Latin American Studies in Finland:  
Past Trends and New Perspectives  

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**Finnish Research Related to Latin America during the Last Twenty Years**

During the 1970s the debate over dependency theories was the primary focus of Finnish Latin American Studies. The political situation in Central America, and especially the Nicaraguan Sandinista revolution in 1979, provided some new impulses to this discussion, but as a matter of fact the Central American issue did not generate any remarkable research response or *boom* in the Finnish academic establishment at this time. Instead, academic interest during the 1980s concentrated more toward Latin American indigenous peoples, both past and present (see Valtonen 1999a; Pakkasvirta 1999). Especially at the Universities of Helsinki and Turku, and to some extent in Jyväskylä, Tampere and Joensuu, interest on Latin American and Caribbean indigenous peoples’ history, anthropology and archaeology was growing. This trend was reinforced in 1989 when the Academy of Finland decided to finance a historical-archeological project of the Universities of Turku and Helsinki on the Bolivian Andes entitled ‘The relation of the Pacaje nation to the Inca State: a multidisciplinary study of the peoples living in the Pacaje province, 300-1825.’ The project was led by Martti Pärssinen, Ari Siiriäinen and Reino Kero, and it was considered to be a continuation of the older tradition started at the first half of the twentieth century by Rafael Karsten and Erland Nordenskiöld (see Siiriäinen 1999). The project was carried out in cooperation with Bolivian cultural and archaeological authorities, and since then it has paved the way for other projects in various parts of Bolivia (Chuquisaca, Kiwaya [Lake Titicaca], Riberalta [Bolivian Amazon]) mainly under the supervision of Ari Siiriäinen, Martti Pärssinen and Risto Kesseli (see, for example, Pärssinen 1999; Pärssinen & Siiriäinen 1998; Siiriäinen & Pärssinen 2002; Faldín 1999; Kesseli 1999).

At the same time, at the beginning of the 1980s, when some historians and archaeologists were planning their future multidisciplinary projects on the Andes, some botanists at the University of Turku and the University of Helsinki started to study Andean domesticated plants. Furthermore, Jukka Salo travelled in the western Amazonia and planned another multidisciplinary project to study Amazonian ecology, biodiversity, river dynamics and tectonics. When Salo (biology), Risto Kalliola (geography) and Matti Räsänen (geology) finally got financial support from the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, they launched an important Amazon project at the University of Turku that has contributed a great deal to our knowledge, especially to what we know about the Peruvian Amazonian ecosystem, biodiversity and land use planning. Since then, the project has grown considerably, and some anthropologists and historians have also con-
tributed to its research strategy (Kamppinen 1989; Pärssinen et al. 1996). In general, the project has produced a number of important published dissertations and other studies (see, for example, Salo 1988; Räsänen 1991; Kalliola 1992; Tuomisto 1994; Ruokolainen 1995; Vormisto 2000; Kalliola and Flores Paitán 1998).

While the Finnish Bolivian and Amazonian projects continue to play an important role in our Latin American Studies and are still expanding both geographically and methodologically, the general research interest on Latin America saw a welcome diversification in the 1990s. This happened at the same time as the European Union; Finnish authorities and private industry became more interested in Latin American economic, political and cultural development. As a part of this process the University of Helsinki has financed a project dealing with integration and democratic politics in the Americas led by Markku Henriksson, Professor of North American Studies, and with the active participation of Latin American specialists such as Jussi Pakkasvirta, Teivo Teivainen and Petri Minkkinen (see, for example, Minkkinen 1999; Teivainen 1999). Pekka Valtonen has also actively participated on two comparative projects at the University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere dealing with Latin American integration processes, especially from Mexican, Central American, Caribbean and European perspectives (see, for example, Valtonen 1999b), while Ilkka Ruohonen, Eija-Maija Kotilainen and Lily Diaz (University of Helsinki, Helinä Rautavaara Museum and the University of Art and Design in Helsinki) have led projects in Venezuela and Brazil related to visual anthropology (Kotilainen 2000).

