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# In Conversation with Marit Melhuus and Benedicte Bull About Life and Death in Mexico. House of Literature, September 26, 2013

Claudio Lomnitz <sup>1</sup>✉

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## **Claudio W. Lomnitz**

is Campbell Family Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, USA. He works on the history, politics and culture of Latin America, and particularly of Mexico. Lomnitz received his Ph.D. from Stanford in 1987. His first book, *Evolución de una sociedad rural* (1982) was a study of politics and cultural change in Tepoztlán, Mexico. After that work, he developed an interest in conceptualizing the nation-state as a kind of cultural region, a theme that culminated in *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in Mexican National Space* (California, 1992). In that work, Lomnitz concentrated on the social work of intellectuals, a theme that he developed in various works on the history of public culture in Mexico, including *Modernidad Indiana* (1999) and *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (2001). In the mid 1990s, Lomnitz began working on the historical anthropology of

crisis and published *Death and The Idea of Mexico* (2005), a political and cultural history of death in Mexico from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first centuries. His most recent book *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (2014) is about exile, ideology and revolution, and won the Latin American Studies Association's prize for the best book in the humanities. Lomnitz has also been on the editorial collective of the postcolonial journal *Public Culture*, where he served as editor from 2004–2010. Claudio Lomnitz writes a bi-weekly column in the Mexico City newspaper *La Jornada*. And he has written two plays with his brother Alberto Lomnitz, including a historical play on intellectuals and power that won Mexico's National Drama Award in 2010.

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## Abstract

The abstract is published online only. If you did not include a short abstract for the online version when you submitted the manuscript, the first paragraph or the first 10 lines of the chapter will be displayed here. If possible, please provide us with an informative abstract.

In this conversation between Prof. Marit Melhuus and Prof. Benedicte Bull (University of Oslo), Columbia University professor Claudio Lomnitz reflects on his long-standing work on 'life and death' in his native Mexico. Lomnitz offers his views on the vexed relationship between history and anthropology, on his role as a well-known public intellectual in Mexico, on Mexican intellectual traditions and Mexican nationalism.

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Due to temporary illness, Sindre Bangstad was replaced by the political scientist Benedicte Bull

for this particular event in the series. Bangstad has, however, overseen the re-working of the transcript, and is therefore included as a co-author.

***Marit:***

It is a great pleasure to have you here, Claudio. In what follows, I will try to address some general issues, and we will also go into some particulars. I thought I should start precisely with your positioning in anthropology and history. A good working relationship between these disciplines has not always been an obvious one, or an untroubled one for that matter. In 1950, Professor E.E. Evans-Pritchard, a well-known British anthropologist, gave a lecture at Oxford on anthropology and history where he forcefully argues for the conjoining of these two disciplines.<sup>1</sup> He draws on very noted anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Dumont to make his points. He accepts Maitland's dictum that "anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing ... though only if it can also be reversed, history must choose between being social anthropology or being nothing". I am not sure whether historians or anthropologists would frame the issues so boldly today, but then the context for our disciplinary discussions is also very different. There are few today who would argue that we, the anthropologists, should emulate the natural sciences—the practitioners of which Evans-Pritchard was engaging with in his lecture. In fact, I am not quite sure how the relationship between anthropology and history is framed today, and whether it is contentious at all—I think there might be more pressing issues than these disciplinary boundaries. Still, granted your interest in history and anthropology, my first question has to do with how you actually view this relationship at a more

general level. Because as Benedicte Bull noted, you were trained as an anthropologist, at Stanford University, but the perspective in very many of your publications is historical. So what brought you close to history, and how do these two perspectives—the historical and the anthropological—merge? What I am asking you is to share your reflections on these issues, whether they have to do with ethnography, field work, the archives, or documents.

AQ1

AQ2

AQ3

***Claudio:***

Sure. I'll try not to draw this out too long, because this is a big topic. I think in my case, one of the things that my trajectory through Mexico into the US and by way of France for a little while has afforded me is the opportunity of being a dilettante, which is something that I have embraced, and treasured, and tried to claim. If you think about Latin America's intellectual traditions, the essay has always been touted as the probably quintessential for, and the peak of, Latin American accomplishment in the intellectual field. And I think the essay is essentially the intellectual form that involves this kind of... well, the negative way of putting it would be lack of professionalism. The positive way of putting it would be that the essay responds to the actual need to move across disciplinary formations, in part because the life of the city, the life of politics, takes precedence over the life of the academic disciplines. I think I still was able to benefit from that aspect of Latin America's tradition. Today, it is questionable how vibrant that tradition is, but I believe that it is an identifiable tradition, and a space that one can

