

Critical Edges

Episode 1.4.

Latin America and Geopolitics of Trains

VADIM ROMASHOV

Welcome to the “Critical Edges” podcast. In this podcast we explore critical edges that may seem distant and marginal at first glance, but which are in fact very much connected to, and even interdependent with our global society and politics. In our podcast we discuss with different scholars who have, one way or the other, addressed critical edges critically.

HANNA LAAKO

In today's episode we discuss Latin America as a critical edge and the geopolitics of trains. This is Hanna in the studio, and today we have a special guest Ana Esther Ceceña. Ana Esther Ceceña is an esteemed professor at the Institute of Economic Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM, which is one of the biggest and the most prestigious universities in Latin America, located in Mexico City. Ana Esther Ceceña is an expert in geopolitics and economics, particularly focused on the study of natural resources, social movements, militarization, and global hegemonies. She has been particularly interested in the ways in which the processes of domination and exploitation interact with resistance.

She has collaborated with a number of important social and Indigenous movements in Latin America, such as the Zapatista movement, as well as in many projects and networks such as the World System Theory with Immanuel Wallerstein and as a member of the Global Economy Network. Recently, she has been publishing on the geopolitics of trains, which is our special focus in this episode. Indeed, Ana Esther Ceceña is also the founder and coordinator of the Latin American Observatory of Geopolitics, created in 2007.

Bienvenida professor, welcome to our podcast. So mentioning the Observatory of Geopolitics, I would like to begin with that one and ask how was this Latin American Observatory of Geopolitics born? Could you explain a little bit about the work of the Observatory and how it was founded, and how your work has been also developing and evolving during these past decades?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

Thank you Hanna. I'm very glad to be here with you. And the Observatory was born in a moment, very interesting for Latin America, because since 1992 in America we have an uprising of, I don't know if “social movements”, but Indigenous people that were coming from the underground, from the places where nobody looks at them. And they said “500 years is enough”. And then, “it's our time”.

Since then Latin America lived an explosion of proposals of modes of living, different to what capitalism proposes. And we had many social movements, Indigenous movements, and also we can say political movements, because some governments in that time, like the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez and others were also trying to get more place, more capacity of decision in front of the United States politics and implementation of that politics in Latin America.

And it was quite a geopolitical moment, a moment of geopolitical definitions. And then I founded the Observatory to understand the reality in a different way. Because it was not a question of economy. It was not a question of politics. It was not just one thing, but it was an integral kind of redefinition of our reality in Latin America. Then we needed an integral vision and integral valuation of the things that were happening. And we needed to think about the future possibilities, scenarios. How can we change the fatalities of domination that we were living on. And, since then I'm there. I can't be out of this kind of vision, of this kind of recognition of the reality.

HANNA LAAKO

That's very interesting. And I was going to ask, is this close to what you have been talking about the theories or science of complexity - *teorías de complejidad*? I'm not sure if that's the correct translation to English.

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

Yes, that is.

HANNA LAAKO

I have recently popped into this perspective of complex systems or complexities, especially in the Latin American context and Latin American scholars. So I'm wondering if that's something that now, among Latin American scholars, has become like an important viewpoint. And what does this kind of offer, especially for the study of geopolitics?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

When you approach the study to capitalism, for instance, you are studying a system, an organizational system in many dimensions. Then when you are there, you have to look at the complexity that is inside, because it can't be simple. It can be just economics. Everything interacts with the other dimensions, and the chaos theory and the complexity theories just put the focus on that how all things interact with the others. And, you know, when you are in the systemic approach it's interesting, because, what we were talking about before, you can detect how there is not only one system, there are many. There are many, or two or three, I don't know, but there is not only one. Because this system, and precisely the capitalism as system, put itself over all the others. And all the others, some have disappeared, some were distracted, but some are there.

And the uprising of -92 in Latin America was a kind of constatations that there were other systems of life that were alive, a little bit distracted, a little bit disaggregated, a little bit mixed with capitalism, but they were there. There's another possibility, they were there. And that's very important. And that's complexity also. The complexity of this combination of systems, and the complexity inside each one of these systems. It's passionating.

