

Third Yale Conference on Latin American Labor History

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Dealing with culture, ideology, and consciousness, papers at the April 1986 Third Yale Conference on Latin American Labor History examined peasant politics, urban mass protests, popular music, and the impact of mass communications in modern Latin America.

Summarizing the first session, commentator Michael Jiménez (Princeton) called for further advances in understanding the still largely “unknown terrain” of rural popular culture. In “Tarascan Villagers, Callistas and the War Against Popular Culture in Michoacan, 1924–1934,” Marjorie Becker (Yale) explored the clash between a centralizing revolutionary state and the conservative village peasantry of the isolated Tarascan meseta. In “Nuestro Jefe Se Llama Necesidad: The Origins of the Campesino Movement of Chinandega, Nicaragua 1950–1964,” Jeffrey Gould (Yale) traced in intricate detail an agrarian struggle that, starting with one hundred families, grew to actively involve ten thousand people in a region with only twenty-five thousand residents.

Commentator William Roseberry (New School) praised Gould’s aggressive critique of categories. Dealing with a mixed group of proletarians and small owners, Gould rejected restrictive categories such as “semi-proletarian” and vigorously defended the analytical utility of using their self-designation as *campesinos*. As Jiménez noted, Gould “in great and sometimes ribald detail” provided a memorable account of the learning curve of a group of rural folk in Somocista Nicaragua. Jiménez also called for further exploration of Latin American “campesino civic culture” shaped by the mixed messages of nineteenth-century liberal notions of citizenship and rights.

The second conference session examined the phenomenon of mass social protest in 1940s Colombia and Argentina. Rejecting reductionist temptations, both Herbert Braun (Virginia) and Daniel James (Yale) investigated the diffuse “social and cultural dimensions” of the “spontaneous, unplanned and fortuitous.” Based on his recently published *Assassination of Gaitan: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison, 1985), Braun broke with the monolithic images of the famous “Bogotazo” enshrined in myth. Seeking to capture the “crazed fleeting passions of the crowd that took to the streets of Bogotá” on April 9, 1948, he provided a detailed hour-by-hour narrative of the popular response to the assassination of the populist politician Jorge Eliécer

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Gaitan. Discerning successive stages within the riots, Braun opened the way for the emergence of a new and deeper understanding of the riot.

In "October 17th, 1945: Approaches to the Study of Mass Protest in Argentina," Daniel James gave a similarly rich treatment of the dramatic working-class protests that led to the release of the imprisoned populist military man, Juan Perón. Consecrated in Peronist mythology, the protests of October 17 emerged in a new light by moving the focus from Buenos Aires to the events in the meatpacking suburb of Berisso. Analyzing the reported chants, targets, participants, and evidence of general irreverence, James contrasted the carnivalesque nature of October 17 with the solemnity and dignity of acceptable forms of traditional working-class union and political behavior in Argentina.

Commentator Steve Stein (University of Miami) asked how we are to combine these papers' insights into the sociocultural dimensions of these events with the larger socioeconomic processes at work. Following Stein's lead, subsequent discussion focused on the targets of crowd action with Yale's Emilia Viotti da Costa emphasizing the ambiguity of the protests as a demand for inclusion. The crowds spared banks and other capitalist institutions after all, and chose instead to strike out against the symbols of the prevailing political and cultural order, especially newspapers and universities. Hailing the effort to delineate the fleeting subgroups of the crowd, John French (Utah State University) argued for broadening our investigation into both the "crowd" and the "anti-crowd" given the lack of universal participation. In Bogotá, for example, local brewery workers stayed on the job in order to protect their workplaces.

The final conference session focused on the messages and means of mass communication. In "From Conformity to Protest: Popular Music and Social Change in Twentieth Century Peru," Steve Stein argued that popular folk music offered special advantages to the historian interested in the "world views of their working class composers and audiences." Exploring popular culture and mass values through textual analysis of lyrics, Stein contrasted the early twentieth-century phenomenon of "Vals Criollo" with contemporary *chicha* music, the folk idiom of Lima's urban poor in the 1980s. While the former stressed themes of "resignation, fatalism, respect for hierarchy, and personal dependency," aggressive *chicha* music is filled with anger and often speaks "directly, almost sociologically, about the structures, institutions and persons involved with the daily misery of the Lima lower classes."

In "The Communications Revolution: Radio and Working Class Life and Culture in Post-war São Paulo, Brazil," John French rejected the prevailing "brainwashing" thesis that sees mass communication like radio as necessarily encouraging popular acquiescence and passivity. After detailing radio's direct link to the political revolution represented by the emergence of populism, French examined the political rise of charismatic *radicalista* Osvaldo Giménez

in São Paulo's industrial ABC region in the 1950s. Rejecting homogenous notions of culture and consciousness, he argued that social class is best seen as "a shared social construct that can transcend the cultural, occupational and gender differences that may tend to drive members of a class apart or attach them to other social groups."

In her comments, Elizabeth Mahan (University of Connecticut) emphasized the need for greater empirical understanding of the economics of mass communication, especially the nature of the audiences. Like French, Emilia da Costa criticized the tendency to focus exclusively on the content of the message and the motivation of its creators. Overlooking the contradictions inherent in any message, these critics have overlooked the reality of selective consumption and multiple interpretations. In subsequent discussion, James emphasized the risk of viewing culture solely as a mirror of social reality while Braun suggested that analysis focus on the inherent tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities of cultural expressions.

While far from resolving the issues in debate, the conference ended with an agreement on the importance of exploring related topics such as popular leisure and the impact of racism and cultural divisions within the working class.