claim. So if you look at it biographically, my first job in Mexico was in a department of anthropology, my second job was in a sociology department. Then I came to the US to an anthropology department, whereupon I was hired by a history department at the University of Chicago. So my ability to converse across disciplines was in part environmentally shaped, and not so much epistemologically driven, I would say. And in that sense, I don't feel competent to do an Evans-Pritchard "number" on history and anthropology, because I came to bring those fields together out of contextual necessity rather than as the result of an internally-driven disciplinary conviction. On the other hand, it is certainly true that if I was appointed to the University of Chicago's History Department, it was because my work was already 'historical' enough to be taken seriously by historians. That did not mean, however, that it was historical enough to be confused with the work of a historian. That is a different proposition. It was historical enough to be able to engage historians, that is all. And when I moved to Chicago and began working with historians, I discovered that history was a much more different field from anthropology than I had thought. I had always been raised with the notion that in the end, it was sort of the same. From the start, when I studied anthropology in Mexico City, I was somewhat in between anthropology and history. But when I actually started working with and training historians, I learned that basically, historians worked with little pieces of paper. That really is what they work with, and what I work with too, now. Basically it is just little bits of paper. That is very difficult for an anthropologist to assimilate. It took me a very long time to realise that. Which is

an obvious thing. Probably someone could have told me that. But nobody did, and all of a sudden I was there and I started realising how different ethnography is from historical work. Ethnography is a great thing. I mean, ethnography is great for historians if they open themselves to that, most of them don't, because ethnography is a form of embodied practice. That is, you have to put yourself physically in the position of generating information. You are aware, in a very radical way, of what "data" is. You become keenly aware that all information in social sciences is generated in social interaction. It is not already there. I think that that is an important matter for any social science, for any humanities, and for history as well, and it helps you read documents in a radically different way.

***Marit:***

I would assume that being having been trained as an anthropologist you would read those documents and convert them into ethnography, in a sense.

***Claudio:***

Yes, I do think so. I think reading is genuinely different if you have done ethnography than if you haven't. So it is a great plus if historians open themselves to that. This is a generalisation, but there is a tendency for anthropologists to read differently than historians, even books.

Anthropologists tend to have what I would call a utopian reading of books. That is, they read them as if they were written for them, at any time. Say that you're an anthropologist, and you are reading some book by, say, Karl Marx, in 1853 or something like that, and you're reading it as if it was written today, for you. I would call this a utopian reading of a book, or to be more precise, an anachronistic reading. But also utopian, because it

means pushing the book to tell you something, no matter where it was written, who it was written by, or when. An historian tends to read a book by locating it historically. Which means that the first thing they ask is who wrote it, when and for whom was it written, in what context was it written. What was written before it, what was written after it, what was meant by this and that word when it was written. So historians' reading is, I think, much more cautious, and often more precise in terms of the reconstruction of the significance of the book. But it also tends to put a bigger ironic distance towards the work, which can also be negative, I would say.

***Marit:***

I would like to go a bit further down the path of history and anthropology. In an article entitled 'Narrating the neo-liberal moment' (Lomnitz 2008), which came out in 2008, you draw a line between the use of history and working historically. And one of the things that struck me in this article was precisely the significance of history for Mexico and Mexicans, that is, the native points of view. History has a particular significance—you have already touched a bit on that, Claudio. And you state something to the effect that history has a special significance for what you call 'dependent countries', and 'frustrated modern projects'. How would you say that Mexico, or rather Mexicans, have a particular relationship to its history, and what does that imply for anthropological scholarship? Are there comparative projects on the role of history in other Latin American countries? I am thinking here of Marisol de la Cadena's work on *Indigenous Mestizos* (Cadena 2000), which is historically framed. Is there something particular here to Mexico? And then I would like to add the

last part of the question, because I would like you to turn the perspective around: How would you place the role of anthropology on the national scene? Is it similar to that of history? Because Mexico, as many of you would know, has a very long and widely recognised anthropological tradition, and I am wondering whether it contributes to the same kind of debate, as history does. Does it have the same kind of “neurotic obsession”, to quote you on one of your adjectives for history, or has anthropology lost its intellectual hold? I am thinking here of people like Guillermo Bonfil, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Guillermo De La Peña, Roger Bartra, Lourdes Arizpe and Arturo Warman. These were all public intellectuals while working as anthropologists. What is their role now?

AQ4

***Claudio:***

To the first part: One of the things that I was thinking about when I was writing that essay was a famous article by Nicholas Dirks several years ago, which was called ‘History as a sign of the modern’ (Dirks 1990). When I started writing this, I was thinking that an excess of history is a sign of a frustrated modern. That is, what you see in a country like Mexico is a saturation of historical discussion. One interesting thing is that you can trace that back to the nineteenth century, and I think that it has very much to do with, speaking of death in Mexico, it has to do with the fact that Mexico was one of the first nations, one of the early “national” republics on the world scene. The republic is from 1821, but it suffered collectively something like a “near death experience”. Mexico was first invaded by Spain in 1829—that was a failed invasion—but then it lost half its territory in the war with the United States in 1846–1848.

