

33. Latinx politics

Some of the first scholarship that would eventually become known as Latinx politics, broadly speaking, consisted of the scholarship produced within Chicano studies. These works examined the political struggles of ethnic Mexicans both inside and outside the electoral arena and focused primarily on the Southwest United States (García 1997). These early studies examined significant events, such as the rise of La Raza Unida Party, a third party which challenged the dominance of the U.S. two party system (García 1989). Much of this scholarship took historical approaches that used archival research and oral history to document the rise of Mexican American and Chicano politics (Gómez-Quinones 1990, Acuña 1997). Many of these scholars emerged from the movements themselves. Other more theoretically driven perspectives examined how Mexican communities became wage-laborers through primitive accumulation (Montejano 1987), thus illustrating the asymmetrical social and political context where Chicano politics emerged. Mario Barrera, one of the first Chicanos trained as a political scientist, uses a Marxian theory of the state to explain how Mexicans in the Southwest came to occupy a position in the political economy as a segmented class due to their marginalization as exploited wage-laborers and as racialized second-class subjects.

Over time, the study of Mexican American and Chicano politics continued to develop alongside another intellectual tradition that came to be known as Latinx politics, a subfield within the larger discipline of political science. The development of Latinx politics complemented and added to the study of Latino communities in ways distinct from those of Mexican American historiography and Chicano studies. Latinx politics has contributed to our knowledge of Latinx communities in distinct ways, especially our understanding of public opinion and political attitudes. For example, the pioneering work of Rodolfo de la Garza, Angelo Falcon, F. Chris Garcia, and John A. Garcia in their 1989–90 Latino National Survey (LNS) generated a dataset which political scientists, and other social scientists, have utilized to examine the political attitudes and behaviors of Latino communities. As the first national

survey of its kind, the Latino National Survey disaggregated “Latinx” by examining the three largest Latinx communities at the time: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans.

A newer version of this survey (Fraga et al. 2006) continues to provide social scientists with a significant sample size (N=8634) of self-identified Latinx interviewees. This survey contains approximately 165 distinct variables ranging from demographic information to party preference and political ideology. The methodological strength of the LNS, and similar surveys with large samples, is the ability to capture the political attitudes and viewpoints of Latinx populations from various Latin American nationalities, across generations and those residing within specific geographic regions within the U.S. Quantitative approaches, such as survey research, multivariate, correlational, and other types of statistical analyses, continue to increasingly dominate the field of political science writ large, the subfield of Latinx politics included.

The methodological strength of survey research, which Latinx politics generally utilizes, poses limitations due to its focus on attitudes and political behavior at the individual level. The types of questions that such surveys ask, due to their conceptualization, do not capture the nuances of phenomenon as transnationalism, race and ethnicity, specific geographic origin beyond the nation-state, and political commitments outside traditional party systems. At some level these questions were included in the LNS, but they were not able to capture the immense heterogeneity of Latino communities. While these samples provide a sense of the Latinx population’s opinion on salient issues, this method poses limitations since the data is not historically situated. Although survey research and experiments lend themselves to testing correlational and causal relationships, these methods pose further limitations because of their narrow capacity for “understanding the macro-structural and historical processes that structure the political system that Latinos actually engage in” (Gonzales 2017, 160). This is not to dismiss the achievements of Latinx politics scholars whose work is commendable, but only to underscore that the goal of achieving breadth and generalizability falls short of capturing rich nuances within Latinx communities and the ways in which they come to understand themselves and their

relationship to states which have historically marginalized them.

The dialectical tension between agency and social structure is a concern taken up by Latinx politics scholars whose research moves beyond the hegemonic paradigms of political science (García-Bedolla 2005, Beltrán 2010, Gonzales 2014, Rocco 2014, Sampaio 2015, Felix 2019). Such standpoints to Latinx politics have enlarged our theoretical understanding of why Latinx populations interact, or not, with the traditional institutions of the state and provide us with insights which complicate our understanding of Latinx communities and the Latinx electorate. A cross-section of scholars working within various methodological traditions will be discussed in the remainder of this entry.

