

# Unanswered questions in Latin America

The historian talks about identity, wars of independence and interpretations of the region's development

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**M**aria Ligia Coelho Prado already had three children when she decided at 27 to study history at the University of São Paulo (USP). Although she entered the field late in the game, the choice would prove to be right on the mark: in addition to being “love at first sight,” it led her to teaching, which she would practice at a level matched by few of her peers. Prado taught in public and private high schools, and in the 1980s, she crisscrossed the State of São Paulo, teaching the history of the Americas to high school teachers. Before being hired by the USP School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences (FFLCH), she began her career at the university level as a professor of contemporary history for architects-in-training.

In her classroom, Prado tackled big topics, such as slavery, capitalism and interpretations of Latin American development. Along with the usual reading list, her habit was to assign her students labor contracts, worker manifestos and political party platforms. She ignored borders, and in response to invitations from American universities, she taught eight courses in the United States be-

tween 1987 and 1995: three at the undergraduate level and five at the graduate level at institutions such as Brown, Stanford and New York University.

Prado trained generations of professionals at the undergraduate and graduate levels and formed close friendships in the process. One close friend was another historian, Maria Helena Capelato. ‘We defended our master’s theses on the same day, in front of the same committee, one after the other,’ she recounts. They subsequently co-authored a book, *O bravo matutino* [Troubled Early Morning] (Alfa Omega, 1980), based on research gathered on the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Among the books she has published, an educational one, *A formação das nações latino-americanas* [The development of Latin American nations] (Atual, 1985), had 23 editions and sold more than 70,000 copies. She is currently at work on a new book containing already-published articles and unpublished texts, including one on the death penalty’s impact on women considered traitors under the Spanish Crown during the wars for independence, and another on the debate about the role of the state, church and family in public education in Colombia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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**SPECIALTY**

Latin American history

**EDUCATION**

Undergraduate (1971) and master's (1974) degrees in history, doctorate in social history at the University of São Paulo (USP) (1982)

**INSTITUTION**

USP

**SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION**

Author of 15 books (of which five in co-authorship), advisor on 19 master's theses and 32 doctoral dissertations and supervisor of six post-doctoral fellows



A founder of the National Association of Researchers and Professors of the History of the Americas (ANPH-LAC), which she headed between 1998 and 2000, Prado spoke with *Pesquisa FAPESP* about Latin America, identity, the role of historical discourse and the function of knowledge.

***How did you become interested in Latin America as a topic of interest?***

In my undergraduate coursework in history, there were two subject areas that dealt with the Americas: the history of colonial America and the history of independent America. I completed my undergraduate work in 1971, but I had never studied America after independence – we never got past *caudilhismo* [the authoritarian period]. We were stuck there. As a student, I never studied anything related to Latin America after 1850. Nothing. In 1975, when I began working as a university professor, during the selection process for history of the Americas, I had to give classes on the history of America after independence. My intention was to change direction because my research was on Brazilian history. I am self-taught in Latin American history – I began to study it with no background whatsoever. And it fascinated me.

***What prompted this fascination?***

One example: the history of Mexico, the world of indigenous peoples and how the Mexican state was formed. We really don't know anything about the indigenous communities in Mexico, Peru, Bolivia or Guatemala. Or about the liberal reforms in Mexico, and later in the rest of Spanish America, which involved an attempt to destroy indigenous communities. The culture, the issues of language, of art, the role of the Catholic Church. And the conflicts between the secular and religious worlds.

***For your further development of different historical issues – is Latin America always your prism?***

Yes. I know the history of a few countries in Latin America, but not all of them, because that would be impossible. I know best the histories of Mexico, Argentina and Chile. When I started teaching, Brazil was a military dictatorship, so Cuba was taboo, you could not talk about it. So it wasn't studied. Latin America was



Working with the issue of identities demands a certain skepticism because identities obscure contradictions

where dictatorships thrived. Since I was on the left politically from the very beginning, I opposed the dictatorship. This made the region even more alluring to me. Something which has captivated me from the outset was the historical convergence between Portuguese America and Spanish America. This includes approaches to notions of knowledge, religion and art alongside the specific social relationships that formed in this space, with a significant indigenous and African population.