During that period, when you read the newspapers, there is a lot of sentiment that Mexico might not survive as a country. For example Lucas Alamán, one of the great historians and statesmen in Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century, writes one of the first histories of Mexican independence, published in 1849, the year right after Mexico lost the war with the United State, a big multi-volume work. In his foreword, Alamán says that he is not sure who he is writing this book for, as he is not certain whether Mexico will actually survive. If it doesn't, then Alamán hoped that at least the history would be instructive to the other Spanish American nations. Mexico was invaded again in 1862, by the French up until 1867. And it is not until the defeat of the French, which at the time was referred to as "the second independence", that the boundaries of Mexico were felt to be more or less secure. It was not until then that Mexico felt that it had survived as a nation. I believe that this extended uncertainty generated a very intense historical obsession. I don't think that Mexico is a unique case in this regard, but it is an important instance of historical self-obsession, in the sense that countries that had their survival at issue, tend to generate a lot of historical discourse. That is certainly also the Peruvian and Bolivian case, that you mentioned. So you have a huge amount of historical excess. This has been commented even in the nineteenth century by American travellers. Hubert Bancroft, who went on to create the collection that later became the Bancroft Library, a very important holding at the University of California, went to Mexico in the 1880s, and he comments on the amount of historical writing and publishing in Mexico as way superior to what there was in the US. And there was also the intensity of the historical debate. He

describes a rock fight between liberals and conservatives over which was the appropriate day to celebrate national independence, in the city of San Luis Potosí. Because the conservatives wanted to celebrate the date that General Agustín de Iturbide won independence, and the liberals the day that Miguel Hidalgo declared independence. This rock fight took place in 1883, 60 years after independence. So because the politicization of history generated something of what Levi-Strauss talked about with regard to mythology: That is, history becomes a sort of key or register in which you can mark any kind of distinction, because it is a known language that has its imagery and can serve allegorical functions. So much of the history is not really academic history at all, it is iconic, somewhat in the ways of the Catholic church's depiction of the lives of the saints. Because of this, professional historians have an edge on public discussion, as they can always frame what is happening in relation to these icons, allegories and myths. And when I say "they", I mean "we", because I actually do this sort of work as well; I write in a newspaper, and I constantly indulge in that faculty, very often abusively.<sup>2</sup> You say "so you want to talk about this", and then woom!, you throw in a little historical spin which helps you put it in a certain context of dialogue. That historical spin moves current events into a dialogue with historical myths as well as with historical facts. So historians have had a very important role in public discussion, very often more than they, or we, deserve, in my opinion.

Anthropologists in public have a different story. In Mexico, they have had a tremendous public role, due to their role in the Mexican revolution, where they actually figured the collective image of the

whole post-revolutionary era. That image was created by anthropologists. Specifically I would say that Manuel Gamio<sup>3</sup> was the guiding figure. He was a student of the pioneer ethnographer Franz Boas, but not a very good student. I think he was a great figure, but more of a trickster than a dusty academic. Gamio used Boas for what he wanted to, rather than being a deep or rigorous follower. Gamio worked in Teotihuacan, the famous pyramids that are right outside of Mexico City in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and at the time he was an officer in the revolutionary government; he was an undersecretary of agriculture. As an archaeologist and anthropologist he also distributed land, he had an educational project there, and the whole project had as its guiding figure and symbol the pyramid, the great pyramids of Teotihuacan. The grandeur of the past—represented by the pyramids—was made to stand also for the potential of Mexico's future. While the village that sat below the pyramids, San Juan Teotihuacan, where Gamio's team did field work, stood for the degradation of colonial, and, let's say, neo-colonial, pre-revolutionary exploitation. So the role of anthropology was to bring that village back up, let's say, to the level of the potential that was materially visible in the pyramid. That formulation, I think, was huge in Mexico, and I think that petered out during the era of neo-liberal reforms that started in the early 1980s. So the period of neo-liberal reform really eviscerated the role that anthropology had had, which means that recently there are fewer voices that have come from anthropology in the public. I mean, of the people that you mentioned, there is only Roger Bartra today. The rest are either dead or no longer participate actively in public debate. Before you

really had major figures that were major public voices—Alfonso Caso, Aguirre Beltrán, Arturo Warman, Guillermo Bonfil, and others—several of them also with important political positions. That really collapsed in the 1980s. And I don't think it has been rebuilt yet.

**Marit:**

I think this is the time to turn to death. You have focused on so many different issues—nationalism, political cultures, corruption, modernity, intellectuals, the staging of Mexico by elites, and then *death*. And the way I've read your *Death And The Idea of Mexico* (Lomnitz 2005) it's an historical book, but it is written with a lot of anthropological analysis, I would say, in the way you treat much of your data. It draws us through Mexican history from the conquest and down to this day, so it's a long history of death. There are many subtexts, but the major focus is the relationship between death and death imagery, death practices, notions of the afterlife—and the formation of the modern nation state. It brings to mind other books on death, like Katherine Verdery's *The Political Life of Dead Bodies* (Verdery 2000) and Heonik Kwon's *After the Massacre* (Kwon 2006), but the scale of your project is much broader. So I'm wondering: What drew your attention to death? What makes death in Mexico so compelling that you need five hundred pages to elaborate on this central bio-political topic?

