next step, recent developments in extra-university institutions will be discussed, namely the Austrian Latin America Institute and the Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Latin American Research (Institut für zeitgenössische Lateinamerikaforschung). Especially the former has emerged, as the establishment of the Master’s Programme indicates, as a focal point of research on the region. In the last section, a brief assessment of the current situation will be presented.

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Historical Development

Austria has a relatively long tradition of research with regard to Latin America, albeit a heterogeneous and weakly institutionalised one. It dates back to the nineteenth century when natural scientists, adventurers, ethnographers and travellers started exploring the continent and its cultural, anthropological, biological and geographical diversity. Most of these men (and a few women) lacked official support, reflecting the scant interest of the Habsburg Empire in Latin America; they undertook their expeditions and journeys on their own initiatives. With the disintegration of the monarchy in 1918, the overall situation only deteriorated. The newly born Austria, landlocked in the heart of Europe and struggling amidst bitter ideological confrontations for its identity, had neither the political interest nor the economic potential to support further research on Latin America. Activities related to the region were essentially limited to the work on the ethnographic collections of the Habsburgs based in Vienna and some field research initiated by the Catholic Societas Verbi Divini, based in Mödling, near Vienna, which sent its members to such places as Tierra del Fuego, expecting in vain to find proofs for its theory of elemental monotheism (Drekonja 1992, 829). To make things worse, as a result of the political events of the 1930s, especially the annexation of Austria by the Third Reich in 1938, an intellectual brain drain set in. Important scholars, academics and writers left the country, many of them for the Americas, not least Stefan Zweig and Marie Langer, who markedly influenced the development of psychoanalysis in Argentina.

As far as Latin America was concerned, the Second Republic, born with the liberation from German occupation in 1945, continued the tradition of the interwar period. Neither economically nor politically did the political establishment show any interest in the continent; the country focused on internal questions. Moreover, the opportunity to invite émigrés back to Austria and integrate them into the impoverished academic life, among them Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, Friedrich Katz, and Eric R. Wolf, was sadly neglected. The establishment of the Austrian Latin America Institute in Vienna in 1965, later followed by regional branches in Graz, Linz, Salzburg, Klagenfurt, and Innsbruck, did not fundamentally change the situation, nor did the foundation of an Austrian school in Guatemala in 1967. While the latter remained an exception, not followed by similar projects in other Latin American nations and ignored by Austria’s foreign cultural politics, during the first years of its existence the former struggled to define its identity and objectives. Only in the early 1970s did it begin to develop its own agenda and develop a more coordinated approach to Latin American studies. It started to publish a journal, Zeitschrift für Lateinamerika-Wien (Drekonja 1992, 831-833). Until its discontinuation in 1996, fifty issues were produced covering topics such as the trade relations between Austria and Latin America (no.2, 1971), tourism in Latin America (no.9, 1975), dictatorship and military rule (no.19, 1980), Austria’s interests in Latin America (no.35, 1988), and NAFTA and Chiapas (nos.46/47, 1994). Despite an increased, if uncoordinated and short-lived, political and economic interest in the continent in general and Central America in particular on the part of Austrian politicians in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was the direct result of a more outward-looking foreign policy pursued by Social Democratic chancellor
Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983), a qualitative change in Austrian Latin American studies only took place in the mid-1980s. This was all the more remarkable, and in fact ‘ironic’ (Drekonja 1992, 838), because at the same time the political leadership of the country ended its brief flirtation with Latin America and again turned its attention almost exclusively to European issues, namely Austria’s integration into the European Union and improved relations with central and eastern European countries. Since then, Latin America has played no role in Austria’s foreign policy. However, in 1983 the Association of Austrian Latin American Research (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Österreichische Lateinamerikaforschung, ARGE OELAF) was set up, in 1985 the Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Latin American Research was founded, and five years later, in 1990, the first and so far only chair of Latin America studies in Austria was established in the department of history at the University of Vienna.

Latin American Studies at Austrian Universities

Since its establishment, the chair of Latin America history, which is officially a chair of ‘Non-European History with Special Emphasis on Latin American’, is held by Gerhard Drekonja, a specialist in the diplomatic history of Latin America (Drekonja 1983, 1986). His appointment marked an important step in the development of Latin American studies in Austria, as research on the continent was finally officially embedded in the academic world and its status formalised. Now, if only in this specific department, work on the region no longer exclusively depended on the personal interests of staff members, who worked in different institutes and museums – for instance, the Museum for Ethnology in Vienna, with its strong Latin American collection – but had become part of the university establishment. In addition to Drekonja, who is also actively involved in the Austrian Latin America Institute and co-director of the Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Latin American Research, Martina Kaller-Dietrich also works permanently in the same department. Appointed Associate Professor in 2000, her interests and expertise lie in the field of historical anthropology and the history of ideas and development, especially as regards Central America and Mexico (Kaller-Dietrich 2002, 2001, 1998).

