

Entangled Spaces in the Americas: Concepts and Case Studies

Veranstalter: Center for InterAmerican Studies, Bielefeld University

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On April 11 and 12, 2014, the Center for InterAmerican Studies at Bielefeld University arranged for an interdisciplinary workshop on „Entangled Spaces in the Americas“. The workshop was part of an ongoing BMBF (German Ministry of Education and Research) research project at the Center for InterAmerican Studies („The Americas as Space of Entanglement(s)“); its goal was to enable a cross-disciplinary and transnational academic exchange which contrasted some of the major conceptual approaches employed by the various affiliates of the research project with case studies and empirical field work.

After a warm welcome, Klaus Weinhauser (Bielefeld) summarized the guiding questions of the workshop. Key concepts of the research project were outlined by Olaf Kaltmeier, Wilfried Raussert, and Angelika Epple. All agreed that new spatial conceptions were necessary to think and speak about „the Americas“. These new conceptions needed to take into consideration post-colonial critique, employ a post-national perspective and engage in interdisciplinary and inter-cultural cooperation. OLAF KALTMEIER (Bielefeld) pointed out that historically the turn from the 19th to the 20th century had marked a turning point in the Western hemisphere from a trans-Atlantic relationship with Western Europe towards a growing Inter-American entanglement. This entanglement needed to be understood as interaction and exchange between and of individuals, objects, natural phenomena, media, commodities, ideas, and structures. Geopolitical imaginaries were one of the binding factors that reunited these often incoherent spatial fragments. WILFRIED RAUSERT (Bielefeld) took this notion further and emphasized that there was no essence of „the Americas“ but that the ever-changing idea of America/ the Americas defined the object of research. He argued for a research approach that was at the same time comparative, re-

lational and process-oriented and that had a strong focus on the links, obstacles and power relations between different areas in the Americas. His aim in particular was the creation of a critical terminology to reflect this focus on an anti-essential in-between-ness. The idea of a relational and process-oriented approach to area studies was further developed by ANGELIKA EPPLÉ (Bielefeld), who argued for a „global microhistory“ within larger geopolitical imaginaries. The aim of such a global microhistory was to dissolve entities into (asymmetric) relations. This included local relations and their effect on macro-relations (and vice versa) but perhaps more importantly a focus on the role of gender and race and the construction of subjectivities. By focusing not so much on (international) relations but on processes of „relating“, it would then become possible to close the existing gap between postcolonial, gender and microhistory on the one hand and global history on the other.

In the following first panel MARY LOUISE PRATT (New York), contemplated the role of former imperial languages in what she called „linguistic entangled spaces“. The everyday use of „Spanglish“ in New Mexico marked a form of collective resistance, not as „Spanish vs. English“ but against politics of purity. Based on these observations, she formulated the thesis that switching between Spanish and English could be viewed as an „inter-imperial practice“, as both languages have a long history as imperial/colonial languages. The Americas in particular appear thus as a world shaped by empires, both through opposition and contagion, and their respective languages. Whether Nahuatl, Quetchua or later Spanish itself – the language of the defeated empire became subjugated but did not necessarily disappear. It became vernacularised and indiginised but could also serve as a means of communication, remembrance, representation and recognition. Until today, restoration fantasies were therefore often linked to old imperial languages, as was the case with the Chicano movement in the 1960s, whose members were relating themselves to the mythical Aztec homeland, Aztlán, and not to modern-day Mexico.

In the following debate the question was raised whether the described phenomena are

really a specificity of (former) imperial languages. Creole and Pidgin were mentioned as examples for languages that were used in similar fashions, had served as *linguae francae* but had never been imperial languages. Therefore, the thesis of language as the most long-lasting „afterlives“ of empires might have to be reconsidered. This would also change the interpretation of the use of, for instance, Spanglish in New Mexico as a prolonged conflict between empires.

As second speaker, WOLFGANG KNÖBL (Göttingen) talked about „Revolution and Independence in Latin-America: The problem of entanglement“. After giving a brief overview of the historiography of the American revolutions and a plea for a (sociological) terminology of order instead of an overemphasis on „fluidity“, Knöbl highlighted the relevance of „Atlantic History“ and the analysis of political language in regards to legitimacy and representation for the study of American revolutions in a wider context. Knöbl discussed three theoretical implications, namely those of entanglement, actors, and possible relevance beyond the scope of Area Studies. Entanglement, so Knöbl's argument, could be understood as federalism on a political level but also (and perhaps more importantly) on the level of political language, including the historical necessity to define political programs, entities, nations and even „America“ itself. Especially the rise of the concept of national sovereignty in Hispanic America might lead to new insights into the nature of the mistakenly labeled „national“ revolutions of the 18th and 19th century. The focus on the contested rise of the nation-state in Latin America also shifts our understanding of individual actors: if nation and national sovereignty were disputed concepts, the role of local revolutions needs to be revised. A focus on cities as actors might help us to understand how cities and regions were being connected and mutually created. Finally, these new approaches might help to contribute to our understanding of globalization as a bottom-up process, with American revolutions and cities linked more closely to the emerging system of global capitalism than hitherto acknowledged.