AQ5

**Claudio:**

The five hundred pages definitely have to do with decline, right? [laughter] When you're young you have the mental power to say something very briefly, but as you get older it becomes harder and

harder to rein oneself in. So it's not a sign of accomplishment, but rather one of difficulty of synthesis. Again, I will do a little biographical answer, but also a more conceptual one. When I was doing my doctoral work, I spent a year in Paris, and I was in Philippe Aries' seminar at a time when he was publishing his big book on the history of death in the West.<sup>4</sup> So I started thinking about the possibility of writing a dissertation about this, but I soon became discouraged with it. I felt that I couldn't really break out of Aries' text, that it was a wonderful work and that to write a book about death in Mexico would only be to reproduce Aries' thing in Mexico and say something like "and it happened here, too". That's fine, but I didn't want to do it. So I abandoned the topic, but I had worked on it enough to know something about the subject. And I think that is important, because what happens with death in the case of Mexico, is that in the twentieth century, death imagery became worked on in certain nationalist traditions, and in particular during the formation of Mexican modernism, of modern art. Diego Rivera is especially important in this regard, but not only him. Mexican modern art in the 1920s takes as its source of inspiration two currents: One is pre-Columbian sculpture, which in the case of Mexico includes very prominently Aztec sculpture, and if you are familiar with this kind of sculpture, you would know that there is a lot of death imagery in it, a lot of skulls and skeletons. And then the second source was a popular newspaperman and engraver, called José Guadalupe Posada, who died in 1913, and who has been compared to Goya. He did something like 30,000 engravings for the Mexican penny press, the working class press in Mexico City. So Diego Rivera, for example, is

trying to blend two sources—one of which is a popular working man’s press, and the other is pre-Columbian sculpture—to forge a modern Mexican art. Posada’s main thing was these dressed-up skeletons. You have seen Posada, I am sure, even if you don’t know the images’ author, you have all surely seen Posada engravings. The images use the newspaper as an ironic space, to comment on daily life from the vantage point of death. Posada’s drawings are all skeletons, and they are all dressed up so that their social identities, and vanities, are plain. So both sources for the formation of Mexican modernism, which is a key to nationalism in the twentieth century, have death imagery at their centre. And as a result, there is a lot of ‘death talk’ in twentieth century Mexican nationalism. That is why, knowing something bigger and broader about the history of death, I think it was important for me to identify this as an interesting problem, since you have a peculiar tendency to nationalize death and to use death imagery in the fabrication of Mexico’s national brand of modernism. It is very hard to identify an interesting problem regarding the anthropology of death, because death is a classical theme. What drew me to writing the book was seeing a series of cartoons and drawings made in the 1980s, during the neo-liberal crisis in Mexico. There was an economic crisis in 1982, when the price of oil dropped and the government couldn’t meet its debt obligations, and as a result, the turn to neo-liberalism in Mexico was very drastic. It started with the bankruptcy of the government. So during this crisis, I started seeing cartoonists use death imagery in a way that was somewhat different and dissonant from earlier usage. That started getting me attuned to the plasticity of death imagery, to its political dimension. So my book as

a whole is a political history of death in Mexico. Its basic idea—and now I'm moving from the biographical to the conceptual—is that most of the historiography about death, and a lot of the anthropology about death, is really focused on the mourners, the bereaved, and the problem of bereavement. But if you look at death more broadly, in a tradition that is more out of George Bataille, in a greater economy than that of the bereaved, it brings into focus a political field that includes not only the bereaved and the mourners, but also friends, enemies, and people who are indifferent to the departed. All of that factors in. And it gives you a figure of death which is at the same time a set of social practices: a representation and a set of social practices that can allow you to articulate a political history of Mexico. So this is long book because it is a very pretentious book. I mean, it is.

#### AQ6

##### ***Marit:***

Let me just add one question to that, and then I'll leave the word to Benedicte. Very often when we do anthropology and are out in the field—whatever it is we are looking at—serendipity is a word that inevitably crops up. I mean, you run into things that you didn't think you were going to run into, and that actually turn out to be very, very important for the way in which your ethnography is released, if you could put it that way. Did you stumble across any such phenomena? In particular, I have always wanted to ask you: How did Purgatory show up? Or did you already know that you were going to write so much about it? Because you have some wonderful discussions around the meanings of Purgatory for one's ties to the priest, to property, et

cetera. Would you consider Purgatory a phenomenon you stumbled upon?