Gender, grassroots activism, and Latinx politics

Some qualitative approaches to Latinx politics have focused on grassroots political organizing at the community level among Latinas (Hardy-Fanta 1993, Pardo 1998). These studies analysed the role neighborhood actors such as Latina women played in campaigning on behalf of candidates for local office. For example, Pardo investigates how Latinas from two East Los Angeles neighborhoods organized to prevent the construction of a prison in their community. These studies are important because they invert traditional understandings of political science by looking at how power is built from the site of civil society. Their work argues that dominant theoretical paradigms did not possess the explanatory power to analyse the phenomenon under examination. Prior frameworks had conceived of politics from an elitist perspective where politics becomes a matter of powerful figures engaged in struggles over power as individuals divorced from their respective communities. Latina women's engagement in political work demonstrates a view and understanding of "politics" distinct from dominant frameworks based on white male understandings of how power functions, and male Latinos' focus on vying for leadership roles. By departing from an understanding that power is strictly located within the dominant political institutions of the state, Pardo and Hardy-Fanta focus their attention away from strictly examining the behaviors of voter-turnout and towards the

quotidian processes of building power at the grassroots within civil society.

Identity and *Latinidad*

Other studies of Latinx politics have examined the intersection of Latinx identity, political behavior, and grassroots activism (García-Bedolla 2005, Beltrán, 2010). A common thread in these studies is the way in which "Latinx" identity is mobilized for political purposes. In *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity and Politics in Los Angeles*, Lisa García-Bedolla makes a critical intervention in the field of political science. Contrary to past social science research which emphasized the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation (i.e. voting), García-Bedolla argues that within particular social and geographic contexts individuals can develop a "mobilizing identity." García-Bedolla's intervention challenges the mainstream literature in political science, which claims that only those who occupy a higher socioeconomic status and who are more educated will normally engage in political activity. In contrast, García-Bedolla found that among Latinx immigrants and their children in two Los Angeles neighborhoods, it is possible for these individuals to develop a mobilizing identity. García-Bedolla illustrates how a mobilizing identity can develop among social groups whose personal experiences are shaped by racism and xenophobia. Any analysis of political engagement must include the dialectic between structure and agency. Only then can we understand how political engagement is situated at the intersection of "collective identity and structural position" (García Bedolla 2005, 3).

In *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*, Cristina Beltrán offers a nuanced understanding of *Latinidad*. Beltrán argues that such broad and overly comprehensive categories as "Latinx" and "Hispanic" have very little explanatory power. Beltrán explains that *Latinidad* has been an effort to expose historical "group-based inequality" and has jointly served as a platform from which to speak out collectively against racial and ethnic discrimination. Such categories have served as the basis from which to engage in collective politics and make group-based demands for social and economic resources. Simultaneously, these categories are inherently limited because they collapse

racial, ethnic, gender, and political diversity within the group in the name of commonality. For example, Beltrán highlights that within the Chicano movement, women's needs and those of the queer community were silenced. Beltrán urges researchers that use categories such as "Latinx" should be "reconceived as a site of permanent political contestation" (2010, 9). The category Latinx should undergo a process of "on-going resignifiability" and ought to serve as a political rather than merely descriptive category. Beltrán analyses electoral and protest politics and provides a "critical and theoretically driven account of how political power, racial/ethnic identity, and ideological diversity have been theorized and debated within U.S. Latino politics" by engaging with democratic theory (2010, 10).

Subaltern Latinx politics

The subaltern school of thought critiques the hegemonic approaches to Latinx politics. The approaches used by mainstream political scientists take for granted that the liberal democratic institutions of the U.S. emerged from a particular mode of production established on colonization and racial capitalism. Starting from the basis that the struggle over power is never a harmonious process, but one inherently antagonistic, the subaltern school of thought situates its analysis within social struggle itself. A subaltern approach is invested in transforming the social hierarchies that maintain race and class privileges and eschews false claims of objectivity taken up by mainstream social scientists. However, this research is by no means less intellectually rigorous in its examination of politics and enhances the analysis by way of immersion within working-class Latinx struggles (Gonzales 2018).

