

Interview - Dirk Kruijt

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AUG 15 2018

Dirk Kruijt, who has alternated his career between academia and development assistance, is Professor Emeritus of Development Studies at Utrecht University. He has published on poverty and exclusion, ethnic relations, civil-military relations, military governments and guerrilla movements, and co-authored (with Kees Koonings) six edited volumes on urban violence and armed actors in Latin America. His last two monographs in English are *Guerrillas. War and Peace in Central America* (London: Zed Books, 2008) and *Cuba and Revolutionary Central America. An Oral History* (London: Zed Books, 2017). He is currently working on an edited volume about "Latin American Guerrilla Movements: Origins, Evolution, Outcomes".

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in Latin American studies today?

Maybe I am somewhat biased because I am inclined to follow my own preferences. There are four ongoing research themes that I currently find most exciting: (1) the debate on 'Violent Democracy', a term coined by Arias and Goldstein in 2010, but which was actually initiated in the late 1990s. The book I co-edited with Kees Koonings, *Societies of Fear* (1999), was one of the earliest publications contributing to this debate, but the first eye opener for many researchers was the ethnographic study on sicarios and structural violence in the slums of Medellín by Alonso Salazar published in 1993. Salazar was a journalist then and later became the city's mayor. The debate is still ongoing in research centres in Brazil, Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and in American and European universities. (2) The Pink Tide governments, that were the focus of a short-lived academic discussion from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, but which have since started to fade away. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA)-government network between Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and six smaller Caribbean island-states is on the wane while the governments in Nicaragua and Venezuela are questionable, to say the least. (3) Migration streams: the seven million Colombian war refugees, the exodus of three million Venezuelans repatriated in other countries in Latin America, the continuous Mexican, Central American and Caribbean exodus, and its political effects in the guest countries. It is not only a Latin American issue; it also affects the United States deeply. (4) Neo-extractive politics and (indigenous) protest movements. Nearly all countries with native ethnicities suffer from large-scale extraction activities by transnational corporations that signed binding contracts with national governments without explicitly guaranteeing ground rights. These activities contribute to soil, river and air pollution, and lead to disputes about the ancestral and religious significance of land, rivers and mountains. That was the case when I wrote my PhD about the copper and coal mining Cerro de Pasco Corporation in Peru in the 1970s, and it still is. It apparently persists as a generic trait of mineral, oil and gas extraction.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

That is a question about my own evolution. I was trained as a mathematical sociologist and my conceptual baggage was a residue of functionalist theory, then the dominant sociology stream in American and Dutch academia. I started in the late 1960s lecturing methodology at Utrecht University. After two years, the supervisor of my MA thesis asked me to come to Peru, to do the same at the Catholic University in Lima, a private Jesuit elite university. I also lectured at the National University of San Marcos, the public and proletarian university, fifteen years later a hotbed of pre-Shining Path splinter parties. Peru changed my profession and my political ideas for sure. I was there during the period of the Velasco government (1968-1975), the 'Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces' that started

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with the expropriation of American oil companies, implemented a far-going Agrarian Reform and ended with five different forms of property. General-President Velasco was a nationalist pro-poor reformer and wanted 'socialism with a chullo' (the Peruvian hat). It was an essential experience to live in a revolutionary period with an avalanche of decrees and reforms, its euphoria and collective enthusiasm of peasants and slum dwellers, and the loathing of the elite and middle classes. It was also the period of the Dependency Theory and most of its pioneers came to Peru and were invited to the Católica. When we started new courses on social problems, social theory and the legacy of Peruvian Marxist Mariátegui, father Gustavo Gutierrez, the Liberation Theologian, lectured at the Theological Faculty. So, I became a member of the generation of the 'izquierda caviar', the pejorative expression for leftist scholars and intellectuals during the presidency of Fujimori. When he ran off to Japan in 2000, maybe 50 percent of the members of the interim cabinet under Perez de Cuellar, the retired UN secretary-general, were my former colleagues or students.

I became a Latin Americanist for life, trying to build up deep knowledge about its societies, languages and cultures. At my return to Utrecht I started studying Marxism more seriously. I never had an enormous affection for Althusser and Poulantzas: too abstract, too academic. But I was deeply impressed reading Wallerstein. More at a micro-level, I always wondered why and how revolutionary generations emerged. It strongly influenced my research projects on the Velasco military (I became his biographer); on the Central American guerrilla wars; and on the Cuban veterans of Castro and Guevara and the generation thereafter, including the officials of the Cuban Departamento América. Most of what I later wrote is about poverty and exclusion, violence and military governments of the Right and the Left, revolutionary generations, insurgents and counter-insurgents, and efforts to mould a better society.