***Claudio:***

Well, yes. Yes, I did. Or: Yes and no. The 'yes' part is that initially my idea for writing this book was to start in the 1920s, which is when a certain kind of death imagery starts getting adopted as part of a nationalist discourse. Which is a very bizarre thing, and unusual. It is comparable in some way, I would say, to the nationalisation of sex in Brazil through the carnival. Death and sex are connected, deeply connected, but it is interesting that Mexico took up death as its national form, it is very counterintuitive, and one of the problems I wanted to explain. And my plan was just to do this twentieth century history of the political use of death and rely on the secondary literature for all the background. So I started looking at the secondary literature, and it started collapsing under my gaze. I thought it could sustain whatever history I wrote for the twentieth century, but it couldn't. The nineteenth century material that is in my book was a total discovery, the secondary literature on the subject a complete mess, and the primary materials that I was finding were completely different from anything I would have expected, and very different from what happened other places. Similar processes might be found in some Latin American countries, not all of them, but some. Usually, death in the nineteenth century is represented in the broad history of the modern as the era of the denial of death. In the late eighteenth century and the whole nineteenth century, the dead are taken out of the churches and put into cemeteries outside of the cities. There is the whole urban sanitation movements, ideas about contagion and public health, all these ideas and movements that push

death out, and so you have the horror of death which is the typical story of the modernisation of deathways in Europe, and all over the world. But what is interesting when you look at the history of Mexico, is that the political fractiousness of the nineteenth century made that debate about what to do with the dead a point of contention which saturated the public sphere. For example—and this was a great surprise to me—the celebration of the Days of the Dead; this is on the 1st and 2nd of November, the All Saints' Days and the All Souls' Day, a feast that has very much to do with Purgatory. The All Souls' Day is for the souls in Purgatory, while the All Saints' Day is for the souls who are already in Glory. The notion is that the ones who are already in heaven, the Saints, are the example for all of us, the people whom we rejoice in, and then the next ones that we celebrate on November 2nd are our dead family members, who are perhaps still in Purgatory, but on their way to heaven. That is, not my family, because I am Jewish, so they would never have gotten even as far as Purgatory. I'm not joking. And probably, if many of you are Lutherans or Protestants, just forget it, you would not have been included either. But within Catholicism, the saints were in heaven, while the souls who died with sins that still needed to be expurgated were in Purgatory, so on All Souls' Day you are praying for them, and doing things that will help move them from Purgatory into heaven. That is the meaning of the *Days of the Dead*, which were instated during The Middle Ages by the Church as an official holiday. So what I found was that in the late eighteenth century, the Days of the Dead were celebrated over the course of a week, right up until the 2nd of November, while by the 1870s the celebration in Mexico lasted

for as long as 6 weeks. It started a couple of weeks before the Days of the Dead proper, and went on all the way through to the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12th. That is, the holiday started late October, and continued through the whole of November, and early December. This ran against the whole idea of the denial of death in the nineteenth century. So I had to start rethinking the problem of Purgatory, from just looking at this nineteenth century data, and that forced me to go further back to discover—and this is one of the discoveries of the book—that the Days of the Dead were successfully implemented in Mexico, and I would say in the Americas but certainly in Mexico, *before* the doctrine of Purgatory was successfully conveyed to the indigenous people. So you have a tension around the celebration of the dead as a communal affair, and the problem of property, family structure et cetera that is dictated by Purgatory and its connection to testaments and inheritance. So this becomes a central idea and finding of the book. But as you say, there is serendipity in the case, because what lead me there was the discovery that the Days of the Dead in 1867, for example, lasted more than 6 weeks, when in the late eighteenth century they lasted a week. This ran completely against what anybody had said.

***Marit:***

So, Benedicte, would you like to shift track, maybe from death to life?

***Benedicte:***

Yes, I would like to shift track, but before that let me add just a little question on this topic.

Unfortunately, I have not read your *Death And The Idea Of Mexico*, but I am curious of your thoughts about how this culture and these traditions affect or

help people deal with the extreme presence of death in certain areas in Mexico in the present. I am thinking of the areas most affected by the drug wars, both through the media and through their daily experiences. Do you have any thoughts on that?

***Claudio:***

I have some thoughts, but I haven't done a study on it. This book was published finished in 2005, and the drug war started in 2006, so this massive killing that you've seen started after I finished the book.

