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Interview – Gerardo L. Munck

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Gerardo L. Munck is Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Southern California (USC). His recent books include *El pensamiento sociopolítico latinoamericano: Ciencias sociales e intelectuales en tiempos cambiantes* (with Martín Tanaka, 2023); *Latin American Politics and Society: A Comparative and Historical Analysis* (with Juan Pablo Luna; Cambridge, 2022); *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods for Comparative Social Science* (edited with David Collier; Rowman & Littlefield, 2022); and *A Middle-Quality Institutional Trap: Democracy and State Capacity in Latin America* (with Sebastián Mazzuca, Cambridge, 2020). His research focuses on the state and democracy, Latin America, methodology, and the science of the social sciences. He is currently working on a book on the evolution of social science knowledge entitled, Reimagining the Social Science: Knowledge, Epistemic Change and the Study of Democracy.

What do you see as the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

I am particularly interested in what Charles Tilly called “big structures.” The lives of people around the world are shaped by structures, such as modern states, political regimes (whether democratic or autocratic), economic systems, and the international order. Understanding these structures and their changes is a priority. I see good, innovative research on these big structures. There is an interesting debate regarding state formation and capacity in Europe, especially in Tilly and other scholars. However, many make the mistake of considering such theories as universal and able to provide suitable explanations for global politics. In my opinion, efforts to decenter Europe are very important.

There is also interesting research on the relationship between democracy and capitalism, especially on how economic inequality influences politics and vice versa. This method can identify issues that might be overlooked by a purely political approach. For example, a critical challenge for democracies is the pervasive tendency of economic elites to convert economic power into political power, and we can only understand this challenge when we consider the interaction between the economic and political systems. I am reading some works about the structural power of business elites that are quite insightful.

Lastly, I would draw attention to the resurgence of interest in historical approaches to studying politics. The use of a historical perspective is valuable for discovering what is new in our current times and showing how our contemporary world is affected by past events. Nowadays, a key question is whether we live in a new political age or are on the cusp of a new political age. We can find an answer only if we know about the distinctive features of prior political eras.

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

Several years ago, I decided to think more historically about world politics. I began to pay more attention to frameworks, such as the critical juncture framework, to combine history and social science better. With David Collier, I edited a book — *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies* — that discusses this framework and includes many of its applications. Relatedly, I have dedicated time to learning more about Latin America’s history and understanding how it has evolved since the nineteenth century. Presentism, a focus on the short term, is rather pervasive in social

science research, and I have instead sought to think historically. This approach allowed me to ask questions about when new historical periods begin, what is distinctive of contemporary politics compared to earlier periods, and how past processes leave legacies.

To think historically, you need to know history and be able to think in temporal terms — something I did not spend much time on early in my academic career. I did my doctoral dissertation on the military regime that had just ended in the country where I grew up, Argentina. Thereafter, I focused on the democracies that emerged in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing very much on relatively short-term processes. I read and admired some great historical sociology works by Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol. It was only with time that I realised that, to understand contemporary politics and to distinguish fleeting events from deeper, structural issues, I had to be able to place current events in the long flow of history. So, only later in my career did I start to appreciate the value of historical thinking and seek to develop the skills needed to make social science history.

What is your opinion on the indices that measure the state of democracy in different countries?

I did a fair amount of academic research on the measurement of democracy in the 2000s. I even had a role in creating a democracy index for a UNDP report on democracy in Latin America twenty years ago. From the start, I was critical of some early efforts to measure democracy, such as the one by Freedom House and then of widely-cited ones by the Economist Intelligence Unit and V-Dem. I find them questionable on conceptual and methodological grounds and I consider some of the claims made by the organisations that generate these indices to be unwarranted. As social scientists, we sometimes need to say that there are things we do not know. Such humility is important when making knowledge claims used in public political discussions.

My position evolved as I gained more experience with democracy promotion projects. I support quantification, and as I studied the concept of democracy and how democracy was being measured, my academic reservations about most current democracy indices grew. The fact that all organisations producing democracy indices originate from the Global North does not adequately address how democracy is perceived in the Global South. Also, how they commonly use their data to preach about the Global South is politically troubling. To be clear, I see a role for data in governance matters, but I have serious doubts about how many global democracy indices are constructed and used.

Throughout the 20th century, Latin American politics centred on the conflict between authoritarianism, particularly in its military form, and democracy. What are the lasting effects of this process on the continent's politics today?

The conflicts that underpinned Latin America's experience with democracy and dictatorship in the twentieth century are largely specific to a period that goes from about 1930 to 1980. Following the Great Depression, conflicts hinged on the incorporation of workers into the political system, a process analysed superbly in Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier's *Shaping the Political Arena*. Cold War tensions added another dimension to the regional conflicts, especially after the Cuban Revolution. However, the 1980s debt crisis and the end of the Cold War changed things markedly. In my opinion, the 1980s and 1990s were turning points in the history of Latin America.

In the twenty-first century, there have been some conflicts revolving around democracy, but now it has become the norm in Latin America. The threats to democracy have taken a new form, coming from elected government and not from the military. The criminal violence of drug cartels has replaced the political violence of the 1960s and 1970s. Nowadays, Latin America is much more linked with the global economy, and the state does not have the leading role it used to in economic development. Still, legacies from earlier periods remain. Latin America's states were formed in the nineteenth century, and though many reforms to the state have been attempted since the 1930s, some shortcomings, like states with pervasive patrimonial practices and hence low capacity, still exist. One book that convincingly makes this point is Sebastián Mazzuca's *Latecomer State Formation*.