In *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America*, you explore Cuba's changing role in region, from supporter of the armed left during the years of 'revolutionary fervour' through to effective peace facilitator today. What are the key factors that explain this apparent turnaround?

In the 1960s, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were convinced of the possibility of replicating revolutions by training and assisting guerrilla movements starting from rural guerrilla *focos*. While Latin America was the *Patria Grande* (Greater Fatherland), Cuba focused on the entire Third World. In retrospective, one cannot deny a certain hubris of the young triumphant insurgency leaders of an island of nine million people. But the entire world was theirs. "We were absolutely convinced that we had discovered an infallible method to free the people," an aide of Che Guevara's told Piero Gleijeses about Cuba's early support to Latin American revolutionaries (he wrote that in the *London Review of Books* in 2017). But the Cuban example could not easily be replicated; the only other successful revolution was in Nicaragua twenty years thereafter. The failure of Guevara's Bolivian campaign caused a shock. American support to the Latin American military had prevented 'other Cuba's' and there weren't 'one, two or three Vietnams', as Guevara had hoped for. The Latin American armies and police forces were much better equipped than the armies of the Caribbean and Central American dictatorships.

Additionally, Cuba only became a socialist society two years *after* the successful guerrilla campaign. But transforming an essentially middle-class economy (with huge pockets of poverty and misery) into a sustainable socialist one takes time and experience. In 1972, after some years of relatively icy relations with the Soviet Union, Castro made a large 'trip to Canossa', beginning in Africa and ending in Moscow; in the same year Cuba became a member of the Comecon. Soviet monitoring of Cuba's ideological rectitude was undeniable given the presence of Soviet experts on a massive scale; their contingent increased from 1,000 in the early 1960s to 6,000 by 1975. Of them, 50 percent were military specialists, the remaining other half assisting in economic planning, business management, engineering projects, infrastructural design, technological advancement, and even higher education. For instance, until the late 1980s, all faculties of the University of Havana had a Russian adviser. Cuba's economy became highly dependent on Soviet assistance. The Cuban military maintained warm relations with their Soviet counterparts; all senior commanding officers received training in Moscow or Leningrad. The armed forces were modernized along Soviet lines. A programme of re-equipment was launched with the most sophisticated weaponry and military technology at the time.

But that did not mean a slavish following of Soviet foreign politics. Fidel Castro never broke with his policy of supporting insurgents in the region and elsewhere, a vision that was not very popular in Moscow. With respect to

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Latin America, the United States had forced Cuba into a diplomatic quarantine, but in the early 1970s these efforts began to dwindle. In some countries more progressive governments took office. It coincided with Cuba's turn towards a more pragmatic diplomacy, creating alliances not only with the Armed Left but also with other nationalist-reformist forces. When Cuba established formal diplomatic relations with a country, its support to the local guerrilla forces was withdrawn. Still, Cuba played an important role as supporter of the Armed Left in countries under dictatorship. The new line was to try and create politico-military umbrella organisations in Argentina, post-Allende Chile, and especially Central America (and it is only there that this policy was successful).

After the implosion of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Socialist block, Cuba's economy was shattered, and its society only survived by Spartan policies. When Hugo Chávez was invited to come to Cuba for the first time, he was told that "Cuba could not even buy him a matchbox" and he paid for his own ticket. Cuba cut its coat according to its cloth and told the leaderships of the Colombian, Salvadorian and Guatemalan guerrillas to try and look for a political solution: peace consultations. The role of Cuba in the final peace negotiations in Guatemala was at the request of the leaderships of both the guerrilla and the army. The Cuban diplomatic facilitation during the long-lasting peace negotiations in Colombia was explicitly requested by successive Colombian governments.

Given the failure of Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements during the 1960s and 70s, and subsequent rise of alternative progressive movements and ideas outside the remit of '20th Century Socialism' since then, why is it that Cuba remains "the referential country for nearly all Latin American revolutionary and post-revolutionary movements"?