HANNA LAAKO

Yes, it is. And difficult as well as a researcher then to analyze all these different systems and complexities. You have interestingly addressed what we could perhaps call the geopolitics of waters and seas and oceans. And also the geographical extraction related to those. If you could discuss a little bit about that analysis that you have related to these watery roots and the geopolitics related to waters?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

Well, in the case of America, because clearly the axle of economy have passed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, then it's very important to reorganize all the relations, roots and links there were in the Atlantic, to the Pacific. Not only because of reorganize the commercial routes, but also to reorganize the power routes I would say. And they have to fight, to dispute with the Asian economies. Then the United States needs to bring their production that were in the East Coast, looking to the Atlantic, they have to bring it to the Pacific.

They have Panama. But Panama is a difficult place. Not only because of the fight with the Chinese, but also because the climate change and the antiquity of the Panama Canal. It's not enough. It has many, many problems. It takes 10-15 days to pass there. it's complicated now. And then they are thinking how to get a resolution to that. And one is to retrap Panama, and maybe make some recondition of the canal. But to look also other routes, other routes that could be interesting for them and in some cases better than Panama.

There are two possibilities. I think one is the Arctic, but the Arctic is complicated because of Russian presence there. And because they are not there, they have a minimum presence there: Alaska. But there is a possibility, not only of communication route but also because in the Arctic there are many natural resources, very important. Then it's a place that they look with a very big interest.

And there's another possibility in North America. You know, North America is composed of three countries: Canada, the United States and Mexico. Then, in North America, we have Mexico, and Mexico has a very tiny place where you can put a kind of canal to communicate the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific. I am insisting the Gulf of Mexico, but Trump wants to call "the Gulf of America", because he's like that.

But that Gulf of Mexico is a part of North America, the North America homeland, if you want. And then we have 300km. And, it's a little more than Panama, but it's a little more close to the United States. And the problem is that it could be terrific if they were to construct a maritime canal there. But they can do a territorial canal, a "dry canal" we call that. A dry canal with trains that come and go with a quantity of container. And a way to profit also from this communication route is to install many assembling factories there, put places there.

It's not so easy to go to the practice because there are many communities, Indigenous communities that live there, that are fighting against the project. There are many people that is not Indigenous, but they are like me, like others, researchers or whatever, that know that it could be an environmental problem, very critical, because, you know, this is the place where we have the septentrional tropical forest of America. If you make some devastation there, you impact also the Amazonas, because it's the same forest corridor that comes from the Amazonas, to the south of Mexico.

The Mexican government is convinced that they have to do it. Even if we argument and argument, they want to do it. And I think Americans also want to do it. I think they were the inspiration for this project. But they are waiting till the Mexican government resolves the problem with the people there. What is the risk if they do that? The risk is: this canal will be mainly for the American transit. Mainly. Panama is 75% American transit. There are also Asian transit and all that, but it's mainly American transit. This new canal will be mainly American transit. And then, who will secure that? You know, in Mexico we have cartels and... We have many disrupted groups and then if it will be used for international commerce, it will be it has to be secure by someone that can secure that. Who is that if not the American military forces?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

It's the transmit train, but also in connection with the famous train Maya. The train Maya that goes to the... all the south-east of Mexico, called the Peninsula of Yucatán. Then all that part will be, it's being, the place for this megaproject, this trains, lines of trains, that pass over natural reserves. And it's militarized because populations were not comfort with this project. And then militarization have little by little imposed the construction. And the southeast is the most important septentrional tropical forest that we have in the continent. And they are being devastated with the train construction, because it's not only the train, but it's the train, the stations, the places for the military forces, the hotels that come because there is easier to go by train. Theoretically, because it's not so easy to go by train.

It's a project that wanted to impulse the touristic activities because the Peninsula of Yucatán has a very beautiful and long coast, Caribbean coast. It's beautiful, really beautiful. Then they have put there many big hotels, since time before. But the

project was to multiply that kind of investments.