Raymond Rocco (2014) illustrates in his book, *Transforming Citizenship: Democracy, Membership, and Belonging in Latino Communities*, how Latino communities in Los Angeles were transformed as the result of neoliberal urban restructuring, and how they engaged in distinct forms of citizenship within civil society. Through ethnographic research that is theoretically driven, Rocco argues that Latino communities strive to exert their power within and against democratic institutions which function within a neoliberal mode of production. Latinx communi-

ties have and continue to exercise political power within the informal networks of civil society and through the formal institutions of the public sphere. Because Latinx communities continue to lack belonging in the body politic due to their "inclusionary exclusion" and racialized alterity, they enact citizenship within the "submerged networks of everyday life" (Rocco 2014). This practice of citizenship within civil society is enacted as an active practice, as opposed to citizenship as a static legal category. Because civil society is a permanent site of contestation, it is a key space of social transformation since political and ideological hegemony is fragile.

Alfonso Gonzales (2014), author of *Reform without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State*, uses a neo-Gramscian framework to explain how a diverse set of social forces constructed migration control policies during the post 9/11 homeland security state. Gonzales' approach to Latinx politics employs a conjunctural analysis to understand how the homeland security state coalesced a set of class forces. Gonzales argues migrant rights activists, primarily Latinx communities, were at a disadvantage since they were up against a powerful constellation of forces he calls the "anti-immigrant bloc." This bloc was constituted by state and non-state actors within civil society. These actors included legislators, right-wing think tanks, organic intellectuals, and media pundits who set the parameters of the immigration debate around "narrow questions of criminality and anti-terrorism" (Gonzales 2014, 5). These discourses had such a powerful effect that sectors of the "migrant rights bloc" participated in the "good immigrant/bad immigrant" debate which ultimately legitimized legal violence against immigrants and further reinforced their "illegality." Gonzales underscores the dual nature of civil society as a perpetual site of political conflict where the struggle over the moral and intellectual *common-sense* is fought. Using the concept of civil society in the Gramscian sense, Gonzales argues that the hegemony of the dominant classes can be reinforced or replaced with a hegemony that advances the interests of subaltern Latinx groups and the working-class more generally.

Paul Apostoldis (2019) in his book, *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity*, argues that due to *pre-caritization*, migrant day laborers negoti-

ate some of the worst working conditions in the U.S. Apostolidis' approach to understanding migrant day-laborers' quotidian struggles with precarity, and subaltern Latinx politics more generally, exemplifies how Latinx migrants come to theorize their own precarious material conditions. In his ethnographic study, male Latinx migrants from Mexico and Central America theorize their own condition as racialized workers on the margins of the economy. These workers also provide us with insights into the material conditions which impact the entire working-class. Apostolidis describes precarity as a "near universal complex of unfreedom" (2019, 2). Since racial capitalism devalues the labor of particular social classes such as Latinx day-laborers, they become a racialized segment of the working-class who are superexploited. Nevertheless, these migrant laborers share a general experience with other sectors of the working-class. In this case, an emerging politics of anti-precarity is located within civil society at the site of day-labor centers.

Transnational civil society

Other scholars (Fox and Salgado 2004, Smith and Baker 2008, Bada 2014, Felix 2019) focus on the political and social ties which Latinx migrants maintain across the hemisphere. These studies depart from traditional approaches to the study of Latinx politics which limit their unit of analysis to the nation-state. They underscore the transnational nature of Latinx politics but, more generally, the global character of civil society and the public sphere. They challenge the idea that "Latinx politics" is a domestic phenomenon based on what sociologists call "methodological nationalism." And they stress how migrants maintain ongoing social and political commitments to national politics across borders and political ties to indigenous communities as in the case of Oaxacan migrants from Mexico (Fox and Salgado 2004).