I should correct my own sentence. The exact quotation is: "For the entire period, Cuba was the referential country for nearly all Latin American revolutionary and post-revolutionary movements and insurgent generations". And it was written in the past tense. From the 1960s to the mid-1990s, Cuba was the referential country for nearly all Latin American guerrilla movements. Fidel Castro, given his reputation and his age, was a kind of father figure for most Latin American guerrilla leaders. When the five members of the Salvadorian FMLN comandancia general planned the 'final offensive' on San Salvador in 1989, they had presented their military plans to Fidel Castro for advice and he had found faults: in underestimating the probable use of air force by El Salvador's military commanders. He had also manifested his doubts about the supposed mass uprising (that did not occur). Young recruits of the Nicaraguan FSLN solemnly declared their loyalty 'before Fatherland, history, and Che Guevara'. Many Latin American guerrilla leaders went to Cuba for military training, study, consultation with the Cuban leaders, and medical treatment. Cuba always acted as a kind of general hospital for the crippled and the wounded, for convalescence, rest and relaxation. The relation between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez was initially one of father and dearest son, then of mentor and successor and finally of revolutionary colleagues.

When the Soviet Union had morphed into Russia, delivery of new weapons and spare parts was very difficult, and the Cuban armed forces' only possibility to maintain their operational condition was cannibalising older equipment. When the Guatemalan army delegation visited the island in 1996 during the reconciliation sessions with the guerrilla, the air force pilots were shown all MIGs, but they were not ignited; that was only permitted in emergency situations due to the shortage of fuel. Military service was reduced from three to two years. The personnel of the military was officially halved; the reductions probably went further, to one third or less than its previous strength, while the budget was cut in half.

But surviving under Spartan conditions, Cuba maintained an international reputation as a development donor, this time using its soft power diplomacy: large-scale medical missions, an international medical school system, and literacy campaigns. Even when Venezuela's role in delivering oil and co-founding missions was reduced to nearly nil, Cuba still sent medical missions to Latin America and Africa and Asia. According to data published by John Kirk in 2018, the countries that benefitted most from Cuban medical support in Latin America in 2016 were Venezuela (with 28,351 medical personnel), Brazil (10,994), Bolivia (721), Ecuador (567), Guatemala (415) and Guyana (181), and in Africa: South Africa (9,344) and Angola (1,712). During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, 258 medical specialists were immediately sent to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea: intensive-care doctors and nurses, surgeons, anaesthesiologists, epidemiologists, and paediatricians.

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And finally, during and the period of the Pink Tide governments, it also helped that the presidents of Brazil (Lula, Dilma), Bolivia (Morales), El Salvador (Sánchez Cerén), Nicaragua (Ortega) and Venezuela (Chávez, Maduro) had all been embedded in Cuban friendships over several decades. At least three national labour union leaders were regular guests and attended training courses and seminars in Cuba. Afterwards these same leaders became presidents of their countries: Lula (Brazil), Morales (Bolivia) and Maduro (Venezuela). In 2011, 2012 and 2013, staying in Bolivia and interviewing Bolivian cabinet members, I became aware of the fact that several vice-ministers periodically visited Havana for their MA or PhD studies. But again, we are talking about the recent past.

Why was Cuba's revolutionary leadership so eager to go against the Soviet Union's policy of 'peaceful coexistence' by supporting revolutionary movements in the region, and how did they manage to do so despite Cuba's increasing economic dependence on the Comecon countries?

Fidel Castro was never an orthodox follower of Soviet foreign policies, and especially in Latin America he always acted independently and not according to Soviet pressure. In the early 1960s, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara considered it as their calling to support liberation movements worldwide. They were very explicit in voicing their conviction about the proliferation of the Cuban Revolution. They were convinced of the fact that the triumph in Havana could not be limited to the continental borders of Latin America. In the early 1960s, Cuba established contacts with the Middle East and Africa. Already in 1962, Manuel Piñero (a leading Cuban revolutionary who later became the long-standing head of Cuba's Departamento América) formed a 'working group' for strategic cooperation with Algeria. In 1965, an agreement on intelligence cooperation was established between the two countries and a special unit was created to accommodate relations with other African Liberation Movements. Algeria was instrumental in establishing these relations. Similarly, Mexico and later also Panama were countries from where Cuba could maintain direct relations with many Latin American guerrilla and liberation movements. Castro, who always closely monitored and directed Cuba's formal and informal foreign relations, pursued an independent Cuban policy in the region even when this differed from the wishes of the Soviet Union and the existing pro-Moscow communist parties in Latin America. There are many indications that these parties openly complained about Cuba's preferences for radical splinters from the 'Good Old Party'. In the second half of the 1960s the already existing divergence between the Communist Parties loyal to the Soviet Union and the presence of the Armed Left in Latin America (supported by Cuba) became concrete. And although the Communist Parties were not inclined to let their members assist the new guerrilla movements, it is undeniable that in many countries members of the Communist Youth joined the guerrilla.

