

Histories of the Public Sphere in Latin America

Graduate colloquium

HIST G8911
Spring 2010
W 9-10:50 am, 802 IAB

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The literature on the public sphere has been expanding rapidly in recent years, spanning diverse regions and periods. The public sphere has been a central category in studies that deal with intellectual debates, cultural transformations, elite and popular politics, and the shifting boundaries of public and private life. Although historians of Latin America are part of this new interest, they do not always engage the theoretical and methodological implications of the category. Part of this is due to the assumption that the inequalities and exclusions of Latin American politics are not properly accounted for in a study of the public sphere following European models.

This course will seek to review the historical literature on the public sphere in modern Latin America while critically engaging the theoretical and comparative literature. We will examine empirical contributions but also at the way in which the category impacts the debates and research agendas of political and cultural history. The course will include a reading of Habermas's work but will also seek to expand the usual limits of the study of the public sphere, going beyond the study of political ideas and elite sociability and focusing also on the history of the media and cultural practices that, although outside the usual purview of intellectual or political history, are still relevant to understand dialogical interactions between state and civil society.

The seminar, for example, will explore the role of honor and violence in the formation of a republican public sphere in Latin America. It will also look at the way in which twentieth-century massive popular mobilizations altered the rules of public debate. In both cases, the assumption will be that, although not corresponding exactly to the model formulated by Habermas, these interactions were nevertheless considered egalitarian and rational by political actors. Ultimately, the goal is to examine the literature centered on the public sphere as a step toward an expansion of the realm of political history, linking traditional narratives of politics and popular mobilization with new concerns about culture and identities.

Can we write the history of that common space of rational and egalitarian debate called the public sphere? Do reason and public opinion have a history? Are social inequalities and exclusions strong enough in modern societies to eliminate the possibility of a dialogue about the common good? Have political and intellectual history neglected non-elite groups that participated in the development of one or multiple public spheres? Is the public sphere losing relevance in front of the expansion of the mass media and state power? Can we consider, alternatively, that communicative action is a fruitful realm of research and reflection in democratic societies? This colloquium will reclaim these questions as objects of historical research in Latin America without losing sight of their contemporary relevance.

Requirements:

In-class presentations: each student will lead discussion at least one week during the semester. This will involve sending out discussion questions to the rest of the group ahead of the meeting, introducing the text and providing information on its historiographical context, and leading the discussion.

Weekly reactions to the reading, of 500-300 words, will be submitted to the Courseworks site no later than Tuesday at noon.

Final paper, approximately 15 pages. Each paper should be discussed individually with the instructor. An abstract and outline should be submitted by March 3.

Readings and syllabus:

1. January 20. Introduction: Basic definitions.
Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"; Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article."
2. January 27. The historical construction of the model
Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*.
3. February 3. The Latin American laboratory
"Piccato, "Public sphere in Latin America"; Palti, "Recent studies"; Uribe Urán, "The Birth of a Public Sphere."
4. February 10. Understanding citizenship in Latin America
Chapters by Guerra, Annino and González Bernaldo in Sabato, ed., *Ciudadanía política y formación de las naciones*; chapters by Annino (both) and Lempérière in Annino and Guerra, *Inventando la nación*.
- February 17: No class
5. February 24. Approaches to the public sphere as public space
Guerra et al., *Los espacios públicos*.
6. March 3. Critical approaches to the public sphere
Forment, *Democracy in Latin America*, especially chapters 2, 9, 10, 15, 16; Eley; Mah.
7. March 10. Politics, writing, gender:
Chambers "Choosing to be a Subject"; *ibid.*, "Letters"; Goodman; Warner, "Franklin"; Landes; Maza, "Women"; Reddy.
8. March 24. Civil society and politics
Sabato, *The Many and the Few*.
9. March 31. Honor and the public sphere
Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion*.
10. April 7. Masses and politics
Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón*.
11. April 14. Media, culture and politics in the twentieth century
Roldán, ms on radio; chapters from Joseph, *Fragments*; Hayes, *Radio Nation*.
12. April 21. Transition to democracy
Avritzer, *Democracy in the Public Space*.
13. April 28. Working class public narratives
James, *Doña María's Story*.
14. May 5. Memory and revolutionary violence
Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia*.

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