Although the chair puts the department into a unique position, when looking at the larger picture the situation is more sobering, because all in all forty academics work there. The two Latin Americanists are ‘exotic foreigners’ at the institute, and they certainly do not and cannot constitute a critical mass of researchers. Consequently, no Austrian school of Latin American history has developed since the establishment of the chair more than ten years ago. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could have emerged under these circumstances. Yet, both researchers contribute to efforts, as we will see in the section on the Austrian Latin America Institute, that aim at the furthering of studies on Latin America by co-operating with scholars working, inter alia, on the areas in the social sciences or humanities departments around the country. None of them has a chair of Latin American studies, although some, as for example the geographer Axel Borsdorf at the University of Innsbruck who has written extensively about many different aspects of urban and rural development in the region (Borsdorf 1976, 1987, ed. 2000), the social geographer An-
dreas Novy at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration who focuses on development issues in Brazil (Novy 2001, 2002), as well as the economist Kunibert Raffer at the University of Vienna, are professors or at least qualified as university lecturers.

Among those is Wolfgang Dietrich, a political scientist at the University of Innsbruck. Dietrich has very broad research interests, including social movements, human rights, and indigenous cosmovisions, and has published widely on Central America (Dietrich 1990, 1988, 1987). Another influential personality in the Austrian Latin Americanist community is the anthropologist Elke Mader, a part-time lecturer at the University of Vienna’s Institute of Ethnology, Cultural and Social Anthropology and freelance scientist, and currently president of the Association of Austrian Latin American Research. Mader, a specialist in the indigenous populations of the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon, has undertaken extensive field trips to the region and written a number of articles and books on shamanism, mythology, and kinship (Mader 1999a, 1999b; Mader and Gippelhauser 2000). However, she has not obtained a permanent position at an institute that has, since the mid-1970s under the direction of Karl R. Wernhart, developed a relatively strong research interest in the Caribbean, particularly Cuba and the West Indies. Last but not least, while not yet qualified as university lecturers, in this impressionistic overview one can also mention René Kuppe, Associate Professor at the Institute of Law and Religion at the University of Vienna who works on indigenous rights, particularly in Venezuela (Kuppe 1996, 1997), and Monika Ludescher, a researcher at the University of Innsbruck who focuses on the same topic, but in Peru (Ludescher 1999.

Since specialists in Latin America are, with the exception of the history department at the University of Vienna, scattered over many different institutes and no area study centre exists that could have led to a concentration of research interests, an analysis of the doctoral dissertations submitted in Austrian universities since 1990 does not produce a clear pattern of specific research interests, neither a particular theoretical focus, nor preferences for certain themes. In fact, the 76 doctoral dissertations submitted in the humanities and social sciences since 1990 cover a wide range of topics, for instance the relationship between women and men among the Embera, Darien, Panama (Ramnek 1996), the function and structural change of wage labour in Argentina (Unterdünhofen 1997), or the emigration of Austrians to Brazil during the interwar period (Prutsch 1993). Interestingly enough, a relative majority of dissertations was not submitted to the University of Vienna’s history department, as one might have expected because of the chair, but to the university’s anthropology department. On the other hand, it is not surprising, given the fact that the University of Vienna is the biggest Austrian university and the only one with an Institute of Ethnology, Cultural and Social Anthropology, that almost half of them were submitted there. The Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration follows with around one sixth of all dissertations.

In geographical terms, these doctoral dissertations cover all south and central American countries, except Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Honduras. In accordance with the findings of the above-mentioned survey of the Austrian Latin America Institute (Stumpf, ed., 2000, 3-7), as well as reflecting historical trends, Mexico (13) and Brazil (9) received most of the attention. Guatemala, possibly as an after-
effect of the political interest shown in the country in Austria between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, attracted a considerably and, in terms of its size, disproportionately high number of students, five. Other countries that have been the subject of more than one dissertation were Argentina (4), Bolivia (5), Chile (4), Peru (6), Paraguay (2), Venezuela (3), Ecuador (2), Nicaragua (2), and Cuba (4). Thirteen dissertations dealt with more than one country or chose a comparative approach.

At the university level, the most salient feature of Austrian Latin American studies is, then, its marginal status within academia and its heterogeneous nature. The chair at the department of history at the University of Vienna did not change this overall picture. Resources are scattered over many different institutes, researchers are thinly spread, and job opportunities for Latin Americanists do not exist. In general, work on Latin America still depends on the personal interests of researchers; it is not the result of specific policies. Given the scant interest of Austrian politics in the continent as well as the precarious financial situation of universities, it is highly improbable that at the university level the situation will change in the foreseeable future. Private initiatives, personal relations and extra-university institutions will continue to play crucial roles.

Extra-University Institutions and Activities

The main extra-university institution is the Austrian Latin America Institute in Vienna. Since the 1980s, the LAI has increasingly assumed a central institutional role concerning research on the region. While not being part of any university, it has become a focal point of Latin American studies in Austria, serving as a platform for the co-operation of scholars working in different universities and on different subjects, and as a meeting point between specialists and non-specialists. Tellingly, all academics mentioned so far are in one way or the other related to the LAI and involved in its growing activities. The fact that the institute also provides the infrastructure for the Association of Austrian Latin American Research as well as the Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Latin American Research further underlines its significance.