The Colombian FARC with their ties to the Communist Party was operating independently and without contact with Cuba until the 1990s. Functionaries of the Departamento América told me that young members of the Argentinean Communist Party with a poster of Che at home were requested to turn in their membership card, even in the mid-1980s. Diplomatic relations with Venezuela had broken off in 1961 but had been resumed in December 1974, under the presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez. While visiting the Soviet Union, Pérez negotiated a covenant about the triangulation of oil delivery to Cuba with Brezhnev and Kosygin. In his memoirs he remembers that "Kosygin told me that Cuba cost them dearly (...). They assured me that they wouldn't allow the expansion of Fidel Castro. They had settlements impeding Castro from using Soviet weaponry without permission from Moscow". When Cuba's new ambassador, a former vice-chief of Piñero, tried to re-establish contact with the Venezuelan Communist Party, he noticed that "relations with the CP were icy." When embassy functionaries visited its Secretary General, he told them: "Unfortunately, I cannot do anything for you". Later, relations improved.

In the 1970s and 1980s, during Cuba's military involvement in Africa, the Soviet Union also greatly benefitted from Cuba's reputation as non-imperialist military and medical service provider. Cuba—and not the Soviets—took the initiative to intervene with their regular military forces in Angola. This earned Cuba its immense reputation in the Third World and the Non-Aligned Movement. Cuba's policy of supporting existing guerrilla movements in Latin America continued, but much more pragmatically: trying to establish unitary umbrella structures instead of supporting all existing smaller guerrilla forces, consolidating ties with nationalist-reformist military governments, and (officially) abstaining from support to insurgent movements where and when diplomatic relations were re-established. Some internal changes, like the closure of the urban guerrilla school and the transformation (in 1975) of the VMT-DGI-DGLN (Piñero's former military intelligence structures within the Ministry of the Interior) into the Departamento

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América, a 'civilian' organization whose members operated as diplomats from the Cuban Communist Party, can probably be attributed to Soviet 'orientation'.

Were there any significant divisions of opinion about strategy within the institutions directing Cuba's relations with the Latin American left, such as the Departamento América? Did divisions between advocates of urban and rural guerrilla theories, or between official Communists and radical Marxists, not also play out in these Cuban organizations?

Cuba's foreign relations were always closely supervised by Fidel Castro. In 1972, when Piñero's senior staff members requested an interview with the (then) Minister of Foreign Relations Carlos Rafael Rodríguez about Cuba's policy with respect to the United States, Rodríguez told them bluntly: "(...) don't worry too much. Here, [even] the members of the Politburo do not know what our policy is about. We're going to give you instructions and you follow what Fidel and I tell you to do. Because here, [the two] who handle it, are Fidel and me". Castro provided the instructions and Piñero had day-to-day access to Fidel. Instructions were given to specific persons and sections on a need-to-know basis. As one of Piñero's vice-chiefs once remarked: "(...) I can't speak about that all because our highest chiefs, Fidel y Piñero, never told one hand what they did with the other".

But yes, there were and still are divergencies between the old Comunistas and the new (although at present old-aged) Fidelistas. When I interviewed Fidel's and Che's veteran insurgents, it was not difficult to perceive their lasting exasperation about the power struggle between the old Moscow guard and the Fidelistas in the Party during the 1960s. The secretary-general (Escalante) of the old Moscow-oriented Communist Party (called the PSP) was in charge of the creation of the present Cuban Communist Party. During this process many of the insurgents (Fidelistas) were dismissed from office or sent away to stay at home. After an intervention by Castro, Escalante was forced to step down and accepted minor postings. 'Escalante' stood for many former PSP party bureaucrats whose qualifications were indispensable for the national, regional and local administrations. And Escalante's demise did not prevent the thousand-and-one small purges and insults carried out against the 'new revolutionaries'. For a long period, bad feelings about the actions of PSP members lingered just beneath the surface. Still today, several of the Fidelista veterans remain outspoken about the incorporation of the old PSP cadres into 'their' revolutionary party. And the antagonism between Cuba and the Soviet Union, specifically regarding the support to other revolutionary movements, became an issue of continuous worry.

