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Luis Roniger on the Politics of Human Rights, Language and Multiple Modernities: An Interview

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Alex Estrada: For over a decade you have studied Latin American political exile and have published five books and many articles on the topic, including *The Politics of Exile* with Cambridge University Press in 2009 and *Exile, Diaspora and Return*, brought out a few months ago by Oxford University Press. What is the analytical importance of exile for politics? And on a more personal level, what parallels do you see between the exile's mind, which can be nomadic, decentered, and even estranged, and your own work as an academic? Edward Said once wrote that "exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past," in such a way that can both mutilate and create ways of understanding the world. Your work and scholarship have taken you, a native of Argentina, across the world to places like Israel, Canada, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and the U.S. How has an international life affected your understanding of politics?

Luis Roniger: As I started studying exile, I realized that the prevailing nation-state perspective had to be complemented by a transnational optic. The former could explain such territorial displacement as a mechanism of institutionalized exclusion. What defines exiles, distinguishing them from migrants and other sojourners, is not just deterritorialization, but also their forced move, paired

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with their commitment to return once the political conditions change and such return is possible. In the short term, there is even a tug-of-war between exiles and the rulers who forced displacement over who represents the core spirit of a nation. Yet, as soon as individuals move beyond the territorial boundaries of a state, new scenarios of life are opened in the diaspora, prompting exposure to new ideas and practices that embed the national in transnational spaces and experiences.

Moreover, living across borders and cultures triggers individual transformations, with a varied mix of loses and gains, for instance in relationships, human capital, and skills, but also has wider institutional implications. Usually, displacement prompts a redefinition of previous political and cultural premises. Those premises could be taken for granted and be "markers of certainty" while people live their "normal" course of life; but once abroad, those premises are necessarily challenged and questioned. In this sense, the exilic condition is a harbinger of reflexivity and change, both at the personal and at the collective level. Like others crossing borders, exiles are exposed to what Victor Turner and other anthropologists have defined as situations and experiences of liminality and, from another perspective, what Julia Kristeva characterized as a condition of strangers moving back in their minds to places out of reach.

Some of those displaced thus become agents of social and cultural transformation both in the host countries in which they reside or in the societies to which they hope to return. Of course, we should be wary of generalizations. For some individuals, exile precipitates deep depressive states. For others, it prompts an orientation to public activism and a commitment to be active and innovate. It is the pro-active type of exile who often becomes an agent of transformation and serves as a bridge between societies, ideas, and institutional paradigms. Just to illustrate such drive, I would mention that one cannot understand the transition of Chile from dictatorship back to democracy without considering the repositioning of political alliances operated by Chileans in exile, which led to a multiparty coalition of seventeen parties defeating Pinochet in a plebiscite called by him to remain in power. Likewise, the profound transformation of Uruguayan higher education was due to the impact of returnees who, by building alliances with "insiles," spearheaded institutional diversification, introduced new disciplines and subdisciplines, invested in the sciences and humanities, and established transnational networks of international cooperation relying on their experiences and contacts abroad.

My family roots are in Eastern and Central Europe, from where my grandparents moved in the 1920s to Argentina, a home country which I left in the early 1970s. Argentina was entering then a period of deep political chaos and violence. Juan Domingo Perón, a charismatic yet aging populist leader, returned after over seventeen years in exile once his movement, Peronism, was allowed to participate under its own banner in the 1973 presidential election. As president, the leader tried to control the situation yet failed to prevent the armed confrontation of the Peronist and non-Peronist Left with Right-wing factions and paramilitary forces. Soon, Perón's death and the ineffective rule of his third wife opened the doors for another military intervention and massive state-led repression. Known as the "Dirty War," this period witnessed the decimation of an entire generation, of mostly young people of Leftist affiliations and sympathies, by repressive undercover forces that conducted massive human rights violations, detaining, torturing, and killing thousands, and producing the

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phenomenon of the *desaparecidos*, i.e., individuals who were assassinated without a trial and whose bodies were made to vanish without a trace. By 1974 I had completed a *licenciatura* in sociology, was married and had a child, and was almost certain that something terrible was about to happen in Argentina due to the extreme ideological polarization. This situation promised to produce mounting violence, repression, and the persecution of anyone who, like myself, was willing to think critically about reality. My family background and my personal experience led us to move to Israel, where I conducted my graduate studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and later, following a postdoctoral stay at UC Berkeley, became a tenured faculty member in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Jerusalem.