Lastly, Latin America's economies have long been known for their dependence on countries at the global economy's centre and their high income and wealth inequality levels. These features are lasting legacies of the region's early

history and have persisted despite various changes in their economies over time. Therefore, to understand contemporary social and political processes in Latin America, we need to be attentive to changes and continuities.

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Latin America has experienced greater democratic contraction than expansion in the last few years. What are the causes of this trend?

First, even though it has become commonplace to argue that we are witnessing a democratic recession in Latin America, I am somewhat dubious about this claim. In recent years, we have seen a few cases of democratic breakdown in Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Nicaragua, or of threats against democracy in Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. However, we should not forget that, despite such setbacks, most democracies have endured for the first time in the history of Latin America. They do not live up to expectations in many ways, but the durability of democracy is a key fact of contemporary Latin American politics. I see the endurance of low-quality democracies, although punctuated by occasional negative and positive moments, as the main pattern in Latin America since its transitions to democracy in the 1980s and 1990s.

Regarding the causes, as I mentioned before, to understand contemporary Latin America, we need to focus on changes and continuities. An example of change is that the end of the Cold War increased economic globalisation and reduced the stakes of political conflict and the costs of democracy to financial elites. It is also crucial to trace the causes of current politics to certain long-term structural features in Latin America. The first one is the state, which can be defined as a low-capacity or semi-patrimonial state, while the second one is the capitalist economy that generates high levels of inequality.

The context of politics in Latin America exercises a strong influence on politics, preventing the development of high-quality democracies and creating an incentive for politicians to ensure that elections continue to be the channel of access to high political offices. In other words, a configuration of old and new factors helps to account for what I see as the main distinctive political feature of contemporary Latin America: its low-quality but enduring democracies.

Your recent book consists of interviews with intellectuals on their experiences and topics related to Latin America. Why was it important to bring these experiences together, and what were the main lessons that emerged from the book?

This book, *El pensamiento sociopolítico latinoamericano* (*Latin American Sociopolitical Thought*), a collaborative effort with Martín Tanaka, a Peruvian political scientist, is a companion to an earlier book of interviews with influential social scientists — *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* — I did with Richard Snyder. In the book with Snyder, we focused on the lives and work of scholars who had spent most of their careers in the United States. I was interested in understanding the perspective of Latin American scholars, sociologists and political scientists who worked in a very different context, both politically and intellectually, and played a key role in shaping thinking about politics and society in Latin America from the 1960s. The social sciences are a global enterprise, and it is important that we not be parochial.

Some of the lessons of this book concern the relationship between the social context in which researchers operate and the research scholars produce. In the United States and Europe, academics largely work in stable democracies and universities that have considerable resources and enjoy autonomy from the government. These are important conditions for research in the social sciences. In contrast, in the 1960s and 1970s, many Latin American scholars worked in contexts of dictatorship and/or civil war and frequently were forced into exile. Additionally, even after Latin American countries moved past dictatorship and civil war, academics often worked in universities with scarce resources and faced political pressure from the government.

What are the similarities and divergences of the US and Latin American models of social science research?

I came to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the US model of social science research and the Latin

American model. In the US, where I work, the notion of ivory-tower academics is not farfetched. Scholars have the freedom to engage in all sorts of research. But at times, they get lost in trivialities, and sometimes, they get carried away by theoretical and/or methodological fads. Today, academics in the US are more likely to engage passionately in methodological debates than in discussions about politics.

In contrast, scholars in Latin America show a strong commitment to understanding their societies and to participating in debates in the public sphere. This makes their research highly relevant and readable. However, there is also a strong tendency in Latin America to conduct politicised research, which has many obvious limitations. There is also the problematic balancing act Latin American scholars face as they seek to manage their relationship with scholars in the Global North. Many Latin American intellectuals claim that research produced in the Global South is epistemologically superior to work done in the Global North. Others implicitly or explicitly assign epistemological privilege to research produced in the Global North.

It is difficult for academics in Latin America to escape these two problematic positions. Indeed, many are forced to choose between intellectual insularity and intellectual dependence. Thus, working on this book reaffirmed my conviction that there is a need for a more collaborative relationship between scholars inside and outside Latin America, for more of a two-way flow of ideas, and for basic things such as having scholars in the United States read and cite the research produced in Latin America.

My two books on the life and work of social scientists in the United States and Latin America led me to think more systematically about knowledge and our progress in the social sciences. Much of the current discussion in the United States is framed in terms of methodological criteria, and many scholars argue that older works have little to contribute and that there is no point in reading them. I spent a fair amount of time reading about the philosophy of the social sciences. Also, to get at the question of progress, I set out to read research on democracy from Adam Smith and Montesquieu to the present. I am putting the final touches on a book about the evolution of knowledge.

To anticipate my conclusions, we have made considerable progress in the social sciences, but future advances in knowledge will require recognising the value of conceptual and theoretical research and not only of empirical research. The current emphasis on methods for empirical research is a mixed blessing because it empowers us in significant ways but has led to a disregard for concepts and theories.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Be sure you are passionate about research and the topics you study. Do not pass up any opportunity to travel internationally and talk to all sorts of people. Live for some time in a country other than your home country. Follow the news closely in some countries other than where you live. Read widely and not just recent publications. Find scholars who can serve as models for you, but always work to find your voice. Value theory and empirics. Learn about methods, but do not get caught up in methodological obsessions. Make time to write on a regular, even daily, basis.