During most of the 1960s, a certain heterodoxy in discussions within the Cuban Communist Party was tolerated, even encouraged to a certain degree in academic research centres such as the Department of Philosophy at the University of Havana. There, courses in 'Dialectic and Historical Materialism' were modernised into 'the History of Marxist Thinking' in 1965. The lifespan of the Department was nine years; it was closed in November 1971. It functioned as a revolutionary intellectual discussion group which was internally very coherent. Other participants were young professors of political economy. They read and studied the original European Marxist classics in translation and discarded the Soviet textbooks. Dogmatism was forbidden while new ideas were welcomed. They saw it as their task to enter into discussion with other Third World intellectuals, trying to integrate pre-World War II European Marxism and the reality of post-colonial independent nations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Their monthly journal *Pensamiento Crítico* was launched in February 1967 and its last issue (number 53) appeared in June 1971; Fernando Martínez Heredia, Cuba's brilliant albeit heterodox philosopher, who died in 2017, was appointed Director of the Department (1966-1969) and chief editor of the journal (1966-1971). Latin American guerrilla leaders and intellectuals published in the journal. Texts of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and nearly all the leaders of insurgent movements of the Third World were published or republished and commented on. There were also fluent relations with leftist European intellectuals (Regis Debray was a visiting fellow at the Department), and many Latin American guerrilla leaders who visited Cuba or were trained on the island visited staff members. The journal and the Department were closed in 1971 under Soviet pressure. In terms of internal orthodoxy, the 1970s, and especially the years between 1971 and 1976, were a decade of dullness, silencing, and ostracism of heterodox artists, thinkers, writers, and intellectuals. The vigilance of obligatory 'ideological pureness' and persecution of 'political flaws' such as critical observation of the Soviet Party line or the Cuban Party line were corrected by the

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National Culture Council with respect to novels, poetry, theatre performances, movies and documentaries, and radio and TV.

Can we talk of a 'revolutionary left' of any significance in Latin America today? Many of the political parties that emerged from guerrilla movements have adopted what appear to be mild social democratic programmes in comparison to their former positions.

Sure, former guerrilla leaders were elected president or vice-president in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Uruguay. Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Peru had Pink Tide presidents, while Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela joined together in the ALBA. But at present, the political panorama (August 2018) is mostly that of governments headed by the Right or Centre Right with strong preferences for neo-liberalism. The only exception to this predominantly rightist scenery is Mexico where López Obrador, a president with a leftist past has recently been elected. The Colombian elections of the same year were won with 54 percent by Duque, clearly a rightist, but it is surprising that 42 percent of the electorate voted for Petro, a former guerrilla member and then mayor of Bogotá, while the votes for the Colombian left during previous decades stagnated at 10 percent.

And you are right about the mild social democratic programmes the post-revolutionary parties implemented after they won elections. When I wrote about the Central American civil wars I wondered about the suave tone and the prudent reforms of the programme of the Salvadorian guerrilla, the modest political programme of the Guatemalan guerrilla after nearly 10 years of formal and informal negotiations, and the absence of reforms from the political programme of Ortega when he again assumed the presidency after elections in 2007. Chávez's socialism of the twenty-first century was a generous and far-going redistribution programme financed by oil revenues but without consolidating a sustainable economic and productive infrastructure. Five years after Chávez's succession by Maduro, the country suffers from galloping hyperinflation and massive outmigration while the essential government and administrative tasks, even food provision, are subcontracted to the armed forces. Ortega's government in August 2018 reminds me of the last years of 1970s, one or two years before the fall down of Somoza.

To what extent do Cuban intellectuals engage in and influence debates that are occurring within the Latin American left today? Has the 'liberalisation atmosphere' you describe as emerging during the special period opened-up the possibilities for such exchanges, beyond those directed through official state or Communist Party channels?