In his book, *Specters of Belonging: The Political Life Cycle of Mexican Migrants*, Adrián Félix (2019) demonstrates, through thick ethnographic description, how Mexican migrants within the citizenship classroom develop critiques of U.S. empire as they go through the process of naturalization. Migrants within the citizenship classroom

contest and expose the contradictions of U.S. democracy by articulating their own "exclusionary inclusion" (Rocco 2014) into the U.S. body politic as racialized subjects. Félix displays how Mexican migrants from different regions in Mexico, and to a lesser extent Latin America, use the space of the classroom to contest dominant narratives about assimilation and U.S. imperial citizenship. Migrants do so to negotiate "transnational political belonging and membership" (Félix 2019, 24). Félix argues that "the citizenship class functions as an alternative public space where migrants develop a counternarrative that exposes the arbitrariness of the naturalization process, creating a transnational, rather than assimilative, relationship to citizenship and national identity" (2019, 25). Ultimately, this study is about the transnationalization of civil society and the public sphere.

Latino laboring classes and the next left

Others such as Armando Ibarra, Alfredo Carlos, and Rodolfo D. Torres (2018) emphasize the relationship between race, place, and capital. In the book, *The Latino Question: Politics, Laboring Classes and the Next Left*, they argue that urban, and semi-urban, geographies are critical sites in which to study the political struggles of Latinx laboring classes. By taking a critical look at the forces of capitalism which structure the material conditions of Latinx communities, Ibarra et al. critique past approaches to Latinx politics which examine Latino communities as if they are monolithic voting blocs or a "sleeping giant." They argue that Latinx populations have varying class and ideological differences which mediate the ways in which they approach politics as a social class. For example, Ibarra et al. point to the fact that almost 30 percent of Latinx voters selected Donald Trump and that mainstream approaches to Latinx politics failed to account for Trump supporters. For instance, they ask "how can we speak of the 'Latino Vote' as if 'Latino' is one unifying category? The reality is we can't and shouldn't; it is just poor social science. More importantly, focusing on this conversation obscures more pressing questions about what types of experiences unify or differentiate groups of people meaningfully" (Ibarra et al. 2018, 8). Moreover, they argue that working-class Latinx communities need to be squarely at

the center of debates related to labor struggles since they are asking questions about how to alter the social relations of the state which continue to keep them at the margins.

Conclusion

A critical approach to Latinx politics will have to begin from an analysis that large segments of Latinx communities continue to hold precarious positions in society and the political economy through “exclusionary inclusion.” Such approaches will be generative not only to the field of political science, but other cutting-edge fields such as Latinx Studies interested in questions of power, belonging, and citizenship which continue to be pressing issues for Latinx populations. Future research will also have to account for the multiple levels of subalternity and subjectivities within the Latinx community without losing sight of historical processes and macro-structural forces which homogenize and criminalize entire populations perceived to be “Latinx.” For example, work from interdisciplinary fields such as Ethnic Studies, Central American Studies, and Latinx Geographies are generating important insights into the distinct subjectivities which constitute the Latinx community such as Indigenous Latinx, Afro-Latinx, and Queer Latinx communities. What will be important to keep in mind is how this diverse community will be able to find points of commonality within the community itself and with other marginal groups without engaging in what public intellectual Roberto Lovato terms “intersectional empire.” Although much important work has been generated which examines such phenomena as co-ethnic candidates and Latinx voter-turnout, a critical approach to Latinx politics will have to seriously interrogate symbolic representation versus substantive representation. Such an honest self-criticism will have to question the limits to transformative change that Latinx elected officials, and public policy, can make within the dominant political institutions of the state. A critical approach to Latinx politics should maintain a commitment to approaching politics with the end goal of challenging structures of power and academic enterprises which seek to justify the ongoing exploitation of marginal groups, and which frame U.S. democracy as an ensemble of neutral institutions based on “checks and

balances” which operate outside an ongoing history of colonization, racial capitalism, and white supremacy.

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See also

Latino Politics and Marxism; Hegemony; Immigration; Migration; Racialization; Ethnicity