



# Strong program cultural sociology and Latin America

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, a community of strong program cultural sociologists has developed from Latin America against the background of local traditions in the study of culture that mostly have been influenced by Gramsci and Bourdieu. Here, we will provide an overview of this community—its members, sites of production, and recent publications which mark the leading edges of iconic power theory, cultural trauma theory, social performance theory, and civil sphere theory. In particular, we will try to flesh out how the members of this emerging community have gone about extending the horizon of strong program cultural sociology while seeking to maintain their tune with local intellectual sensibilities in the study of culture across the region.

**Keywords** Strong program cultural sociology · Latin America · Iconic power · Cultural trauma · Social performance · Civil sphere

## Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, strong program cultural sociology (SPCS) has emerged as a distinctive paradigm in sociology focusing on the analysis of the autonomous impact of culture on social life (McCormick 2019). Drawing, for its sources of inspiration, from cultural and historical anthropology, literary criticism, structural linguistics, semiotics, philosophical hermeneutics, cultural history, and later performance studies and the study of material culture, it has progressively developed into a neo-Durkheimian research program that along with Durkheim acknowledges that cultural

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representations enter people's lives through ritual processes but, unlike Durkheim, also recognizes that the circumstances under which such processes unfold in modern societies are markedly different from traditional societies (Smith and Alexander 2005; Weiss 2019; Jacobs 2019). Since then, SPCS has spread around the world and has contributed to a broad spectrum of fields and themes ranging from politics, the economy, the media, race and ethnicity, migration, religion, social movements, trauma, materiality, and knowledge, just to name a few. And yet, in spite of such empirical focus, it has never lost its commitment to the centrality of theory. As Norton (2019, p. 269) put it, "one of the things that makes the strong program in cultural sociology a program is its claim to an intellectual ground somewhere between the mercenary middle-range and true-believing paladins of this or that general theory." In particular, SPCS has taken a non-dogmatic "middleground position calling for multidimensional explanations that provide space for social structure, culture, and individual actors as simultaneous 'causes' of the same events and processes" (Smith 1998, p. 9). And on the very specific issue of power, it has appreciated its multi-layered nature as it has recognized the mediative force of civil interpretations over socio-economic and political power (Reed 2019, p. 284).

Here, we will provide an overview of the literature produced by the community of strong program cultural sociologists that has emerged from Latin America against the background of earlier traditions in the study of culture within the region.

## The study of culture in Latin American sociology

Until the first half of the 20th century, the study of culture in Latin America mostly showed how national identities manifested themselves in the world views and popular practices of urban and rural communities (Szurmuk and McKee 2009). After World War II, it stressed how these identities persisted—urbanization, economic modernization, and mass education notwithstanding (García Canclini 1991).

By the end of the 1970s, the study of culture sought to illuminate the strains that socio-economic development and modernization laid on popular cultures (Brünner 1988). Traditional cultures appeared to be doomed to reproduce only within the most "backward" segments of Latin American societies (Mignolo 2001) and scholars turned their attention to the changing cultural patterns of the emerging middle class that was supposedly in the process of leaving their earlier cultural practices behind. The crisis of the developmental model, though, led many observers to believe that the consolidation of new cultural forms congenial to modernization was ultimately hindered by the endurance of traditional values and practices within the region (Rama 1985).

Critics from the Western Marxist tradition interpreted the tension between tradition and modernity as an ideological struggle between social classes. The dominated expressed their resistance through their cultural practices based on communitarian values and collective rituals against dominant groups, their individualism, and their positive disposition toward competition.

In the 1980s such interpretations increasingly drew from Gramsci and Bourdieu, and the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, as well as the tensions within



and between fields and their respective habitus, became central to the interpretation of culture by scholars in the region. As Rosaldo (2005) points out, García Canclini was particularly instrumental to placing Gramsci at the very center of the analysis of Latin American social formations.