In general, this new diversification can also be seen in a number of dissertations completed during the 1990s at Finnish Universities. After Pärssinen’s (1992) multidisciplinary thesis on the political organization of the Inca State (General History, University of Turku), Anja Nygren (1995) defended her thesis on Costa Rican peasants in changing environmental conditions (Cultural Anthropology, University of Helsinki), while Elina Vuola (1997) wrote her dissertation on the relationships between the Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology (Systematic Theology, University of Helsinki). Jussi Pakkasvirta (1997), on the one hand, compared the cultural debate on continentalism and nationalism in Costa Rica and Peru from 1919 to 1930 (Political History, University of Helsinki) while Eeva-Leena Melkas (1999), on the other hand, compared the political backgrounds of the Finnish settlers in Brazil and the Dominican Republic from 1925 to 1932 (General History, University of Turku). Furthermore, in the same year Maaria Seppänen (1999) defended her thesis dealing with the reorganization of the historic centre of Lima into a world heritage site (Geography, University of Helsinki) and Juha Hiltunen (1999) presented his much-discussed thesis on Fernando Montesinos’s list of ancient Peruvian kings (Cultural History, University of Turku). To the Finnish tradition of Andean Studies belonged also two dissertations of the Department of Political Science (University of Helsinki): Teivo Teivainen’s ([2000], 2002) ‘Enter Economy, Exit Politics’ on the limitations posed by the recent transnational political economy on Peruvian democracy, as well as Markus Österlund’s (2001) thesis on social and political strategies of the Peruvian Huanta on the basis of their deep religious convictions and beliefs. Furthermore, Pekka Valtonen’s (2001) thesis on Mexican agrarian politics in the twentieth century (Sociology, University of Tampere) is an important contribution to Mexican peasant studies.
Finally, as a reflection of the widening of research interests in Latin American Studies I can also refer to a recent thesis in musicology at the University of Helsinki (Lima 2001) and one on the cultural differences in Finnish-Colombian business communication that was defended in the Department of Communication at the University of Jyväskylä (Vaahterikkö-Mejía 2001). These too have enriched Finland’s academic research tradition on Latin America.

The Ibero-American Centre at the University of Helsinki and the First Finnish Latin American Studies Program

The Ibero-American Centre started to emerge in the year 1986 at the University of Helsinki when it was informally founded as a part of the unit for Ibero-Romance Languages, directed by Professor Timo Riiho, for the purpose of coordinating and supporting Finnish research on Latin America. Since then, the Centre has also organized various national and international conferences and meetings. For example, in 1996 the Ibero-American Centre organized IV Nordic Symposium for Latin American Identity (Pakkasvirta and Pirttijärvi 1997), and in 1999 the Ibero-American Centre organized together with the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs the first Expert Meeting on Cultural Cooperation between the signatory countries of the Declaration of Rio de Janeiro, formulated that same year by the heads of state of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean (see IRELA: Conference report No. 2/99).

In 1992 the Centre started to coordinate the first Latin American Studies Program in Helsinki at a rather modest level. Nevertheless, interest in Latin American Studies was growing, partly due the fact that Finland joined the European Union in 1995, and Finnish authorities had to participate in planning and decision-making connected with a European Latin America policy. In 1996 Finnish Ibero-American Foundation, directed by the Chancellor of the University of Helsinki Prof. Risto Ihamuotila decided to establish El Instituto Iberoamericano de Finlandia in Madrid in order to intensify the cultural, scientific and economic ties between Finland and Luso-Hispanic world (see Opetusministeriö 1998, 23-33). By that same time many Latin American countries had opened their markets to foreign investors and the ongoing integration attracted the Finnish private business sector to invest in them. At that time, internal preparedness and external demand converged, and the Finnish Ministry of Education offered financial support to establish a chair for Latin American Studies at the University of Helsinki.

In 1998 the Ibero-American Centre was incorporated into the Renvall Institute, a multidisciplinary unit for area and cultural studies at the University of Helsinki that had originally been established in 1968 in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. As a part of Renvall Institute, the Ibero-American Centre has hosted, from 1999 onward, the chair for Latin American Studies, and it has coordinates that unit’s study program. It is worth mentioning that North American Studies, which is also situated in the Renvall Institute, has both a permanent chair and a visiting chair, and that the Renvall Institute is also home to five minor area studies programs: Russian and East European Studies, Nordic Studies, British and Irish Studies, German Studies and Asia-Pacific Studies.