I've thought about it just because I can't avoid thinking about it, that's all. One thing is that neither in the period prior or for this period does this tradition of, let's say, verbal familiarity and playfulness with death and with the dead make the relationship with death or with the dead any more or less horrific. Sometimes when people talk about death in Mexico, this notion has been in play, but I don't agree with it—not before the current drug war, and not since. We have songs and songwriters, like the famous José Alfredo Jiménez and his song “La vida no vale nada”, ‘Life is not worth anything’. This has generated a lot of commentary. And with writers like Juan Rulfo (1917–1986), the most famous modernist writer in Mexico, the blurred boundary between life and death is one of the key things that have been played with in a literary idiom. Sometimes these themes have been interpreted literally, like the title of the José Alfredo Jiménez' song says, that in Mexico life is not worth anything. I don't actually think that that is the only interpretation that one could have, or not even the best one. So I don't believe that what has been happening now is, say, an example of the lack of importance of life or death in Mexico. I don't believe that was the case even before, during

the Mexican revolution or any other time of massive killing. But what you do have is a ritualised basis and a somewhat set language to help you talk about death and dying that sometimes is helpful. For example what you see in Mexico since the 1985 earthquake, but even more since the drug wars, is the beginning of the use of things like the Days of the Dead as sites for political organisation, for protest around these processes. You do see some of the historically developed cultural artefacts and forms being deployed in the contemporary moment, often as a form of commemoration and protest. Much of what has been happening recently that is really quite radically new, and this has to be analysed in relation to issues of globalisation rather than trying to seek out some kind of ‘ancestral Mexican tradition’. For example, beheading. You have a lot of decapitation in the drug wars in Mexico, and one could say “you know, there is a long tradition for this”, such as Miguel Hidalgo, the leader of Mexican independence and some of his merry men. They were decapitated, and their heads were put on spikes outside the the building *Alhóndiga de Granaditas* in the city of Guanajuato. Their skulls remained there for 10 years, actually, until independence was won. So you could argue that “we have a tradition” of beheading. But, as it happens, I know about Miguel Hidalgo’s decapitation because I’m an historian, but most people don’t know that. There is no tradition concerning that fact. Nobody who celebrates Miguel Hidalgo imagines that his head was on a stick. The fact that you can find historical antecedents does not make a contemporary practice the result of a tradition. Whereas I think you could show as an historian that recent decapitations in

Mexico follow the ones that happened with Al-Qai'da. I think you can show very clearly that you have an international, globalised idiom of terror that at a certain point enters the drug wars. So the historical impulse, and especially when you are dealing with national history, to discuss the contemporary moment should be done with a lot of care. The tendency is always—and certainly in Mexico, which is a very nationalist country—to try to look for an antecedent that is part of a national tradition. That's a mistake whether you are dealing with the sixteenth century or the twenty first century.

AQ7

***Benedicte:***

Turning to a bit of a different topic now. For a number of years you were a member of the editorial collective, and editor of the influential trans-disciplinary post-colonial journal *Public Culture*. But you have also written in the introduction to *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (Lomnitz 2001) that in Western academia, the intellectual traditions of Latin America have been parochialised, that is referred to as 'non-Western', despite the fact that they have as much a claim to Europe as does the United States. And you go on to argue that the corollary of this view is that the category of the 'non-Western' is the category of the particular, and therefore not a suitable place to think through human universals or events of world historical significance. I just wondered if you could say something whether post-colonial theory is helpful for thinking about Mexico today, and what importance this kind of theory has.

***Claudio:***

Well, I have some ambivalence toward that, not toward post-colonial theory in itself but toward its

deployment. I think that the term ‘post-colonial’ sits very uneasy in Latin America. First, because the term has a historical gesture incorporated into it: the post-colonial is supposed to occur after something else that is called colonial, and as a result it is a way of naming contemporary history that weights the colonial as the site from which you are going to refer. I have a lot of problems with that for Latin America. That doesn’t mean that post-colonial theory, that is, the kinds of approaches that were used to think about, say, India or the Middle East, aren’t actually quite fertile to think and to raise questions in Latin America. But the term ‘post-colonial’ I really dislike, in part because we are talking about a 200 year history of the ‘post-colonial’ in Latin America. That’s a long time to decide that you are going to use ‘post’ to characterise it. At a certain point, one might have the right to name whatever it is that one is living in positive terms, right? For example, at a certain point the moderns decided to call themselves moderns, and not say, ‘post-medievalists’. In this, there is a certain question that has to do with the existential gesture around how you denominate your era that I’m uneasy with. That’s one thing. The other thing is that the term ‘colonial’ for Latin America, is putting you in a very different kind of space than when you are talking about ex-British and even ex-French colonies. When you go to India, for instance... I went for 10 days, and that was enough for me to realise—and by the way, I have been very close to a lot of Indian people, that is, not Indian people, but a lot of Indian intellectuals that have been involved in these and who were very close colleagues of mine at Chicago and also at Columbia. So I have been involved in this dialogue, and it’s been very formative for me,