By the 1990s, a sociology-of-culture tradition had consolidated within the region with an important body of empirical research on cultural processes (Miceli 1996; Ortiz 1988; Landi 1988; and Giménez 1978), particularly with reference to political and urban dynamics as well as to mass media communication (Martín Barbero 1987; García Canclini 1991). This line of work, which merged into a broader tradition in Latin American cultural studies, approached culture in semiotic terms as a sphere of production, circulation, and consumption of meaning (Giménez 1999; Restrepo 2019), and while it drew from theories inspired by Gramsci and Bourdieu, it also tapped into the work of Geertz, Williams, Hall, and Turner. It insisted on the imbrication of culture in the economy and social relations, as García Canclini (1989) already had. Moreover, by taking culture as a social, organizing structure of meaning, it placed great emphasis on the influence that socio-historical structures had over it (Giménez 1999).

More recently, Latin American sociologists of culture have built on the tradition of US–Latin American cultural studies (Mignolo 2002), thereby taking culture as a mirror of underlying economic and social power structures and focusing on subaltern cultures, postcolonial resistance, and domination over particular social groups, including indigenous peoples, afro-descendants, women, and the LGBTQ community (Zapata 2018; Bidaseca 2012). *Mestizaje*, syncretism, and cultural hybridization have become a central theme within this literature, which approaches these processes as struggles for meaning and recognition on the part of those social groups (Martín Barbero 1987) and recognizes that, as Alonso and Pinheiro (2017) point out, power asymmetries between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups may actually criss-cross as social groups may establish their own cultural principles and values within specific social spaces by tapping into a variety of power mechanisms.

These studies of culture constitute the background against which SPCS has developed over the past few years within the region.

## Strong program cultural sociology from Latin America

SPCS in Latin America is a relatively recent development. Although it had slowly incubated during the late 2000s in Colombia with Carlo Tognato and, since 2010, in Mexico with Nelson Arteaga, coordinated efforts at community-building in the region within this research tradition actually began in 2014 when Tognato and Arteaga met at the ISA World Congress in Yokohama and started to collaborate on such a front. Today, the community of strong program cultural sociologists from Latin America features scholars living and working in the region who consistently publish within this tradition (Arteaga 2015, 2019, 2020a, b). Others from the region with a long-term commitment to SPCS have left and are currently based elsewhere but maintain their deep connections with Latin America (Tognato 2010, 2011, 2018, 2019a, b, c, 2020a, b, c; Alexander and Tognato 2018;



Tognato and Arteaga 2019; Jijón 2013, 2015, 2018a, b, 2019; Vélez-Vélez 2015). One moved on and left academia (de Santos 2009). Some are building a track record of research in this tradition (Gauna 2018), while others have trained in Latin America and left (Shimizu 2018). Some sociologists have come to SPCS from other cultural sociological traditions (Thumala 2018a, b; Villegas 2018a, b) and others have fruitfully exchanged with strong program cultural sociologists from the shores of different intellectual camps (Baiocchi 2006, 2012; Benzecry 2012). Some scholars currently work at a relatively close intellectual distance from SPCS with no interaction, though, with the rest of its members in the region (Wilkie 2017; Wilkie and Roig 2015). And others from different disciplines, mostly political science and anthropology, have drawn from SPCS or published with strong program cultural sociologists from the region (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2014, 2015, 2016a, b, 2017a, b; Arzuaga and Arteaga 2019; Martínez 2018, 2019; Gravante 2018, Gravante and Poma 2019; Díaz 2014; Jimeno et al. 2015, 2018; Carassale 2019). Recent efforts at community-building in the region have also led to the emergence of a number of young researchers working within this tradition (Romero 2016, 2019; Rudas 2019a, b; Milia 2019; Rincón 2019; Vázquez 2019; Bertoni 2019; Tognato and Cuellar 2013).

