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Reshaping Society and the Commons in Latin America

CEDLA Research 2017-2022



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Introduction: CEDLA's approach to research

CEDLA is the interdisciplinary research institute for Latin American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. It is directed at improving our understanding of the reality and processes of change of Latin America. CEDLA's research has a strong focus on present-day developments. Due to its nature as an area studies institute, its research activities focus on understanding the specificities of the Latin American region and they take the social sciences and the humanities as point of departure to obtain a broad comparative perspective. CEDLA aims to do so departing from the following key premises.

First, a longer term, structural approach is crucial for analyzing recent regional developments. This means, on the one hand, an important role of historical processes and, on the other hand, a belief in regional path-dependencies, which both need to be discussed in order to understand present-day trends in Latin America.

Second, CEDLA research clearly departs from the perceived need for sound and grounded empirical research. CEDLA researchers regularly visit the region for fieldwork and academic meetings and collaborative projects. They have a clear knowledge of local circumstances and social and scholarly debates, and try to embed their research results in this knowledge.

Thirdly, CEDLA research is clearly grounded in its constitutive disciplines: cultural anthropology, economics, history, political science, human geography and sociology. Its interdisciplinary ambitions depart from the conviction that only a sound disciplinary basis with its concomitant theoretical underpinning, will allow satisfying interdisciplinary or comparative research. Besides cross-disciplinary research collaborations, CEDLA's interdisciplinary perspective is also reflected in the approaches of individual researchers and their projects.

Fourthly, CEDLA research is grounded on the idea that many social, cultural and political processes in Latin America present certain specific characteristics. CEDLA's research focuses on these elements which can be considered crucial for the region's development. Nevertheless, research on Latin America cannot isolate itself from global and comparative developments. While CEDLA focuses on the Latin American region, it also tries to do connect its research to theories and insights from other regions and literatures.

Fifthly, research at CEDLA takes place in a vibrant academic environment, where trends and findings are discussed with a wide variety of groups. CEDLA researchers are involved in international networks and (externally funded) projects and regularly receives visiting fellows, while hosting a group of PhD students, including a growing number from Latin America. In the Netherlands, CEDLA holds historically strong interuniversity relations, coordinates the LASP Graduate Programme and hosts networks for Latin American Studies (NALACS and OLA). It is also a member of the recently established Amsterdam School for Regional, Transnational and European Studies (ARTES) of the University of Amsterdam. Furthermore, CEDLA publishes the journal ERLACS, book series CLAS, and Cuadernos/working papers, while its famous library, its lecture series, seminars and screenings, and its MA and BA programmes attract researchers, students and other visitors, such as representatives of governments, social movements and NGOs.

Reshaping Society and the Commons in Latin America

Latin America entered the twenty-first century with new hopes for change. However, following a period of bonanza in the past decade, the region is now facing a new wave of economic, social and political crisis. Growth, poverty reduction, social inclusion and consolidation of democratic institutions have given way to economic recession, social dissatisfaction, dismantling of social policies and intensifying conflicts. Although such a cyclical trend is not new in the region's history, a new context of closely interconnected local, national and global developments is leading to a variety of societal consequences. Recent trends aggravate problems of inequality, insecurity, corruption and unsustainability; yet some groups within Latin America's societies have experienced positive transformations ranging from empowerment and recognition, to a new presence in the public space and the development of different forms of cultural and political expressions. As CEDLA's previous research programme on the use of natural and cultural resources has shown, such diverse, complex and contradictory changes lead to hybrid outcomes.

CEDLA's current research programme aims to produce new knowledge on the reshaping of Latin American society within the new context of crisis and transformation. The region has long been disproportionately characterized by an unequal development that fuelled academic paradigms focused on dependency, inequality, informality and violence. However, this prevailing image of a region with failing states and fragmented societies has obscured powerful creative and constructive processes. In addition to structural elements, we are looking into the agency of new expressions, identities, initiatives, policies and daily realities on the ground that drives social interaction and innovation. This creativity is reshaping Latin American societies, not by ignoring the past but by dealing with and re-interpreting historical lessons and legacies.