so I'm not saying that we can't learn anything from it. I am just talking about the nomenclature and parts of the implications of using the term post-colonial without an interrogation. As I was saying, you go to India, and the first thing you discover, that is, "discover", if you're from Latin-America, is that there is a big bunch of religions there that are non-Christian. Which simply don't *exist* in Latin-America. I mean, even the indigenous peoples, who might not be considered Christians by priests, use a certain amount of some of the exoskeleton of Christianity in their rituals. Even when you go to regions in Mexico that are hardly Christianised, they may not be Christians, in the sense that they do not believe a lot of the stuff that they're supposed to believe in—but they have Christian stuff that is central to their religious practice. They have a church, they have a cross. If you go to India, you don't have either near-universal adoption of the English language, or of the Christian thing. In other words, the depth of colonisation in Latin America, when you say 'colonial', means something else than it means if you go to India. It really means something else! It is also a much earlier project of colonisation, much more akin to, say, Roman colonisation. Whereas when they say 'colonialism', the British are thinking about late eighteenth century and nineteenth century Britain, that is, an industrial nation. Colonialism in Latin America is Spain in the seventeenth century, or the sixteenth century, and the model for that is Rome! So, I am very much in favour of dialogue with postcolonial theory, because I think that I at least have learned a lot from talking and thinking about Latin American history from those angles. But I am not favourable to simply mobilising the same nomenclature.

## AQ8

**Benedicte:**

You have written two publications on anti-Semitism that might stand out a little bit from the rest of your production—one on Mexico under the PRI [the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*],<sup>5</sup> (Lomnitz 2010) and one on Venezuela under Chávez (Lomnitz and Sánchez 2012). I wanted to ask you what motivated you to write those books. You have given us a little piece of biographical information now that might give a hint, so maybe the more interesting question is: What is your view of the position of anti-Semitism in Latin America today, in these new leftist governments and beyond? And what about the respect for liberal values—do you have any thoughts on that?

**Claudio:**

First, and this is an answer to what Marit pointed out earlier, I am delighted that these two very short essays are now considered books! That goes to show that I *have* written short things, it's not all long!

**Benedicte:**

That's what Amazon does for you; they all appear as books, and I haven't read them.

**Claudio:**

Because of the e-book now, they are now books, but they are really thirty page essays. I wouldn't call them books, but I'm delighted to do so just for Marit's sake, to say that not all of what I've written is six hundred pages long. There are thirty page-books of mine that you can read. And you can buy them on Amazon as a book! So they're books, as a result. So, basically, the main work that I wrote on this topic is the piece that I wrote on anti-Semitism and the Mexican revolution. A very, very interesting thing caught my eye, and it is about the

way in which the Dreyfus affair played out in Mexico. But the reason why I wrote it, had to do with serendipity. I am sure that the fact that I'm Jewish helped me notice it. The arch-villains of the Mexican revolution and of the late *Porfiriato*<sup>6</sup> are a group that is known as the *Científicos*, a group of, let's say, a technocratic elite that were positivists. They were a coterie around the dictator Porfirio Diaz, and became a main target of criticism still during the last 10 years of his dictatorship and in the revolution. What struck me all of a sudden—and I was working on the *Científicos* in the play I was writing, about Francisco Bulnes, he was one of the group—was that I discovered an abundance of anti-Semitic language used in the discussion of the *Científicos*. It was a modern anti-Semitic discourse, not the old “Christ-killer” theme. I am talking about nationalist, Dreyfus affair-era, anti-semitic language, right? Jews as “Financial capitalists who have no loyalty to the nation”, let's say. Jews as nation-less people, and as traitors to the nation. It is this nationalist form of anti-Semitism which emerges in late nineteenth century Mexico, and not so much the older, medieval anti-Semitism. What was interesting to me about the case, and that is we I wrote extensively about it—the “book” is short, but it is intense—is that none of the *Científicos* were Jewish. So I started looking into the matter. You know, when you read Jewish history of Mexico it is said, and I believe this is right, that there was not much anti-Jewish sentiment. Jews were fine, you know, nobody cared that much about them. So the few who have written Jewish history in Mexico, like in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, write about people who left Europe, which was a context with very intense anti-Semitism, and arrived to Mexico where there wasn't, and thrived

there. And I don't think they're entirely wrong in writing that. Nonetheless, you have fully-blown anti-Semitic rhetoric that is being mobilised against a group that are not Jewish, but that are occupying, let's say, 'the Jewish slot', which of course is not inconsequential for Jews, because later you can mobilize that rhetoric against actual Jews. But that's not the origin of the discourse, and not the use of it, in Mexico in this period. Because I have written quite a lot about nationalism, this was a little bit of a discovery for me, to think about the study of anti-Semitism as a sensitive point for conceptualizing the development of various kinds of nationalist rhetoric. In the case of Venezuela, it is much of the same. I have not worked in Venezuela, I wrote the work that you refer to together with Rafael Sánchez, an anthropologist who works in the Netherlands, but who is from Venezuela.<sup>7</sup> But I know the country a little bit because I have family there. And I don't have at all the impression that you have very intense, popular anti-Semitism. But you did have at a certain point during the Chavista mobilization,<sup>8</sup> a set of unquestionably anti-Semitic forays, including actually going into synagogues and painting them up; breaking objects; things like that. You did have certain practices targeted against Jews, coded as anti-Israel, that occurred at a certain moment, which was the moment in which we wrote that essay. I believe that anti-Semitism is a legitimate concern in Latin America. Not usually that much in terms of persecution of Jews; sometimes, like in Argentina, where there has been a really big Jewish community, you have had genuine anti-Semitism. I wouldn't say Jew-hatred is not absent; it exists. But it is not a very prominent issue. Anti-Semitic rhetoric, however, is a significant issue for the