***When does the notion of Latin America first appear? When does the region become known by that name?***

This is a very interesting question, because people use the name without really thinking about what it means. The name arises in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, apparently coined by the French, and it involves a lengthy debate. The economist Michel Chevalier [1806-1879] first made the distinction, common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, between Latins and Anglo-Saxons. And, since the French had interests in

the Americas, especially in Mexico, the idea arose that this part of the Americas, which was not Anglo-Saxon, was Latin in its resemblance to France. In publications like the *Revue des deux Mondes* [a French magazine from the 19<sup>th</sup> century], France is clearly seen as the main Latin country in the world, and as such, this part of the Americas was clearly identified with the French. This is one version of the story, a name that was created outside of the region, with external intentions, which was to some extent imposed.

***But there is another perspective, shared by those who understand the term to have in fact arisen in Latin America.***

That's correct, there is a debate related to a Colombian writer, Torres Caicedo [1830-1889], who wrote a poem in which he speaks of a Latin America. But the main issue here relates to a problem that is still with us: whether the term was coined outside of the region by an imperialist Europe and then imposed upon us, or whether it arose in Iberian America as a way of unifying us, bringing together Spanish America and, to some degree, Portuguese America, which were facing these uncertainties together. So the term itself is already problematic.

***How do you approach the issue of Latin American identity?***

I am going to digress a bit here to get to your question. If we look to the writings of scholars, whether intellectuals or politicians – like Simón Bolívar [1783-1830], for example, and his famous 1815 Jamaica Letter, he poses the question: 'Who are we? We are neither Americans nor Europeans.' This search to affirm our identities is very present in these writings and many others that appear throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I'm bringing this up to highlight that the issue of our identity has been on the table since independence. If we look at the sources from that time, there are documents and actions that demonstrate concern about how the different regions of America colonized by the Spanish will come together, and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Brazil.

***So, there is always this relationship in play?***

Yes, there really is. We have writings from Chilean intellectual and politician Francisco Bilbao [1823-1865] from

the 1850s, in which he describes an America at risk, given that what will be known subsequently as Latin America will have the United States to deal with. This challenge of identity is not something that historians and anthropologists created. It's not a pretend problem from my perspective. That's the reason, as I have already written, that working with the issue of identities needs to involve a certain skepticism, because identities obscure contradictions. They reconcile them.

***They almost blend them.***

They do. All women are equal, all blacks are equal, all native peoples are equal, to use the conventional terminology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the contradictions, tensions and conflicts are hidden. Identity, which touches on emotions, is an intellectual construct, but it awakens our hearts, affects our lives and our choices, and forces differences and conflicts to the margins. You need to be very skeptical to work with this issue. Identity always assumes that there is an 'other' – and that the other is the enemy. You must choose. In the case of Latin America, the manufacturing of an enemy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century points to the United States. There is a key moment – 1898 – when the United States enters Cuba's war of independence in support of the Cubans against the Spanish, which transforms Cuba into a protectorate.

***You wrote that since the independence of their respective countries, the Latin American elites have aspired to consolidate their control over society by creating a homogeneous identity that would guarantee them political hegemony. Can we say that to some extent they did not enjoy much success with this in Latin America?***

This question does not go away, and it is a tough one to answer. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is a fascinating period to study, because intellectuals and politicians at the time asked these fundamental questions that we are still wrestling with. What is a nation, what is a civilization, what is legitimacy, what is the State? And their responses established the basis for what a 'civilization' should look like. The con-



With Maria Helena Capelato (at left) in 1980, upon the publication of *O bravo matutino*, which they co-authored

nection between race and culture was a key element in the symbolic domination of the elites, and this connection fed discrimination and prejudice. Albeit manufactured and unreal, this discourse has had a huge impact on Latin American societies up to the present day. The discourse belonging to 'white civilization' imposed its vision on all of society to distance itself from 'the other – barbarian.' So, it has never been possible to control or extinguish *los de abajo*. Native peoples, slaves, people of mixed race, and women made their presence known in politics, art and literature, and resisted the domination imposed by whites. In the end, I believe the elites were successful in their intention to dominate their societies. However, we have to acknowledge the important role played by those who were dominated, because they served as the political opposition, even though they were often overlooked by historians.