HANNA LAAKO

Yes obviously in the Yucatán Peninsula you've got the ancient Mayan ruins, and the ancient Mayan civilisation that attracts also tourism as you said, in addition to Riviera Maya and the beaches and all that. And the Maya train it paints, or it kind of appears as a tourist project, for tourists. But also I have understood that the objectives of the Maya train are not only touristic, exactly as you have also been writing. But there is, these objectives seem to include other developmental aspects as well, like new centres of population, and also, well you have been writing about controlling migration and certain mobilities perhaps from the central American countries. So what do you see that lies behind this tourist facade of the train, and what kind of geopolitical dimensions you think that specifically the Maya train has?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

The Peninsula Yucatán is not only the place of marvelous big forest, but also is the place of that other system of life, I will say. The Pueblo Maya lives there, not only in the Peninsula Yucatán, but also in the place that comes towards the transisthmian canal. And then, it was the Maya civilization that was there, and is there. They are Mayan populations there. They speak their language, they use their clothes, etcetera, etcetera. And it's important to know that it is not really completely explored, archeologically explored. Then you have some things that were explored that are very important, very attractive for tourism. But between one and the other one, there were also edifications. And these edifications are being devastated by the construction of the railway. It's our history. It's a cultural damage. Not only territorial or environmental. It's also a cultural damage. Very important.

But you mentioned also that this project, it's linked with the necessity that the Americans have to control migration. Because migration to the United States comes from the south. Then the transisthmian canal, it's a kind of frontier, narrow frontier. Not a wide frontier as in the north, but a narrow, very narrow. And it's possible to put a blockage for people there. And, I don't know, if you see the reality now, the problem is that it's a place that is also the route for drugs, the route for people trafficking. And there are many delinquent groups there that are profiting of the situation. It's really a very complicated thing. This part of the country is very complicated. And now they want to extend the train Maya, and it's a ramal of the transisthmian to Guatemala and to Central America.

Then it's all that region, big region, I could say, it's a place for illegal activities, but very profitable activities, too. It's terrible what is happening there. All the possibilities of free life, of life healthy and complementary with nature, and another kind of life, pass in second term, because infrastructure is the most important, because it's development. What is development now? What do we understand by development? We can't go on if we put this kind of damage over nature, over life.

We can't go on in this planet. We, the human species.

HANNA LAAKO

Yes. The human species. That's very interesting what you are saying and it makes me think about this coloniality of trains and this kind of infrastructural project as well, and the extractivism behind them. Because, well here in Europe often you hear that trains are a kind of public goods that are also environmentally friendly. At least in big European cities where people, citizens use the trains and it's economic and it's more environmental than using your own cars. So sometimes when I discuss about the Maya train and the polemics and all these risks that it carries, then it strikes this question like how are these trains, or this kind of projects viewed in different places.

So I think that contrasts quite well this history of trains in Mexico and Latin America and perhaps global south with this history of public trains in Central Europe. I suppose it's mainly because of this extractivist nature that these trains in this case have, or what would you say in this case about the colonial or extractivist element attached to this megaproject in the case of the Maya train?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

When you have trains as a way of communication, a way to facilitate communication, and it's more efficient in some cases, less pollutionary, that's okay. I'm not against trains. And in some cases they are very important, very useful. But not in the forest, not over there the Maya civilization. And they are putting all that in second place. And it's not, it's not comprehensible.

HANNA LAAKO

Yes. About the Maya train then. What kind of resistance and kind of mobilisation, public mobilisation has there been to oppose or to resist the Maya train. How do you see that situation?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

There were a lot of resistance. Not only of the population there, but everyone. Even like me, I am upset. But the train goes on. People begin to say, well, if there's nothing to do to stop it, let's go with. And there are many people that sell their lands, and many people adapted to the conditions. And it's also a destruction of the community organization there were. They put in practice many, as we could call co-optational politics, giving money or giving some governmental place for these people, or things like that.

HANNA LAAKO

Yes. co-opting the movement.

ANA ESTHER CECENÁ

Yes, co-opting people everywhere. And also they have fear because the military are always there, passing by the houses. And the military in Mexico are not so loved. And we have a long history of disasters there. But there are communities that still insist in "no" to the project. But the resistance that we had in the beginning is not the same that we have now.

HANNA LAAKO

Perhaps moving towards thinking about Latin America as a critical edge. Latin America is often perceived as a periphery to major geopolitical issues in the world. And in my own field of international relations, Latin America, in fact, is often kind of neglected, or mainly addressed via these dependance theories. So it is somewhat limited. Perhaps it's also because of the linguistic barriers. And then some Latin American scholars have also called Latin America as "the peaceful" or "the continent of peace" because a few international wars have taken place there. Of course, this sounds a little bit funny because we know that there are many things happening in Latin America and in many ways we can oppose that viewpoint of being peaceful. But this was in reference to international wars, thinking about what usually draws our attention in geopolitics.