The second day of the workshop started with a talk on „Anarchist Networks in the

Caribbean from an Inter-American Perspective, 1890s to 1930s“, given by KIRWIN R. SHAFFER (Reading, PA). Originally starting from a history of the anarchist movement in Cuba, Shaffer soon realized that a transnational perspective on his research subject fit much better, as it matched the anarchists' self-conception as internationalists. Three factors made the Caribbean anarchist networks unique. First, the important role of migration, especially of farm workers from Spain to Cuba, causing a constant influx of workers who had already been exposed to the ideas of anarchism in Europe. These migrants, who would often continue their voyage to settle in other countries in the Caribbean, Latin America or parts of the US, would strengthen local activists or even present the first local cells of anarchists at all (as was the case with Panama). The second aspect that characterized the Caribbean network was the Havana hub: as a gateway for migrants but also as the center of anarchist culture and media, both of which provided a means of exchange throughout the region. Finally, the anarchist network often paralleled the expansion of US imperialism into the Caribbean, which added a unique anti-imperialist notion to the anarchists' „unholy trinity“ (anti-state, anti-Capital, anti-religion). Shaffer highlighted the importance of looking closely at the role of nodal points in networks before examining the links between the individual hubs (in this case especially Havana, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles and New York).

As the final speaker, PAUL GOOTENBERG (New York) traced „The Entanglement of Drugs: Hemispheric 'Blowback' in Cocaine's Long History, 1900-2010.“ Looking specifically at the entanglement between the US (as the main market for cocaine as a consumer good) and Latin America (as its main supplier), Gootenberg combined two major analytical tools to describe and explain the various shifts in the inter-American drug trade. Whereas the concept of „global commodity chains“ highlights the long pathways of commodities from production to suppliers and customers, the idea of „blowbacks“ focuses on the often unintended (social) consequences of (anti-) drug policies. Gootenberg showed how attempts to criminalize and suppress

the production of cocaine were responsible for various geographical shifts, from the Andes to Colombia, the Caribbean and currently to Mexico. These shifts were accompanied by an ever-increasing level of violence, as production and trade became more dangerous, but also more profitable. The most recent „blowback“ might indeed be the growing resistance of Latin American elites against the US drug policy, as it becomes ever more clear that the social costs for US demands and policies have so far been paid almost exclusively by the population South of the US-Mexican border.

In the following discussion the notion of „failure“ that is inherent in the idea of unintended „blowbacks“ was questioned, insofar as the militarization of the „war on drugs“ had allowed the US to assert influence in the Andean countries through the DEA, justified the war on the poor within the US, and shifted the growing profits into the legal economies of the global North.

The workshop ended with some closing statements by CHRISTINE HATZKY (Hanover) and ACHIM VON OPPEN (Bayreuth). As is often the case, the workshop seems to have brought up more questions than it could deliver answers. Two of these questions shall be discussed shortly in the following.

It was critically remarked that the concept of „entanglement“ was problematic as it does not incorporate a notion of agency and intention. Little was to be heard about nation-states as agents, but also categories like class or gender were conspicuously absent, as were subaltern groups. Throughout the conference, the metaphor of the „flow“ was omnipresent; although criticized right at the beginning of the workshop, it kept reappearing, thereby pointing towards a general problem in (implicitly) conceptualizing entanglement as a process without agents. In this regard, the concept of „networks“ needed to be conceptualized more thoroughly, too. A typology of networks was as much missing as a discussion of their respective impacts.

These aspects lead to the second problem: without notions of agency, group identities and power-relations within and between networks, the asymmetries in processes of entanglement and disentanglement are in danger of getting out of sight. This concerns also the

limits of entanglement: as processes of (dis-) entanglement might also fail, an understanding of agency and asymmetries is crucial, yet these cannot be conceptualized in geographic terms but only between (social) agents.

These deliberations are of course no shortcomings of the workshop but merely a sign of its success, as it was explicitly aimed at exploring the theoretical and methodological tools that are or could be used in American and Area Studies, their advantages as well as their shortcomings. To this end, the organizers had provided all participants with a series of questions that unfortunately were hardly addressed at all by the speakers. A stronger focus on specific questions might have led to an even more fruitful exchange not just between individual researchers but also between different yet entangled academic disciplines. Whether a focus on Inter-American or global entanglements will merely follow the „flows“ of Capital, commodities and people or whether it is able, in the sense of a critical global microhistory, to incorporate an analysis of asymmetric power relations and processes of subjectification, remains to be seen.

Conference overview:

Klaus Weinbauer (Bielefeld), Welcome and summary of guiding questions of the workshop

Angelika Epple / Olaf Kaltmeier / Wilfried Raussert (Bielefeld), Outline of Key Concepts of the BMBF-Research Project
Chair: Jochen Kemner (Bielefeld)

Mary Louise Pratt (New York), Language and Empire
Chair: Julia Roth (Bielefeld)

Wolfgang Knöbl (Göttingen), Revolution and Independence in Latin-America: The problem of entanglement
Chair: Angelika Epple

Kirwin R. Shaffer (Reading, PA), Anarchist Networks in the Caribbean from an Inter-American Perspective, 1890s to 1930s
Chair: Klaus Weinbauer

Paul Gootenberg (New York), The Entanglement of Drugs: Hemispheric 'Blowback' in Cocaine's Long History, 1900-2010

Chair: Anne Tittor (Bielefeld)

Christine Hatzky (Hanover) / Achim von Oppen (Bayreuth), Closing Statements
Chair: Klaus Weinbauer

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