Today, SPCS from the region draws scholars from Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Cuba, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, the US, and Great Britain. Some have published in the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* (Gauna 2018; Vélez-Vélez 2015; Thumala 2018a, b; Villegas 2018a, b) or with the *Cultural Sociology Series* at Palgrave Macmillan (Tognato 2012; Tognato et al. 2020; Arteaga 2020b). Most of them have participated in two book projects that have served as focal scenarios of interaction for this emerging community (Alexander and Tognato 2018; Arteaga and Tognato 2019). Most of them have used FLACSO-Mexico as a venue for exchange or education. Some trained, or are training, in the US with established strong program cultural sociologists, notably at UCLA, Yale, and SUNY, Albany. Others have been faculty, visiting, and junior fellows or exchange students at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology.

Since 2013, the *Sociology at the Frontier Seminar* at FLACSO-Mexico has provided a space where students from Latin America have had the opportunity to learn about SPCS and get socialized into its ways of investigating and writing. Since 2015, it has also been the fulcrum of the pedagogic collaboration between Arteaga and Tognato with the involvement of the latter as evaluator and co-chair in dissertation committees as well as a mentor of doctoral students and young scholars.

The large majority of this community of scholars works on Latin American issues, although their work may offer insights that can speak to SPCS focusing on other regions. Their countries of interest include Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, and Argentina. Some of them, however, have also written about other societal contexts, including the US, Great Britain, Italy, Philippines, Japan, Ghana, and South Africa. And some of them have pursued broader theoretical agendas on class formation (Villegas 2018b), cultural change, either within the context of globalization (Jijón 2019) or democratic life (Tognato 2020a, b, c) and on the decentering via intervention of theory-making in SPCS (Tognato 2020a).



At the moment, SPCS in Latin America features four main foci of interest: iconic power theory, cultural trauma theory, social performance theory, and civil sphere theory.

As far as iconic power theory is concerned, current contributions have applied it in relation to mobilizations in global civil society (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2015), presidential politics in Mexico (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2016b), and pop culture (Romero and Arteaga 2017a, b). In addition, Arteaga and Arzuaga (2016a) provide an introductory overview for Latin American audiences of Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology up to the iconic turn.

On the front of cultural trauma theory, Vélez-Vélez (2015) applies the idea of trauma process and trauma resolution to the social mobilization leading to the demilitarization of Vieques in Puerto Rico. Arteaga (2019), Gravante (2018), and Gravante and Poma (2019), on their part, describe the trauma process that unfolded in relation to the Ayotzinapa disappearance of 43 students in Mexico. Arteaga (2019), in particular, brings into focus the contested nature of the process and the elements that prevented it from generalizing solidarity with the victims across Mexican society. Niño (2019) pinpoints the challenges that the trauma process faced in a Colombian city in relation to paramilitary violence. Tognato (2011) explores how the trauma process may extend solidarity with the victims of kidnapping across the deep cultural divides that fracture the Colombian public sphere.

On social performance, strong program cultural sociologists from Latin America have produced a rich line of applications as well as of extensions. Arteaga and Arzuaga (2016a) present social performance theory to Spanish-speaking audiences and discuss its use in relation to political drama. Arteaga and Arzuaga (2014) tap into social performance theory and show the role of event-ness and contingency in social change in relation to the sudden emergence in Mexico of a student movement labeled *YoSoy132* after a confrontation between presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto and the students of the Universidad Iberoamericana during the 2012 presidential campaign. Romero (2019) looks at the ritual of conversion to the Islam among Mexicans and shows that the recognition of the converse by their new community of faith is a local cultural accomplishment that crucially depends on the cultural performative success of their declaration of faith in Arabic before the imam that officiates the ceremony. Bertoni (2019) addresses women's fear as a consequence of the cultural performance of occupation of public space by young males in two neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. Tognato (2010) looks at the performance of 'legitimate' torture within one of Argentina's most gruesome clandestine detention centers during the latest dictatorship.