After the discontinuation of the Zeitschrift für Lateinamerika-Wien, the LAI started publishing a yearbook, titled ¡Atención! in 1997. So far, five issues have appeared, each dedicated to a specific topic, for instance development issues (no.1, 1997) or conceptions of the world and societies in Latin America (no.2, 1998). Moreover, in 1998 in collaboration with ARGE OELAF, it has begun a new series, called Investigaciones, in which works of young scholars who received their degrees from Austrian universities, both doctoral and master’s, are published. As of early 2002, four books have appeared dealing with such topics as sustainable development in Chile (Schnitzer 2001) and indigenous religiosity in Peru (Thonhauser 2001). However, the most innovative aspect of the LAI’s activities, which could potentially change the nature of Latin American studies in Austria, is the introduction of an interdisciplinary postgraduate course in the autumn of 2001. Building on courses established as early as 1982, students of Austrian universities are now, for the first time, being offered the opportunity to obtain a degree in area studies, namely a ‘Master of Advanced Studies (Latin American Studies)’. As the programme has just started – currently three theses are in preparation – conclusions
concerning its impact are not yet possible.

The second important extra-university institution that needs to be mentioned is the Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Latin American Research,13 jointly directed by Drekonja and Leo Gabriel. Reflecting Gabriel’s longstanding professional interest in Central America, since its foundation the institution has developed a strong research record on the region and carried out a number of cooperative studies among Austria and Central American countries, particularly Nicaragua. Following an earlier focus on human rights issues and peace processes (Gabriel 1987, 1989), more recently Gabriel, who is also active in the LAI and its programme, has been involved in discussions concerning the impact of the neoliberal economic model on Latin American societies, leading to the publication of a book (Gabriel, ed., 1997). Through his journalistic activities, both in the press and on Austrian state television and radio, he has also attempted to raise, beyond the occasional reports in media, awareness amongst the Austrian public for the region and its people.

Final Remarks

The neglect of Latin American studies on the part of the Austrian educational establishment, characteristic of the field throughout the last century, still seems the greatest obstacle to its development. Without more posts for Latin Americanists in Austrian universities, it is difficult to see how a critical mass of researchers can emerge. The establishment of the Master’s Programme in the Austrian Latin America Institute, while being an important step towards the institutionalisation of area studies and opening up new perspectives for those with an academic interest in the region, does not address the fundamental problem: the lack of positions within Austrian universities or extra-university research institutions. Austrian Latin Americanists still face a precarious future. Since Austria has little political and economic interests in the region, and therefore no demand for expert knowledge, it is highly unlikely that the situation will change in the foreseeable future.

A second issue that has to be addressed is the lack of international contacts and the inward looking nature of Austrian Latin Americanists. Less than ten per cent of all persons listed in the report of the LAI are members of international organisations, such as the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) or the Asociación de Historiadores Latinoamericanistas Europeos (AHILA). The increased cooperation with central and eastern countries does not solve this problem. Even more detrimental to the development of the field, articles are rarely published in refereed journals of international standing. Only by engaging more actively in international debates, and by seeking the contact with the scientific community in the Americas as well as European countries with a stronger tradition of Latin American studies, can progress be achieved.

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Notes

1. While providing significant information, the value and meaningfulness of the report’s findings are limited, because it also includes Master’s students as well as a number of people whose research interests in Latin America are very restricted.
2. Austrian academics that live abroad and who have spent their professional life outside Austria, as for example Johanna Broda (Mexico), Andreas Schedler (Mexico), and Bernd Hausberger (Berlin), are not included.
3. For a slightly different version of the article in Spanish, including a final section on theses published in Austrian universities between 1979 and 1991, see Drekonja and Prutsch (1992).
4. For a full list of topics see http://www.lai.at/pub.htm#zeitschrift.
5. For the activities and objectives of the association see http://www.lai.at/oelaf.htm.
6. For a comprehensive list of her publications see http://mailbox.univie.ac.at/martina.kaller-dietrich.
7. For an extensive list of his publications see http://geowww.uibk.ac.at/~borsdorf/lit.html.
8. For full list of his publication see http://info.uibk.ac.at/homepage/Wolfgang.Dietrich.
9. For an extensive list of his publications see:
   http://www.univie.ac.at/Voelkerkunde/staff/pub/vernhart.html.
10. This section is based on my own research in the Austrian database of dissertations (Österreichische Dissertationsdatenbank),
    http://www.arcs.ac.at/DissDB/diss;internal&action=action.search.database. With the financial support of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, the Austrian Latin America Institute is currently preparing a comprehensive list of master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, and postdoctoral theses required for qualification as a university teacher (Habilitation) dealing with Latin America that have been submitted at Austrian universities between 1970 and 2001. See Stumpf 2001.
11. See http://www.lai.at/pub.htm#atencion.
12. For more details and summaries of books see http://www.lai.at/pub.htm#investigaciones.
13. For reports on the activities of the institute since 1996 see:

Bibliography