Was I defined by my mobility and "nomadism"? Yes, but only while acknowledging that I was equally defined by growing up as a Jew in a Catholic country, by my multilingual background, and by my drive to pursue studies in the social sciences, trying to understand the deep rules of human life and behavior. Of course, by leaving I disconnected from the normal flow of life in the society where I was born and grew up, but opened to assessing its development from a distance, reinterpreting events and frameworks in terms of new experiences. While still committed emotionally to my land of birth, its culture, food, music, family, and friends, my hybrid identity continued to evolve and became more complex. I have a multifaceted personal identity and came closer to realizing the value of finding common grounds with other human beings, both those with whom I share an identity and those who are different yet at the same time equal to me, which is at the core of the idea of universal human rights.

AE: Cuban exile scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat has argued that "it is language that determines the domain, the dominion, and we as speakers cannot but submit to its territorial imperatives … we are what we speak." As a comparative political sociologist, how do you reconcile the "territorial imperative" of language with transnational politics? In your own experience and work, how has language affected your comparative and historical analyses?

LR: This is a complex phenomenon. I would agree that for many of those who lost their homeland and could not go back, "writing became a place to live," as Theodor Adorno indicated in 1945. For writers, being rooted in a human landscape means keeping track of language changes, nuances, evolving figures of speech. Being afar, writing for distant readers, may indeed be a source of anxiety. Yet, from another perspective, national identities are constructed from afar, and national literatures are also written by those in the diaspora, a recognition that only recently has been adumbrated in many societies. In the case of Latin America, the very sense of the national was projected first by Jesuits expelled in the late eighteenth century who, once in Europe, were prompted to describe the natural and human landscapes of the lands they left behind for the host societies that projected upon them all sorts of misrepresentations. Similarly, both in Central and South America, exiles played a crucial role in constructing and reconstructing the sense of national identity along with

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the sense of a pan-Latin American identity. In literature as well as in film and theater, such contributions were multiple, like those by writers in Europe in the 1860s who represented both their homeland and the entire subcontinent by claiming the term "Latin America," or twentieth-century political figures such as Augusto César Sandino in Nicaragua, or Gabriel García Márquez with his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, rooted in his native Colombia yet representing an entire continent, whose spirit he encapsulated within "magical realism," spearheading the Latin American literary boom.

Did language affect my work? Certainly, it was instrumental in enabling me to identify, follow, and analyze social phenomena in depth. Without Spanish or Portuguese, I would not have been able to uncover the cultural substratum of clientelism and patron-client relations, the focus of my first research project on Mexico and Brazil. The way people addressed each other and referred to third parties led me to stress that patron-client relationships embedded instrumental trade-offs and considerations within wider interpersonal commitments and concerns with hierarchical trust and reciprocity, loyalty, and betrayal. Likewise, my more recent research and book on *Transnational Politics in Central America* (2011) could not have been developed without full knowledge of the Spanish language and sources.

Let me give you a somehow more "exotic" example of work done with linguistic ramifications. In the 1990s, while at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, I was intrigued by the profuse use of Hebrew expressions like "I am not a *freier*"—something close yet not identical to a "sucker." Soon, I decided to conduct a social and semiology analysis of its varied uses in everyday life, working together with Michael Feige, then a Ph.D. candidate I supervised at the university. What people consider—to paraphrase Clifford Geertz—"good to talk about" affords researchers a glimpse into the interplay between social processes and categories of interpretation, especially in times of change when these connections become problematic. This was especially so in the case of *freier*, since the term conveyed the connection between individuals and their community, a central issue for any society but an especially thorny one for a society that had been grounded in a communitarian ideology and faced overwhelming challenges such as geopolitical insecurity or integrating a massive influx of immigrants. In such a context, our analysis revealed that the expressions used to refer to the obligations of individuals had acquired high symbolic significance and political import, especially as they concerned negotiating their willingness to contribute efforts to the community without specific prospects of gain or guarantees of substantial return. We published the results in English, Spanish, and Hebrew, yet with different emphases for the different readers. For local readers, we had to go further in covering the wide spectrum of idiomatic expressions and situations; for the English and Spanish readers, we stressed the sociohistorical background and the relevance in terms of pragmatics, a subset of semiology. We thus made sense of a specific sociolinguistic practice and its political importance in terms comprehended universally.