Other works, in turn, have sought to broaden the horizon of social performance theory. Arteaga and Arzuaga elaborate on republican liturgical ceremonies as a social performance genre (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2017a; Arzuaga and Arteaga 2019). Gaúna (2018) explores how populist discourse may interject in pragmatic settings into civil discourse and ultimately change it via condensation and displacement. Tognato looks at ambivalent performances as a way of zipping together separate cultural structures (Tognato 2011). Romero (2016), in turn, discusses Alexander's social performance theory in relation to the transit from otherhood to we-ness and contrasts it with the way such a transit is theorized in



Durkheim, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Alexander. By approaching social performance theory along the otherhood–we-ness continuum, the author implicitly links it to important threads in the fabric of Latin American consciousness as othering alterity in its permanent interaction with native forms of social life and as othered alterity at the very edge of the West and on the other side of the North–South frontier.

It is on the front of civil sphere theory, though, that strong program cultural sociologists from Latin America have pushed the agenda, and the theory, furthest. While Thumala (2018a) looks at the civil mobilization of indignation in relation to collusion scandals in the Chilean retail industry, and while Milia (2019) addresses the societalization of crisis in higher education in Ecuador, Shimizu (2018) introduces policing as a new regulative institution of the civil sphere in her case study on military police in São Paulo, Brazil. A number of scholars zoom on the competition between civil discourse and alternative patrimonialist conceptions of social life in relation to presidential politics (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2018; Arteaga and Romero 2018), violence (Tognato and Cuellar 2013; Rincón 2019), migration (Arteaga 2020b), and public education (Vázquez 2019). Others explore the competition between civil discourse and militant revolutionary discourse over the definition of the cultural meaning of middle class in Venezuela (Villegas 2018a) or of the mission of the university in Colombia (Tognato 2018). Martínez (2018, 2019) looks at how militant revolutionary discourse may be stretched into a civil direction. Rudas (2019a, b) pins down how it is instantiated into the institutional history of an iconic public university in Colombia. Arteaga (2020a) unveils the patrimonialist underbelly of recent populist discourses in Mexico, thereby pointing to the potential for a counter-intuitive recombination between the patrimonialist tradition and militant revolutionary understandings of social life. Tognato (2018) sheds light on how extreme polarization undermines the performative stability of civil discourse, thereby paving the way to a drift of civil interactions into the terrain of alternative conceptions of legitimacy in social life, either on the patrimonialist or on the militant revolutionary ends. Tognato (2019b) delves into the performative transition from militant revolutionary understandings of social life to civil understandings and brings into focus the challenges of recognizing how the latter might actually get woven into the former. In both articles, he focuses on an iconic public university campus in Colombia. In relation to populism, Tognato (2020c) explains why destructive forms of populism undermine the fabric of civil life by engaging in forms of civil mimicry that dissolve the fabric of civil solidarity as they weave, either at a structural or at a pragmatic level, non-civil conceptions of social life into civil understandings while falling short of translating the former into the latter. Finally, one further line of work explores the potential for an interventive turn in civil sphere theory by approaching cultural intervention as an enhanced form of observation in scenarios of civil interaction and over specific issues in which positionality may play a role (Tognato 2019a, c, 2020a). Tognato's agenda on civil mimicry fuses with that on civil intervention whenever civil mimicry within a given setting demands some degree of positionality in order to call it out.



## Conclusion

Over the past decades, the study of culture in Latin American sociology has emphasized its imbrication in economic and social structures of power and domination and has placed emphasis on the variety of ways in which a diverse spectrum of cultural practices has intermixed within the region with particular attention to dynamics of resistance from below. The emerging community of strong program cultural sociologists from Latin America has been sensitive to such themes as it has sought to pin down how alternative cultural conceptions of social life in the region have competed against, interacted, and occasionally intermixed with each other, all with variable effects on the civil fabric of societies in the region.

At this early stage, SPCS from Latin America has produced a developing literature that applies, and in a growing number of cases extends, the horizon of SPCS on a series of fronts. As SPCS consolidates, its intellectual rooting into the sensibilities of the region will crucially depend on expanding its theoretical, analytical, and empirical agenda on cultural hybrids and inter-cultural encounters on at least two fronts. First, between three cultural metrics that across the region have traditionally coded legitimacy in social life, that is, civil discourse, corporatist discourse, and militant revolutionary discourse. And second, at the edge of Western culture, where such discourses encounter non-western cultural traditions within the region.

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