There is an ongoing debate between friendly governments and movements within the Forum of São Paulo which Cuba participates in. The most recent meeting (XXIV) was hosted in Havana, in July 2018. The Forum was founded in 1990 in Brazil by Lula da Silva and Castro and embodies a hundred organisations. Then there is the World Social Forum, a Brazilian initiative founded in 2001. In 2003 Castro and Chávez founded the Network of Intellectuals and Artists in Defence of Humanity, presided by Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova. In Cuba, all these initiatives are monitored by the vice-minister of Culture.

During the Special Period a gradual process of internal liberalisation was initiated, sometimes interspersed with sudden outbursts of orthodoxy, but by and large sustained during the period of Raúl Castro's government. It coincided with other reforms during his 12-year administration: private property titles for real estate; the possibility of selling real estate and vehicles; the permission to buy or import mobile phones, smartphones, DVDs, tablets and USB-sticks; a legal increase of five years in the pension age; the annulment of the prohibition of lodging in tourist hotels; permission to travel abroad for two years for all citizens; the possibility of renting rooms or apartments to foreign tourists; and the possibility of salary increases in the non-state sector. Strange as it sounds, the slow liberalisation of internet-related instruments (blogs, Chinese smartphones) accelerated internal non-Party led debates.

Reconsidering the nearly 60-year period of leadership of Fidel and Raúl Castro, one might conclude that the valuable and original conceptual debate on socialism was halted around 1975. But the real significance of Cuba to the outside world in the past and present (unlike other ALBA countries) is based on its long-term and sustained 'international

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solidarity' (medical and literacy assistance and good offices for peace negotiations) and its soft power diplomacy of the last three decades. Year after year the Assembly of the United Nations votes against the continuance of the U.S. embargo, with a growing majority of countries. In November 2017, 191 of the 193 member countries backed the resolution. The two opposing votes were those of Israel and the United States.

Your earlier research highlighted the progressive role that military actors could potentially play in Latin America, such as within Peru's 'military socialist regime' (1968-1980). What are the factors that can lead the military to play such a role, and what can today's progressive forces learn from these experiences?

The first instinctive connotation of the Latin American military is that of military junta members with dark sunglasses. But officers of the armed forces are not inevitably inclined to the political Right. Throughout the entirety of the twentieth century there were also revolutionary lieutenants and captains. In the 1920s rebellions erupted involving young officers who in later years were referred to as the 'Military Youth' in Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. Military Youth in Central America participated in rebellions with reformist agendas as well. In Guatemala, in 1960, young lieutenants with a nationalist and anti-imperialist agenda attempted to overthrow a military dictatorship and, after the failure of their revolt, organised the first guerrilla groups in that country. Later in 1982 and 1983, young officers were instrumental in the overthrow of the two notorious Guatemalan dictators Lucas García and Ríos Montt. In El Salvador nationalist lieutenants and captains were the actors behind the two last military coups, in 1972 and 1979, before the civil war; they were a desperate effort to prevent large-scale guerrilla warfare.

More well-known are the governments of nationalist-leftist military leaders who used the armed forces to implement anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist nationalisations and pro-poor social reforms after World War II. Many of them and their younger military ministers were of lower middle-class background or the precarious urban working class. They were elected or staged a coup and sought legitimisation by elections or through the support of mass organisations. Colonel Arbenz (1950-1954) in Guatemala was the first one. He was elected President, and while maintaining his army rank, initiated an Agrarian Reform and nationalised American property. His political successors, Generals Velasco Alvarado in Peru and Torrijos in Panama headed institutional coups in the same year, 1968. Like the Velasco government in Peru, Panamanian army chief Torrijos announced a social reform program for the benefit of the poor. The most recent and most radical military reformist was Chavez.

These leaders defined themselves as military reformers with a special mission to break the power of the economic and political oligarchy, to restore national control over the economy and to carry out social reforms, implemented by the Armed Forces. I compared their public discourses and they are basically identical: pronounced by soldiers of poor descent, familiar with poverty, educated within the army that let them grow beyond their expectations, extremely loyal to the armed institution and acting as structural reformers in benefit of the poor and underprivileged. Here is a quote from Chávez that could have easily been pronounced by Velasco or Torrijos: "We can say that it is like the formula of water: H₂O. If we say that the People are the oxygen, the Armed Force is the hydrogen. Water doesn't exist without hydrogen". It is not surprising that both Fidel and Raúl Castro were so attracted to these military leaders, soldiers as they were, always on war alert and most of the time appearing in uniform.