Covering a large range of research activities (individual and with external partners), CEDLA's researchers jointly analyse the dialectical relations between old and new forms of social organization through an innovative, interdisciplinary perspective. This endeavour is built *on three analytical pillars*. First, we look *beyond standardized categories* of actors (e.g. public sector, private sector and civil society), spaces (e.g. urban and rural), and processes (e.g. top-down and bottom-up) and engage in a constructivist perspective in order to better understand how identities and territories are reshaped in the region. Second, we focus on relevant experiments and *experiences that have emerged since the 2000s*, including political reforms, social learning, and cultural and territorial changes. Third, as the region has recently entered a phase of aggravated economic, social and political conditions, we conceptualize *crisis both as a barrier and a driver of transformation*. Problems, tensions and polarization may enhance (latent) conflicts and power relations as much as they can trigger new forms of resistance, adaptation and collaboration, according to the social, institutional and spatial context.

In these new research activities, CEDLA researchers aim to balance out macro-level scholarly attention for changes, actions, discourses and images with empirical evidence of the many micro-level dynamics stemming from everyday life practices, initiatives, struggles and resistances through which citizens employ their agency, individually or collectively. Studies on both levels and from various countries constitute building blocks for observing the multiple forms of societal reshaping in Latin America. Empirical and theoretical contributions in particular are being made in two interrelated domains of inquiry: *the reshaping of identities* and *the reshaping of territories*. Both domains cross geographic and cultural divides by combining tangible and intangible resources.

While this research programme is based on multiple theoretical perspectives that have traditionally been used and developed by CEDLA researchers, the *commons approach* is also playing an important role as a connecting analytical device in understanding a range of processes, actors and contexts. In addition to their importance in the region's history and imaginary, the concepts of *territory* and *identity* will be used to apply the plural perspective of the commons to Latin America. Thus, they facilitate the comprehension of processes that are reshaping Latin American society today, and at the same time, engage with key social science and humanities approaches to the region's particular trajectory of development. This programme aims to critically engage with various recent lines of the commons research, exploring synergistic analytical power by the combination of plural perspectives.

The commons as a connecting analytical perspective

Commons is a concept in construction broadly defined as tangible and intangible resources shared by a group of individuals shaping patterns of access, use and reproduction (Hess and Ostrom 2006). This analytical concept emerged as an alternative to the fixed public-private divide (Hardin 1968) that masks other forms of appropriation and governance models. It has evolved from a narrow contextual focus on social dilemmas in social-ecological systems (Ostrom 1990) into an integrative analytical perspective to address social change at large (Bollier and Helfrich 2012). The incorporation of cultural and political resources allows for an analysis of social processes not only around traditional 'commons' (natural resources such as water, forest, fish, land, ocean, air) but also relating to the what are known as new commons (e.g., knowledge, memories, identities, urban public spaces, digital spaces, collective practices). The commons perspective has become a vibrant interdisciplinary field to articulate theoretical questions usually polarized by domains that may be geographic (e.g., rural and urban commons), scalar (e.g., local to global commons), institutional (e.g., formal and informal commons) and tangible (e.g., material and immaterial commons).

The commons research agenda emerged in the 1990s as a critical perspective on the dominant property rights arrangements based on neoliberal, top-down policies (e.g., Bromley 1992). Grounded in Hardin's seminal work 'The tragedy of the commons,' natural resources were treated as vulnerable to depletion due to absence of property rights, and privatization or statization was urged to ensure sustainable use. Social scientists, however, proposed a new category of goods – common-pool resources (CPR) – characterized by rivalry (exploitation by one individual implies reduced availability for others) and non-excludability (exclusion of others is difficult). Rich empirical evidence from community-based management of natural resources worldwide has revealed that CPRs faced social dilemmas but were not inherently open access. This body of research has not only refuted Hardin's model but has also revealed that the proposed solutions to the CPR dilemmas – privatization or statization – in fact caused longstanding, well-functioning, collective governance systems to erode (Dietz et al. 2002).