***In Latin America's recent history, was there a time when the countries of the***

***region were closer, including as a subject of study?***

Yes, they were closer during the recent dictatorships because of political circumstances connected to a unique struggle for democracy. There was a closeness, a shared interest, a deeper knowledge. When democracy arrived, it ended up creating more distance between us. Brazil turned its back once again on Latin America and positioned itself as a distinct country. Brazilian political and diplomatic history clearly points to the fact that Brazil has always wanted to be the dominant country in South America. This has had repercussions in Latin America and on Latin America's place in the study of history. When we ignore Latin America, we lose the possibility of gaining a different perspective on Brazil itself. When we study and follow the history of other countries, we gain a better understanding of many issues in Brazilian history. Historians are quite used to focusing on their own concerns when considering their nation's history, which is still heavily influenced by frameworks developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

***You addressed this issue in your book, América Latina no século XIX: Tramas, telas e textos [Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Plots, Screens and Texts] (Edusp, 1999).***

First, I want to reiterate the importance of seeing Brazil as part of Latin America. Crossing the border opens up intriguing possibilities for the historian who can identify new issues and broaden historical discussions. As you know, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after independence, the State is organized and national identity is constructed. From my perspective, the issue of nation comes to the fore and is integrated into the varied political, historical and artistic output of the time; politicians, commentators, historians, educated men and women and artists from across Latin America brought themselves to the task of defining their national identities. In addition to the economic problems, political conflicts, social upheaval and civil wars that mobilized debate in these societies, there were also passionate discussions on nation-building and identity.



Prado's former students (*she is in the middle, in blue*): José Luis Beired (UNESP), Sílvia Miskulin (UMC), Luiz Felipe Moreira (UEM), Kátia Gerab Baggio (UFMG) and Stella Maris Vilardaga (USP)

***This takes us back to the idea of transculturation put forth by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz. Could you comment a bit on this?***

In his book, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, published in 1940, Ortiz [1881-1969], in thinking about Cuban culture, coined the notion of transculturation, which was then appropriated by many literary critics, anthropologists and historians. The concept embodies a very important idea about how to conceive of Latin America that I agree with. For a long time, the prevailing idea was that European culture was imposed on us, on the people who lived here before the Europeans arrived and those who were here during colonial times. European culture was said to have been transposed and imposed here. What remained was merely for Latin America to accept it. Accepting it meant copying it. Ortiz said that this notion – and he is referring to Cuba – of a simple imposition of culture from abroad, even in a society organized around slavery, is inaccurate. In his view, both in Europe and in Latin America, a very special cultural mix was created, and Europeans were not immune to the environment in which they lived, which included African culture. It is a two-way street. Power was involved, and Europe imposed its language and religion, but it's important to understand the relationships that formed on every level, as he says, from economic to sexual. What we

study in that social environment is transculturation, and it involves change and reformulations. I believe it still makes sense to think of it this way.

***In your view, can the historical discourse be reduced to a function of knowledge, or does it serve a social function?***

If you had asked me this 1975, I would have said that historical discourse cannot be reduced to a function of knowledge and that it does serve a social function, where it has an influence on what is really happening and will be useful to some degree for those in the struggle for social change. Understanding the past creates the conditions for knowing the present and predicting the future. History, then, played a disproportionate role in ideological confrontations, and historians and academics should have understood that their work was not disconnected from their political responsibilities. Today, the public debate is different in nature. Let's take the issue of "School without Party," which is without a doubt grounded in the idea that historical discourse has a social function. This group, which declares itself to be on the right, attacks the left for saddling knowledge with ideological and political aims and in this way affirming that it cannot be neutral. In apparent contradiction, however, it presents itself as indifferent to politics and raises the flag as a defender of a single "truth."

***Are there changes in historiography that affect the social function of knowledge?***

Particularly during the military dictatorship [1964-1985], we thought that knowledge would set us free, bring us democracy and create the conditions for the construction of a more just society. If we define social function in this way, it is because knowledge and ideas lead to actions. Policy proposals that will be enacted are based on ideas, and in this sense, knowing history is essential. By way of example, let's look at the role of indigenous people in our society. Anthropologists and historians have done work to show how they were exploited, oppressed and humiliated. The same work has been done for the African slaves brought to Brazil. Brazilian historiography, like that of Cuba, has worked hard to turn this conventional approach upside down. Another idea, which your question points to, is that in the case of history, the truth will finally be revealed. Historians are divided when they approach the issue of truth. What is truth? I like to use as an example an event which is somewhat removed from us today: the French Revolution. Consider the people who wrote about it at the time and in the subsequent first or second generations thereafter. How can you write about the French Revolution [1789-1799] without having participated in it? What perspective would an aristocrat like Alexis de Tocqueville [1805-1859] have? And someone on the left of the political spectrum in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France? There are some facts that are solid and indisputable: the king and queen were guillotined. Now, how do we interpret those facts? That is the question. Can we reduce it to: 'Now I am going to tell you the story of the French Revolution'? What is the truth? This means that we will be interpreting and analyzing documents. We must have a theoretical background to understand the role and the place of that document, what it expresses.