What I learned from their lives and times is that (1) structural reforms generate enormous resistance, and (2) there is a problem of succession: Arbenz was ousted by a coup that produced a long-term series of miserable dictators. Velasco was overthrown in a military coup by officers headed by his Prime Minister Morales-Bermúdez, who also wanted to be in charge. They slowed or reversed the reform programme and their government (1975-1980) ended in an inglorious transference of power with their tail between their legs. Torrijos was succeeded by Noriega. And Daniel Ortega was succeeded, yes, by Daniel Ortega.

Given that interviews have been central to the methodology of much of your research, what advice would you give to early career researchers who are beginning to undertake interviews as part of their research?

In summary: Take it easy. Interviewing is fun, it is not difficult. Explain why you are interviewing someone and be receptive. Body language is part of the conversation. Let the other speak and don't be afraid of silences. Provided

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that the interviewees are interested, begin with saying what you are interested in. Set the recorder on and begin with an open question. Never use questionnaires—that irritates the other. Let the other speak as they see fit, about three or four topics of your interest. Be patient when they digress on whatever topic they deem important: family, grandchildren, vacations, achievements and disappointments, politically incorrect statements, transgressions of the official or institutional orthodoxy. Always anonymise the off-the-record information or the post-interview clarifications. Use a professional recorder with long-life batteries, within the reach of the interviewees, giving them the opportunity to interrupt the recording.

Here are my experiences: A strong influence on my research style is the Chicago School of Sociology, with its emphasis on empirical study, its intense ethnographic approach and its preference for precise and exact conceptualising without flying high in abstractions. During my PhD research I read *The Natural History of Revolution* by Lyford P. Edwards, originally published in 1927, and *The Strike* by Ernest T. Hiller, a theologian turned sociologist, published in 1928. It struck me that Hiller had already observed what I was interpreting about the hunger marches of the Peruvian mining proletariat in 1970s. I also admired the sociographic novels of Zola and Orwell. It indeed coincides with my strong preference for interviewing and observation. In fact, I became a social anthropologist with a preference for oral history. In all countries where I did research I read the college books on history and geography, the scholarly texts of the leading social scientists and novels of the canonised writers.

During all my interview rounds with insurgents and revolutionaries, but also with military officers, paramilitary leaders and young sicarios, I always use a qualitative interview style procuring a conversational intimacy, at ease, and trying to hold the interest of my interlocutor inviting him or her to speak freely about their life and career histories with the subject at hand. I consider it the most comfortable way of following the other's way of thinking and sorting out in a decent way the labyrinths of his or her memory. In fact, it is interviewing on 'borrowed trust', confidence generated by the introduction via a dependable intermediary that guarantees that the researcher is reliable. Without an introduction by intermediaries these kind of interviews are very difficult to do.

At some point during my two years of interviews in Peru I was sort of 'adopted' by three of Velasco's leading generals. They first offered me a 'who-is-who' crash course at the very beginning, then mediated in interviews, and finally brought me into contact with the secretary of the cabinet and personal lawyer of Velasco, in whose office I found, to my astonishment, a complete copy of the cabinet sessions between October 1968 and August 1975 (recently, his son donated the archives to the Catholic University). In 1998 and 1999 I was a member of a TV documentary team about the singular friendship between Rodrigo Asturias and Julio Balconi, guerrilla leader and army general who during the formal Guatemalan peace negotiations developed a bond that initiated the reconciliation process between guerrilla and armed forces, which was concluded in Cuba. Afterwards I was the ghost writer of Balconi's memoirs of the peace process. We reviewed the final text in Cuba where Balconi was convalescing from an assault on his life. When I started to interview former guerrilla leaders and peace negotiators in Guatemala, both Asturias and Balconi contacted me with their former colleagues. In El Salvador, Ruben Zamora, who after the Salvadoran peace agreements was the first presidential candidate on behalf of the FMLN, provided me with free access to his private archive, his own interviews with the guerrilla generation, and put me in contact with other prominent guerrilla members. In Nicaragua, some of the respected comandantes made introductions to their colleagues. Margarita Vannini, director of the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua and Central America (the former Instituto de Estudios Sandinistas) convinced other key persons to let me interview them. In Cuba I interviewed the insurgents of the generation of Fidel and Che, and thereafter the former members of the Departamento América, always accompanied by Cuban colleagues that became personal friends. In Peru and Cuba, nearly all interviewees approved, corrected and sometimes enlarged the transcriptions.