During this early stage, the commons debate transitioned into a highly fruitful interdisciplinary field, integrating plural theoretical and methodological perspectives. Multiple perspectives contributed to the understanding of emergence, performance and erosion of local institutions (see Berkes 1989; McCay and Acheson 1990). Focused on the interplay between local agency and resource sustainability, scholars highlighted key factors driving the commoning process grounded in social capital, traditional knowledge, historical legacies and political empowerment. Emphasizing institutional incentives, local context and successful commoning experiences, however, led to gradual disengagement by scholars interested in environmental conflicts and injustices in the 'commons' debate. In addition, the commons epistemic

community has gradually become less diverse, as neo-institutionalism has come to dominate theoretical narrative, especially after the Nobel Prize was awarded to leading theorist Elinor Ostrom.

The increasing body of literature on cultural and political commons, however, opens new channels to address commoning initiatives observed in different contexts beyond natural resources. This broader perspective prompts extending the CPR concept into the 'commons'. The traditional commons, defined in terms of type of goods and analysed from the perspective of rights, contrasts with the 'new commons,' which includes intangible resources and expands the focus to co-creation, sharing and reproduction (Bertacchini et al. 2012). Unlike CPRs, these resources are not inherently 'commons' but socially constructed, as commoning materializes from particular collectivities. Processes related to sharing identities, economies, practices, memories, learning and spaces constitute some of the new commons discernible in many parts of the world. In this research programme, we explore the analytical potential of combining plural perspectives on the traditional and new commons to understand the way Latin American society is reshaping.

While the commons remains loosely defined, its added value derives mainly from the related concept of commoning (Bollier and Helfrich 2012). Commoning refers to a process of collective action to co-create, self-govern and reproduce particular spaces, resources, practices, symbols or ideas. By emphasizing structure and agency dialectics, the commons can serve as a reference for articulating theories, methods and practices of de-commoning and re-commoning (Amin and Howell, Susser 2017). Although Latin American societies have been marked by these two antagonistic forces, the literature addressing these processes in the region is deeply fragmented. Notwithstanding the similar focus on commoning processes addressed by a broad range of disciplines, cross-fertilization among plural 'commons' perspectives is only starting to crystallize (e.g., Zapata and Campos 2015). In particular, engagement in the commons debate has highlighted natural resources and rural transformations (e.g., Svampa 2015; Castro 2016; Delgado-Serrano 2016). Moreover, the commons has become a solid concept for transdisciplinary networks bridging practice, policy and science (e.g., Harvey 2012; Bollier 2014; Haivan 2014; Stavrides 2016). While such networks have emerged around natural resources and socioenvironmental change in Latin America, a similar trend around cultural resources and urban transformations has been less evident. Addressing commoning initiatives in the region as a sociocultural trend and alternative development models for different processes in the region enables a range of processes in Latin America not only to be connected regionally but to be considered in cross-regional comparisons as well. In particular, through special attention to the commons in cities, nature, nations and governance, CEDLA's research can bring a timely contribution to Latin American Studies.

Latin America commons as showcase

Despite a rich body of literature addressing several aspects of reshaping Latin American societies, disciplinary, thematic and scalar divides impede understanding them as part of similar processes. This highly urbanized region rich in natural and cultural resources has undergone recent social transformations combining deepened democratization and empowerment with increased inequalities and insecurities. The commons perspective may provide new angles for examining context, values, norms and interactions around valuable tangible and intangible resources at large.