AE: Do you believe similar ideas take on different meanings when situated in different languages and cultures?

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LR: Take for instance human rights. The dialectics of globalizing and "glocalizing" principles of human rights and accountability on a universal level go hand-in-hand with the existence of multiple disagreements about the generalized respect for individual rights and the effective ways of implementation. There are many sources for this imbalance. For one, there are various philosophical foundations and traditions for universal human rights. Some stem from a perception of natural law, rooting human rights in various soteriological views on the existence of a higher order, or God's will or providence, and their implications for human nature. Others are humanistic and rationalist, grounding human rights in the universal capacity of humans endowed with rational capacities as the basis for moral and ethical attitudes of respect for human life and dignity. Still others trace human rights to positivist foundations, both to legal and contractual commitments, limiting the historical abuse of power and, later on, the agreements reached by international law as the basis for deriving a universal recognition of human rights. Nonetheless, one may argue that these various philosophical foundations and traditions could be reconciled for the sake of agreement on the universal character of the principles of human rights. Still, evolving meanings are at the root of disputes over what is covered and what such rights should cover. Also, there have been disagreements as societies have supported different views of what is right and wrong. For example, during the Cold War, the idiom of universal human rights was contested as part of the East/West divide. Geopolitical camps voiced accusations of infringement of civil and political rights vs. parallel claims of infringement of socioeconomic rights, reaching a minimal engagement only by the mid-1970s in the framework of the detente and the Helsinki accords.

More fundamental have been criticisms aimed at the supposed neutrality of the discourse, addressed by theorists of postcolonialism, indigenous revival, and feminism. Accused of instrumental use and colonial interventionism, Western countries projecting claims of universalism have been described as deluded by an arrogant ethnocentrism pushing for liberal norms and values, the lack of tolerance for distinct cultural understandings, and the entrapment of harmful policies under the halo of protecting human rights in other societies.

AE: You have written extensively about the perspective of multiple modernities and human rights, which, you have argued, "stresses that in the process of reaction, amalgamation and transformation, the universal claims of Western modernity are translated into a multiplicity of cultural and ideological patterns and processes of institutional building." How do you see this "multiplicity of cultural and ideological patterns" taking place during the Cold War in Latin America? Were those infamous systems of repression unique to Latin America? Or rather, were they the extension of a more international or even transnational trend toward violent authoritarianism?

LR: Let me clarify what a perspective of multiple modernities means against the background of more extreme interpretive approaches—namely, those stressing a convergence of human societies

and those predicating a clash of civilizations. Indeed, for generations, historical and sociopolitical analyses moved recurrently from one extreme to the other. For instance, in the WWII period there was a widespread belief in the convergence of industrial societies, somehow an updated version of the nineteenth-century belief in evolutionism, which was somehow confronting comparative lines of analysis such as Montesquieu's. Many of those who endorsed the thesis of convergence assumed that the Western model would be projected worldwide by processes of structural differentiation, urbanization and industrialization, the extension of education, technology, and communication. The Cold War period led to the realization that such a forecast was at least premature. The end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rise of communication technologies, and globalization brought back the idea of convergence under the veneer of "the end of history," as famously coined in Francis Fukuyama's book title of 1992, which alluded to the seeming emergence of a unipolar world system. Of course, there were already signs of a clash of civilizations that would unravel the unipolar international order, as Samuel Huntington suggested almost at the same time.

In between, there has been a growing realization that humankind is likely to continue to experience the impact of both centripetal, converging structural forces and centrifugal dynamics, with societies retaining their specific, multiple character. Such understanding led to a perspective of multiple modernities, projected by scholars such as Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Jóhann Páll Árnason, Bjőrn Wittrock, Wolfgang Schluchter, and others, as a means of making sense of the varied human experience, which can be traced far back in history and still prevails in the present. While recognizing the processes of structural and institutional differentiation at the core of change, this perspective stresses that the very process of increasing complexity created the possibility that different aspects or dimensions of change and modernity would coalesce in different constellations in various societies and historical contexts; and furthermore, that societies' distinctiveness is connected to various constellations of meaning-making crystallizing historically. That is, various traditions, cultural, and religious orientations confront and amalgamate in different ways with the premises of the program of modernity as envisaged first in the West. Even if they may confront similar epistemic, political, and economic challenges, various societies undergo change in different ways, through a multiplicity of actions, reactions, and amalgams.