So Latin America is also a continent of many resources, and you have interestingly referred to the Americas as a particular geography, kind of an island, continent protected by water that gives it certain power, perhaps of isolation and also of defence. So what kind of critical edge is Latin America in this sense? How do you see it positioned in this global frame of geopolitics?

ANA ESTHER CECENÁ

Well, as you say, we are an island with just one power in there. That power, the United States in this case, always thinks that America was for Americans. America as a whole was for them. And, I think, they have a little reason on that because they have profited from everything that America has.

But just in the 2000, change of millennium, America, Latin America was very mobilized. We can say insurrectionary, a little bit. And from there to now I think there is difference, change in the relations with the United States, even if they are always over all the island. But people was putting limits to them. For instance, rejecting the installation of military bases, rejecting, for instance, mineral investments that were very dangerous for people, to the nature, et cetera. And now we have America with relations with other powers, world powers like China, like Russia, like Iran, like many other powers that are putting in problems the American hegemony. Even in his own place, even in his own island. And that's very interesting because that change the geopolitical equilibrium in the world.

You know, it's interesting that China is entering in some things like ports, like trains, like that communicational infrastructure that is so important in this moment. The last fight with the United States is the Panama Canal. And there were a Chinese investor that had the two ports, in one side and in the other side. And, well, he left the place but this kind of positions of others, others that are not near to the American interests, is there. And if you control one communicational important route, you have power. That's power. The dispute for power, it's very important.

Then, I think, the Latin American importance in geopolitics now, in the geopolitics equilibrium now, it's really high. Because if the United States loses his possibility of act all over the island, the United States will be in trouble, really will be in trouble. Because this is his fortress. And if they don't have this fortress, they are weak. They are not so strong as they think they are.

HANNA LAAKO

And how could you deepen a little bit more on that, how do you see that Indigenous emergence and Indigenous movements, perhaps together with other social movements, how do they impact geopolitics in Latin American context or more broadly?

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

Difficult question because, I think, Indigenous movements are all over the world trying to propose their own way of living. This is very interesting because the mode of living of these kind of populations is more.. is less aggressive with nature, is more complementary with nature, with life in general.

They open a new possibility. You remember when Thatcher says there are no alternative? They said yes, there are alternatives. And we are there. We are living there. It's real, it's concrete, it's not a kind of utopia. Then it was in this sense very important, because geopolitics was trapped into power, or contra-power. And then this kind of movements shows that it's not one or the counter one, but "the other". The really different. Then, I think, it's a quality impact.

HANNA LAAKO

Last question: how do you see the futures for these critical edges? Whether it's the Yucatán Peninsula or Mexico or Latin America? How do you see that the future would look like.

ANA ESTHER CECEÑA

I'm optimistic, even if the world is a catastrophe. But I'm optimistic, because, I think, just as the geopolitical equilibrium is changing, also the ways of capitalism. There's not only one way, there's not the American capitalistic way in this system. It's one system, but there are some other proposals.

You have the Chinese way to capitalism, et cetera, et cetera.

Then, I think, on one side, the way, the Chinese way, is more worried about the green. It's a green capitalism, but it's not devastator, oil, et cetera, -capitalism. Then we have there a little advance. But also there are some power coalitions that are emerging, like BRICs, like many in Asia, different kinds, in Africa also. But there are powers fighting because of the part of that capitalistic cake they can have. But it permits people to advance a little bit in some things. Maybe to stop some projects, maybe to, I don't know, fight against corporations, the very devastators of some minerals or something like that.

I think there are many little holes where we can go out. Go out of this system. I'm convinced that inside this system we can't have a kind of living that we will be comfortable. But there are many holes. We have to, you have to make the holes wider. Make the holes possible, attractive to go out, to go out, to go out. To fight for another ways of life.

I know that at this moment this seems like "this woman is really mad", because we have wars everywhere, we have a lot of heavy power over all the world. But, we have been there 500 years. We can be there 500 years again.

HANNA LAAKO

Thank you for listening to the Critical Edges -podcast. We are Hanna Laako, Vadim Romashov, Eleonoora Karttunen and Katherine Hall - researchers at the University of Eastern Finland, who explore and inhabit many critical Edges.

VADIM ROMASHOV

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