Tensions between enclosure and sharing, overuse and sustainability, and social dilemmas are central to this perspective. Regarding *enclosure and sharing*, de-commoning territories, knowledge, memories and practices has long been contested (at least since colonization). Intensified enclosure by neoliberal policies

in the 1980s and 90s contrasts with experiences in re-commoning private and public spaces shaped by everyday life practices, social policies and increased democratization observed in the region. *Overuse and sustainability* derives from increased demand for natural, financial and human resources and urban spaces. The region's history of dispossession has implied structural overuse of its commons and contrasts with local solutions to protect natural resources and urban environment and to minimize threats from climate change and globalization. Finally, regarding *social dilemmas*, ethnic, gender, generational and class tensions contrast with creative collective actions to resist de-commonization and to promote re-commonization in rural and urban spaces. Everyday life practices, conflicts and resistance are directly related to co-creation and sharing of values and norms underlying the commons and to steering social capital, political imagination and leadership. Trust, knowledge and common understanding may, for example, support joint efforts and sharing experiences, whereas freeriding, rent-seeking and copycat behaviour may halt innovation and lead to fragmentation in reproduction of commons.

We contend that Latin American Studies will not only benefit from the integrative analytical approach provided by the commons to bridge some divides such as urban-rural, local-global, material-immaterial and formal-informal. The region also offers a fruitful foundation for critiquing and elaborating the commons perspectives. How values, symbols, narratives, identities, territories, goods or digital spaces are commonized or de-commonized by state and non-state actors, for example, relates directly to both traditional and new commons. In this regard, five transversal research topics have been identified as potential areas of development for studying the reshaping of Latin American societies supported by – but not restricted to – the commons perspective. They combine enduring debates and emergent research questions.

First, premises of the commons theory may be tested and challenged by particular Latin American contexts. For example, social permeability, multiple and changing identities and hybrid institutions observed in the region challenge the well-defined social boundaries and shared values provided by the design principles proposed by Elinor Ostrom. Similarly, the deeply politicized and unequal grounds where the commons are contested challenge perspectives centred on individual incentives and bounded rationality (e.g., transaction costs and incomplete information). Finally, the notion of the commons as an alternative to arranging private and public property rights can be challenged by hybrid appropriation and reproduction, such as security, education and health, in which private, public and collective spheres may co-exist and compete.

Second, the normative perspective to commoning processes can be contested by the way external actors promote 'community-based' models in the region. The frequently unequal conditions in which commoning takes place in Latin America challenges the promises promoted by researchers, practitioners, donors and policy-makers. While many commoning initiatives in the region represent genuine bottom-up processes rooted in strong social capital and local knowledge, recent efforts by the state and NGOs to create 'communities' and foster 'collective actions' merit more critical analysis. On the one hand, the role of the progressive priests (Theology of Liberation) in the 1970s and 80s and the recent wave of progressive national governments have provided mechanisms to support commoning processes, such as traditional territories and community-based governance systems. On the other hand, elite groups have redefined the meaning of 'community,' 'participation' and 'local governance' for their own benefit to retain their access to and control over the commons.

Third, assumptions of harmonious and cohesive commoners in commons literature overlook local tensions, inequalities and multiple interests. The colonial history of social hierarchy, clientelism and chauvinism in Latin America is reflected in community structures often fragmented by political, religious, generational

and gender tensions. Collective actions among marginalized groups may mask internal tensions and lead to new inequalities. Discerning analysis of the communities, taking into account their multiple identities, interests and intersectionalities, may yield a more nuanced analysis of commoning processes as strategies to tackle both internal and external power structures and of how they enhance or mitigate tensions across age, gender, ethnicity and class among collectivities.

Fourth, multi-scale processes shaping struggles over the commons raises questions regarding the best scale for analysing a particular commoning experience to address transboundary issues. Fuzzy spatial boundaries between rural and urban spaces observed in the Latin American context challenge the rural and urban commons divide in academic literature. Although some resources are clearly urban commons relating to access to public space and services, increased flow of resources, people and ideas between rural-urban spaces challenges distinctive social and geographic boundaries. Peri-urban areas are increasingly becoming the social arena for negotiating and redefining both rural and urban commoning practices; while flowing resources such as water, food, energy, symbols and values are key elements linking commoning and de-commoning in both spaces.