question of nationalism. Indeed, one of the problems that is of interest to me about the development of the left in Latin America today is its complex and to my mind quite problematic connection to nationalism. So when you see that kind of anti-Semitism emerging within a political movement, it is to my mind—like in Mexico in the late *Porfiriato* era in the late nineteenth century—symptomatic of the rise of certain forms of nationalism, and something that I think it is worth paying attention to.

AQ9

AQ10

AQ11

AQ12

AQ13

***Benedicte:***

I would love for you to elaborate a little bit on what you find problematic between the left in Latin America and nationalism. Do you think you could do that?

***Claudio:***

Sure. This would be my take just in a nutshell; you are a political scientist and I hope you can argue with this, accept or reject it. But to my mind, what has happened there is that you have had, since the 1980s and in some cases since the 1970s, a very intense and very harsh neo-liberal transition. That transition produced something that has been a lot less talked about, which is what I would call a neo-Republican reaction. A lot of the left, not all of it but a lot of it, transited to a space that was occupied before by Republicanism. Which is why you have a renaissance of figures like Benito Juárez in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> I mean, he was great and all that, and I don't mean to pooh-pooh him. But when I was studying in Mexico City in the mid-1970s,

Benito Juárez was not particularly a hero of the left. He was a *national* hero, certainly, including a hero of the left, but he was not a hero of the left as such. He was *the* Indian president, et cetera, he was a hero against the French intervention. He was also the person who expropriated lands from the Church, so all that is fine for the left. But he was also remembered by the left as the man who expropriated indigenous lands from indigenous communities, and that wasn't so great. Juárez was a *liberal*, that is what he was. He wasn't hero of the left; I don't mean to say that he was an anti-hero of the left, but he wasn't a hero of the left. Now all of a sudden you see Andrés Manuel López Obrador<sup>10</sup> holding a speech beneath this gigantic image of Benito Juárez. You have the transition of a good chunk of the left into neo-Republican territory. Which means what? It means a new kind of foundationalism, a republican revivalism, meaning enthusiasm for new constitutions, new foundations of the Republic, re-foundations of the Republic; these are all flags of a good chunk of the left. It also means that corruption becomes *the* prototype of the ills of society, right? The old left did not believe in this—it was more internationalist, less enthusiastic with regard to reviving ancient nationalisms. I am not saying that I am of the old left—I am not—but this is an empirical fact, the old left did not believe that the problem of the Republic was the corruption of the citizen. That is a classical Republican belief that you find now among the López Obradors and the Hugo Chávez'es and all the way down the line of Latin American populism. So neo-liberalism produces a migration of the left to neo-Republicanism. And neo-Republicanism includes nationalism as the

heart of its justification. And I think that this is a problem.

## Notes

1. Originally delivered for the 1950 Marett Lecture at Oxford University, Evans-Pritchard's lecture was later developed into a 1961 monograph entitled *Anthropology and History* (Evans-Pritchard 1961).
2. In his native Mexico, Lomnitz is also known as a syndicated columnist for the newspaper *La Jornada*, and has also previously been a columnist in *El Exelsior*.
3. Manuel Gamio (1880–1960), often referred to as the 'founding father' of modern anthropology in Mexico, did his Ph.D. under the supervision of Franz Boas at Columbia University.
4. See Aries (1982).
5. The hegemonic state and centrist party of Mexico, the PRI under various names and political guises ruled Mexico for a period of 71 years, from 1929 to 2000. It was named the PRI in 1946.
6. Porfirio Díaz (1830–1915), the Mexican dictator brought to power in a military coup in 1876, practically ruled Mexico for 35 years until the outbreak of the Mexican revolution in 1910. This period is generally known as the *Porfiriato* in Mexico.
7. Dr. Rafael Sánchez works at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

8. Hugo Chávez (1954–2013), a military officer turned socialist politician, was the elected president of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013.
9. Juárez (1806–1872), a Mexican lawyer and liberal politician of Zapotec origins from the state of Oaxaca, served as president of Mexico for five terms from the 1850s to the 1870s.
10. López Obrador, originally a PRI politician, was elected Head of Government of the Federal District (Mexico City) as a candidate for the nominally social democratic PRD in 2000, and served in that post until 2005. In 2006 and 2012, respectively, he was the presidential candidate for a left-leaning coalition. He officially resigned from the PRD in 2012.

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