***Doesn't history teach us something? Or is it that human beings don't learn the lessons?***

I think a lot about this. I am not obsessed with the French Revolution, but I am going to use it as an example again. The French Revolution established that torture should not be legal – human beings cannot be violated. Not exactly in these terms, but for the first time, this declara-

tion appears. Before that, torture was considered completely legal and legitimate. This represents a very important watershed in recent human history, at least in the West. Which does not mean, as we well know, that torture was eliminated.

***The role of women in the struggle for independence, for example, which is an important theme in your work, is still relatively unknown. Can you talk a little about your findings?***

Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as subjects of historiography are treated as if they did not exist in the political sphere. Much significant work has been done to highlight the role played by women as thought leaders, writers and journalists. What interested me was to look at women's political participation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In general terms, historiography begins by pointing to the presence of women in politics as a function of suffragism, when they began to fight for the right to vote. Though few in number, women were already participating in politics in Brazil and Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I worked from the following premise: why did Maria Quitéria [1792-1853], who lived in inland Bahia State, dress as a man, become a soldier and engage in the fight for Brazilian independence against the Portuguese military led by General Madeira? This is her story: at her father's home, she overheard an emissary who was recruiting volunteers to fight in the war. Since I am always crossing borders in my own head, I thought about Spanish America. After a lot of research and reading of many biographies and newspapers from the time, I discovered that many other women also participated in the wars, especially in Spanish America, because in Brazil, the war of independence lasted only a short time. In Spanish America, over the course of 10 or 12 years of war, women participated in many different ways.

***Including taking up arms...***

That's right, they took up arms, dressed as soldiers, and many were called 'messengers,' that is, people who infiltrated the other side and played a part, putting themselves at risk. I believe what's significant here is that they were engaged and participated, they didn't stay on the sidelines. Even when you consider the men who were involved, you



## Women also participated in wars, especially in Spanish America

must remember that the wars for independence involved a minority of people. Only a small percentage of the population participated. Some believed in the cause, took up arms and headed to battle whether on the winning or losing side; they took the risk. Women were taken prisoner, prosecuted and imprisoned. A well-known case is that of the Colombian Policarpa Salavarrieta [1795-1817], who was executed at the Plaza of Santa Fé in Bogotá. She and seven men, including her fiancé. Her death had a huge impact. There are anonymous artists depicting her in the gallows. Poems and plays were written in her honor. Other women like her were also condemned to death or to public punishment, like having their heads shaved or being forced to parade nude through the city. There are many stories like this, but they are largely minimized or unknown. It is nonetheless a fact: women were involved in politics in Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

***In your writings, you also devote a lot of time to thinking about utopias.***

It is abundantly clear that my generation, living under military dictatorship, believed that a socialist utopia was on the horizon, and that gave us the strength and hope to face daily life. In the 1980s, the idea of democracy as a foundation was widespread, and it appeared to be something of a utopia for Latin America at that time. Today, we are undergoing

very hard times, involving deep conflict, ideological confrontation, political positions that are often taken under pressure and without consideration of their broader implications. The most striking problem for me is the lack of any utopian idea. At times of extreme challenge and despair, my generation imagined a better future on the horizon – one that in some way would create a more just society, democracy, and less oppression. That's what allowed us at the same time to endure that difficult period and still remain unified. There is so much cynicism today ... Consumerism has overtaken us. It appears we have lost the idea of higher principles that guided many politicians, intellectuals and workers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Everyone thinks in very pragmatic, short-term ways. This is a bit disturbing and even dangerous. We need a plan for the future in order to bear the day's political events. We have to have some kind of horizon. Today, the big umbrella issue that seems to unify people is the environment – environmental issues, nature conservation. This issue moves people, even brings together people with different political beliefs on the left and the right. But I don't see a utopia that inspires us with an idea like 'let's create a world with less poverty and more equality,' a notion that kept us alive during the most challenging moments of our past. I'm not a cynic who thinks that nothing will change. I do believe things will change, but it will take time.

***You say that using hope as a compass was a decision made by your generation.***

***Where does your compass point today?***

I had a lot of certainty up until the early 1990s. Because I belong to a generation that had a lot of certainty about the future, especially in Brazil, in Latin America. In the early 2000s, I lost that – which was okay, I think – but I am still energized and enthusiastic when I look forward. I want to look to the horizon and try to discern the outline of a utopia, no matter how fuzzy. We have to think critically about the present and understand that what we are living today is not 'natural' but rather the result of actions and contradictions by individuals throughout history. And, we must remember that patience is required, since we know that ideas bear fruit only over the long term, not within the timeframe for political action. ■