Fifth, while the commons debate has been mainly shaped by scholars from other regions, the Latin American context offers new elements that may advance theoretical elaboration in this field. The region has been an arena of bottom-up commoning and re-commoning that merits special attention in commons research. Re-commoning territories by the Zapatistas and the Landless Workers Movements, re-commoning identities by Indigenous, maroons and other traditional populations, re-commoning memories by victims of political conflicts, re-commoning economies by transaction models based on solidarity, re-commoning biodiversity by protecting traditional seeds and development of agroforestry systems and re-commoning narratives by the Buen Vivir discourse figure among the regional perspectives that may help chart a Latin American perspective for the commons.

The commons may thus be a supporting analytical strategy for understanding the reshaping Latin American society while creating channels for cross-regional comparative analysis. This analytical perspective may help identify similarities and differences in de-commoning and re-commoning within Latin America in comparison with other regions (South-South and North-South) to contribute to current debates developed in different theoretical streams such as Post-Colonial Studies, Rights to the City, Environmental Justice and Critical Institutionalism.

Planned activities and products

The research programme aims to profile CEDLA as an international centre of excellence in research on Latin America. One particularly relevant aspect of the research programme is to increase knowledge cross-fertilization among in-house researchers through internal seminars, research collaboration, co-publications, co-supervision, and co-teaching. These collaborative activities will enrich dialogue and reflection across disciplinary thinking and develop new ideas and projects.

Researchers will seek to develop new research lines through internal and external collaboration to improve their prospects of attracting external research funding. An important adjustment from the previous programme concerns the ways in which researchers collaborate on different themes. Instead of using themes to form separate and fixed research groups that run the risk of separating researchers and debates, *the new programme works with more dynamic, integrative and flexible groups* that are formed according to particular research questions and activities. In addition, organization of and participation in academic

(international) seminars and collaboration in broader research networks will facilitate network-building and knowledge exchange. Finally, a solid publishing record, including articles in relevant international academic journals, will optimize the dissemination of all research findings. In order to materialize these goals, the following activities are planned:

Internal Monthly Seminars: Monthly seminars are being planned for discussing integrative research lines, including research projects, fieldwork trips, draft papers, events and current theoretical debates.

Annual Seminars: CEDLA researchers and invited scholars and students are presenting their research lines during seminars of one to two days. Two seminars have already been organized in 2017; first, “Work in Progress”, in collaboration with OLA, targeting graduate students (October); and the “Co-Lab The Commons in Latin America: Struggles, Policies and Research”, targeting graduate students, scholars, and practitioners (December 12-13, 2017). http://www.cedla.uva.nl/CO_LAB/index.html

Participation in International Conferences: In addition to disciplinary conferences regularly attended by CEDLA researchers, two panels in the next four years will be organized by CEDLA to showcase the research programme; one will be at a LASA Conference and the other will be at the IASC Conference in Lima in 2019.

CEDLA Fieldwork: A joint fieldwork project is planned for 2018-2019 carried out by the CEDLA researchers in one particular site in Latin America. Based on the overarching theme “Re-commoning Spaces in Latin America”, the researchers are carrying out a short field trip in which different aspects of a broader process will be analysed from different angles. Lessons and findings will be presented in several co-authored papers and articles.

Course: A joint MA course on ‘Latin American Commons’ is designed for students interested in Latin American studies and the Commons perspective. This course gives a regional dimension to the commons through multiple theoretical perspectives and foster students’ interest in applying the commons analytical perspective to their research. A shortened version of the course was offered in 2017 as a module, and in 2018 it has been extended to full course level.

Publications: Publications are derived from individual and collective research projects. They will be offered to relevant outlets (international journals and publishing houses as well as Latin American journals). Whenever possible, publications will be published in Open Access outlets. In order to rapidly increase the distribution and discussion of ongoing CEDLA research themes, working papers will be published in the “Cuadernos del CEDLA Working Paper Series”, which will be freely available for download from the CEDLA website.

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