Societies have thus developed in a plurality of paths, forms, and expressions due to distinctive visions, ways of interpretation and representation, yet also various modes of constructing and reconstructing their collective identities, attribution of meaning, and projection of power and charisma. It stems from this understanding that modernity and Westernization are not identical processes, but rather maintain a tension-ridden and ambiguous interplay. Societies can be expected to change and modernize, yet they do so not necessarily by following one single paradigm or by adopting Western visions and interpretations as if they were as universal as they have claimed to be, when even within the West there are radical differences between some societies and others. Such multiplicity is not confined to the impact of states and nation-states as building blocks of the international system, but also involves various transnational and trans-state arenas shaped by transcendental visions and networks claiming a stake in the elaboration of meaning, reflexivity, and the resulting mobilization of resources. It is not by chance that following the Cuban revolution of 1959, all Latin America became

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a transnational battlefield for Cold War confrontations and cultural wars, which will produce a grim legacy of human rights violations. As much as Cuba attempted to create "one hundred Vietnams" and supported guerrillas beyond its borders, those claiming to defend "Western civilization" carried out a carnage that will prompt a profound review of consciousness and transitional justice following the return of democracy.

Coming back to your question, without implying that societies develop only on their own terms, similar ideas such as citizenship, regional cooperation, or human rights may take different meanings at different points in time and when situated in different societies and cultures. Compare, for instance, the projection of regional and subregional organizations in Latin America, sustained by a logic of equal sister-nationhood and solidarity, as distinct from the regional organizational dynamics of East Asia. Or witness the prominence of integrative notions of citizenship prevailing over fragmented demographics in republican Latin America, as compared to the still paramount saliency of tribal identities fragmenting many African states. In addition, within any of those societies the political, social, and cultural forces at work are not uniform, being involved in inner struggles around alternative political projects articulated by various social actors—from political elites to carriers of visions of solidarity, from cultural elites to economic entrepreneurs—who work incessantly to structure meaning and embed value orientations in institutions and social practices. Recent developments in the world suggest the importance of such an analytical perspective, with globalization generating its countervailing forces and transnational migration leading to the revival of more "nativistic" movements articulated by populist leaderships.

AE: Considering Latin American repression, you have seen nations undergo sweeping transformations from authoritarianism toward democracy and transitional justice. How has the legacy of human rights, both in repression and justice, affected cultural and political consciousness? What lessons have been learned, and what conflicts do you believe have persisted?

LR: From the early nineteenth century, Latin American countries recognized a wide array of social and political rights in their constitutions, albeit also contemplating their suspension under conditions of political turmoil and unrest. Latin American nations were among the first, beyond some European nations, to sign bilateral and multilateral treaties recognizing the right of asylum and regulating its premises, as well as pushing the boundaries of international private law. Likewise, already in the 1930s human rights NGOs emerged in Argentina, and by 1948 the Organization of American States in which Latin Americans participated had promulgated its own declaration of human rights, months before the adoption of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the UN. Latin American jurist participants in its drafting were most instrumental in broadening the conceptions of human rights to encompass not just civil and political rights, but also social and economic rights. Likewise, Latin American countries stand out among the signatories of ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Convention

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(C169) of 1989. In other words, in many respects Latin Americans were pioneers in developing humanitarian law and human rights principles and documents.

So, how can these be reconciled with civil wars, mass violence, and repression producing the death of hundreds of thousands during the last phases of the Cold War? The answer, developed in *The Legacy of Human-Rights Violations in the Southern Cone* (1999), which I coauthored with political scientist Mario Sznajder, is that a more meaningful way of understanding the value of human rights as the safeguard of the life and dignity of the individual was reached only after such massive repression, which affected not just the lower classes and marginal sectors, but rather everyone, regardless of social status. Before then, those deemed to express the core values and interests of society could easily claim to be defending the public good when eliminating "corrosive elements" of society. Once abroad, home activists and exiles started to embrace the idiom of human rights as a basis for the political work they conducted within advocacy and solidarity networks, adopting it on tactical grounds at first, yet progressively understanding its full principled potential. Moreover, as the broad extent of repression became known, even the home dictators and repressors could not evade using the idiom and discourse of human rights to resist international pressure.