All these area and cultural studies programs aim to provide a multidisciplinary
understanding of their target areas and can be included as minor subjects in most of the master’s degree programs at the university. In addition, in fall 2000 both Latin American Studies and North American Studies obtained permission to offer a complete range of degree programs, including the PhD, as the first multidisciplinary programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki.

The Latin American Studies program is divided into various stages, starting with a basic level and progressing through intermediate subject studies to the advanced level and to postgraduate studies. Due to the multidisciplinary perspective of the program, it is recommended that students arrange their minor disciplines so that they support their degree in Latin American Studies. Accordingly, early careful planning is needed in order to create a good multidisciplinary study program combining subject studies and theoretical skills. To this end students are encouraged to learn basic methods and theories of one minor subject at least in addition to those related to their Latin American Studies degree. In addition, our own advanced courses are offered as seminars and they also focus on methodological issues.

In general, the Latin American countries are remarkably diverse and so are the traditions of research on them. On account of this diversity we have decided on three specialized options at the graduate (MA) and postgraduate (doctoral) levels: 1) Latin American environment and population, 2) Latin American culture and history, and 3) Latin American society and economy. Nevertheless, if students wish to take a generalist approach instead of specialist options, they can combine several lines of study. Furthermore, a special master’s program entitled ‘Intercultural Encounters’ is offered to those students who intend to work in business, public administration or civic organizations. This program focuses on cultural comprehensibility, intercultural communication, social psychology, sociolinguistics and anthropological studies in a European-Latin American intercultural context. Among other goals, it aims to improve the links between working life and academic research and education. In addition, North American Studies and Latin American Studies units are now jointly coordinating the Finnish Graduate School for the Americas, which also offer the PhD.

During the present academic year (2001/2002) some 160 students are registered and participating in the Latin American Studies program. Of these 18 are taking it as their major and are now reaching graduate status. At the postgraduate level fourteen students are pursuing their PhD. The teaching language on the graduate level (BA and MA) is Finnish and, thus, most of the students are Finnish citizens. However, on the postgraduate level, teaching languages are Spanish and English, which is why many of the students at this level have come from abroad.

**Multidisciplinarity in Latin American Studies**

In my opinion, Latin American Studies is not a discipline as such. It does not have its own specific methodology, due the heterogeneity of the Latin American countries and the various research traditions. Rather, Latin American Studies involve such different disciplines as geography, demography, linguistics, archaeology, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and economics. Above all, the Latin American Studies program offers a tactic to bring different disciplines to-
gether in a regional context. Furthermore, to avoid competition with defined disciplines within the same faculty, and in general at the same university, we require that both the master’s thesis and the doctoral dissertation have multidisciplinary viewpoints. In practice this means that students have to master the methods of at least two disciplines. This feature obligates teachers to make special methodological competence available to each student in collaboration with other university departments. So far this has been done successfully within full mutual understanding in cooperation with various departments and faculties. However, as this is not enough, special courses are also offered on multidisciplinary methodology.

Area study programs in Finland are currently engaged in some discussion whether Latin American Studies can be a kind of ‘multidiscipline’ that ‘only’ needs to combine analytical information from different angles to produce new scientific results. For my part, I firmly believe that the distinctive features of established disciplines should always be kept in mind. Basically, the problems seem to lie in a lack of chronological congruency of conjunctures: language, oral and written culture, material life, religious, political or economic phenomena, etc. flow in different time scales or tempos as the French *Annals* school has demonstrated (see Braudel 1980). This is why historians, linguistics, anthropologists, archeologists, economists, etc. with their particular methods cannot always observe the same processes. In fact, only rarely can a one-to-one relationship, say, between material and intangible evidence, be demonstrated, since recorded social, political, religious, or economic change does not immediately affect all material culture; or vice versa: a rapid change in material culture (fashion, for example) does not necessarily imply a simultaneous reorganization of social, political, or religious life.