As has happened many times in history, it is only subsequent to a human rights crisis of such magnitude that progress is achieved in the realm of justice and accountability, the attainment of truth—i.e., an agreed-upon version of the past—, and the construction of collective memory. This was the partial yet fundamental achievement of democratization: developing mechanisms of transitional justice, at first in the Southern Cone (Argentina in 1984, Uruguay in 1985, and Chile in 1990) and then in Central America during the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, at least in the Southern Cone, the understanding of human rights has deepened in the last two decades. This trend was reflected in the adoption of new legal codes and "aspirational" constitutions, such as those of Brazil (1988), Colombia (1991), Paraguay (1992), Peru (1993), Ecuador (1998 and 2008), Venezuela (1999), Bolivia (2009), and in the reformed constitutions of Costa Rica (1989), Mexico (1992), Argentina (1994), and Chile (1989 and 2005). The new constitutions promulgated lists of detailed rights and protections, sometimes going into great lengths to specify those rights. They also established principles of transparency and accountability, decentralized regulations, and recognized frameworks of citizen power and judicial independence, even if sometimes the balance of power is still tilted towards the executive. In educational systems we have witnessed the development of programs to instill a deeper sense of human rights in the new generations. Even if it is not a universal trend, in many of the countries, the very bases of the nation have been redefined in recognizing collective rights of different ethnic and linguistic minorities, primarily native Americans and Afro-Americans.

Still, issues and challenges persist, many of them rooted in a problem that many post-authoritarian societies face: namely, how to turn legal principles into effective institutional procedures and patterns of civility in everyday life interaction. Add to the equation the pernicious effects of a very lopsided distribution of wealth, rising criminality or corruption, persistent prejudice, discrimination, and lack of tolerance, which work against a human rights normative. Situations of political polarization, onslaught on the media, and moves to curtail the autonomy of the judicial or legislative branches of

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government may further hamper the full enforcement of human rights protections. Another major problem is the social authoritarianism prompted by a sense of public insecurity, leading to expectations of a harsh hand against criminals and the support for police violence against marginals. Summing up, much progress has been attained, but nothing should be taken for granted. Every generation has to struggle to retain, expand, and redefine the meaning of universal human rights. In my recently published history of human rights in Latin America, I address these questions systematically in realms as varied as gender rights, development and the environment, and "microdespotism."

AE: Finally, alternative facts. You have been working on a research project recently about the development and emergence of conspiracy theories in Latin America. How do you think conspiracy theories have grown or shrunk during the Trump administration? Do you see parallels to your work on Latin American conspiracies?

LR: We should differentiate between actual conspiracies and imagined plots that project a theory of power and social mobilization against presumed enemies plotting in the dark. Decades ago, historian Richard Hofstadter claimed that the U.S. had recurrently experienced a profuse and what he called a "paranoid" concern for hidden conspiracies. Such conspirationism assembles partial and alternative facts, magnifying their significance as part of comprehensive theories about the existence of forces supposedly conspiring against the well-being of society. Latin American instances of conspirationism are equally abundant, as when colonial powerholders attributed to the Jesuits rebellions against royal power and had them expelled from the realm, while in turn the Jesuits elaborated theories claiming that their expulsion had been the product of the machinations of freemasons, atheists, and others. In postcolonial Latin America as well, complots have been imagined and projected time and again, even as late as the 2010s, for instance around the assassination of special Argentine counsel Alberto Nisman in charge of investigating the allegations of a state cover-up in a lingering inquiry into the 1994 terrorist attack on the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. Incorporating fractured pieces of information and claiming their veracity as proof of the existence of subterranean plot by malevolent forces willing to destroy the foundations of society, these theories have been used both by those in power to delegitimize opposition forces, as well as by those who defy power and try to convince society of the machinations of elites or their lack of awareness of an impending disaster requiring immediate action. Clearly, those endorsing conspiracy theories both in the USA and Latin America—and replicating "alternative facts" millions of times by using social media—create unprecedented challenges for our times.

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