Let me give an example. During the above-mentioned Finnish-Bolivian multidisciplinary Pacajes project in the Lake Titicaca area, we decided to study cultural sequences during the present era and to study among others, the influence of the Inca State on that particular area. Our basic idea was that we should not mix and confuse the methods, but use traditional methods of such disciplines as history, archaeology and anthropology separately in order to accumulate independent data sets. The results were interesting. We were able to confirm, by using various independent historical sources, that the Inca conquest reached the Titicaca area one generation earlier, during the mid fifteenth century, than had been generally thought. Nevertheless, this finding did not alter the established chronology significantly. More interesting were the various radiocarbon dates we got from Inca-type ceramics and funeral monuments. These demonstrated that so called Inca ceramics and architecture were in full use there more than a hundred years before the actual conquest took place. Our dates turned out to be so early, that we must consider the possibility that the so-called Inca ceramics and architecture may even be older there than in Cuzco, the famous Inca capital. In that case, the Incas may have imitated the architectural and ceramics styles of that area for their own use. Another explanation, probably the most likely, would be that the Incas maintained close contacts with the area long before it was politically incorporated into the Inca State. Nevertheless, no matter which explication is correct, the fact is that the archaeologically observed ceramic and architectural period does not correlate with the historically recorded conquest as generally supposed (Pärssinen 1993, 1997; Pärssinen & Siiriäinen 1997). Similar results have been obtained also from Meso-
America, where the supposed artifactual markers of the Aztec conquest spread to some provincial areas before their actual incorporation into the Aztec State (Smith 1987).

Hence, in a genuine multidisciplinary study, records of different disciplines should be analysed separately to yield their own independent conclusions before correlation is attempted. As Michael Smith has proposed: ‘When the two records are compared, one should not confuse any resulting composite models with the independent primary data sets’ (Smith 1987, 38). In other words, when comparing data sets from one discipline to the data sets of another discipline we should also analyse and weigh their comparability. And if we use data sets of one discipline as models of analogy, we should remember what Max Black (1962, 223) once said: ‘Any would-be scientific use of an analogue model demands independent confirmation. Analogue models furnish plausible hypotheses, not proofs.’ In a sense this is an extension of Galton’s famous problem: whether our units of analysis really offer comparable independent evidence (see Hammel 1980; Peel 1987).

Of course, this problem is relative, depending on the proximity of the methods used. Different established disciplines such as Spanish and French Philology on the one hand or Sociology and Social Anthropology on the other hand may use exactly the same methods in some particular cases. Furthermore, in a synchronic structural analysis, Galton’s problem may appear different than in a diachronic structural analysis or in analysing particular cultural, social or historical processes. Nevertheless, the fact is that multidisciplinary methodology has many aspects that should be discussed much more thoroughly. In this area we still have a lot of work to do. In general, to use military terminology, the multidisciplinary aspect of Latin American Studies program appears to us as a central tactic to reach a strategic goal (say, the best possible knowledge of Latin America), and thus, teaching of the appropriate methods as technical tools to solve particular problems (techniques) is an essential part of our study program.

**Some New Perspectives for The Future**

At the University of Helsinki some attempts have been made to break down the old faculty divisions in order to create space for new multidisciplinary programs (compare Romano 1997, 123-55). These attempts have always been stopped because of heavy faculty resistance. There has also been discussion of the possibility that the Renvall Institute, as the unit for cultural and area studies, could be administrated by the various faculties such as Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Theology, Natural Sciences and Law. However, as this discussion has not yet led to any concrete action, the Renvall Institute is still part of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Nevertheless, this question has not affected the content of the curriculum of Latin American Studies, and thus the Renvall Institute and the Ibero-American Centre attract students from all faculties. In this sense the actual position of the Centre can be considered quite satisfactory, and its future seems to be safeguarded.

In Finland, and probably in all Nordic countries, the University of Helsinki is the only university that offers a complete and broad study program up to the PhD in Latin American Studies. This is why we try to cover all Latin American and Caribbean countries. Although in practice, our teaching and research programs
cannot do justice to the great regional diversity, our students have options to specialize in the region of their interest. In general, Andean, Mexican and Central American studies have been quite well represented. However, we are making efforts to integrate Brazilian Studies more closely into our programs. In the near future we will do the same for Argentina, Colombia and the Caribbean nations in general (see Pärssinen and Talero 2001). From a thematic perspective, the topics of gender and the Latin American cultural heritage will be among those that we will soon take up as areas of new special interest.

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