

Transcript for Episode with Javier Puente

SPEAKERS

Joe Aguilar, John Galante, Javier Puente

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

INTRODUCTION

John Galante

Hi, I'm John Galante, I'm a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante

And you are listening to *Crossing Fronteras*.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

INTERDISCIPLINARITY; ETHNOGRAPHY

John Galante

And today we have with us Javier Puente, a writer and a scholar of history and of Latin American, Latino, Latina, Latinx Studies, with a focus on Peru, if I can say, He's also a professor at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. We'll hear much more about his biography as we move through the the interview and the conversation today. But Javier thank you for joining us today.

Javier Puente

Thank you so much, John, Joe, it's a pleasure to be with you today.

John Galante

I wanted to start with something, your bio page refers to you as an interdisciplinary scholar. And I know that you have a degree in history. And so maybe a little bit on the story, there could be kind of an interesting place to start

Javier Puente

I do not have one degree in History, I have three degrees. So my bachelor's degree, my master's degree, and my PhD are all in History. So you know, for many people, I'm a hardcore historian.

I think the interdisciplinary claim comes from some form of identity crisis that emerged while I was conducting my doctoral dissertation research. I think it's an anecdote that will bring us to perhaps another topic that will come back in the next few minutes. And I'm happy to just give you a hint of it. I was researching in an archive, as most historians do, for my dissertation, and I was somewhat disappointed about having this deep feeling of writing another book about *campesinos* and communities, indigeneity, based on state sources, right, because that's what gets to be often in an archive, particularly in state archives.

And I think three months in, one morning, cold morning in Lima's *Archivo General de la Nación*, I saw this scene happening in front of me of this person, you know, you could say he was, you know, *campesino* looking, he was wearing a poncho, and was approaching the archivist asking for the copies of the titles of his community. And he was treated with, I would say, to put it mildly, disdain, as often people who, you know, seem to be from the highlands of Peru, seem to be *campesino* or indigenous, and are in Lima. But I overheard what community, he was from he was from San Pedro de Pari, which is a community that is adjacent to the community that I was researching on.

So I rushed to approach him. And I said, Hey, sir, how are we doing? My name is Javier Puente, I heard you mentioned San Pedro de Pari, you know, it turns out that I know a few things about your *comunidad*. And, you know, we exchange information, I gave him a USB port with some documents that I had found about San Pedro de Pari. But I told him, whatever you consider to be the titles of your *comunidad* they're not here, and I can guarantee you that. And towards the end of the conversation, he said, Oh, wow, it's so baffling that you know so much about this, this part of the country, have you been there? And, you know, to my embarrassment, I said, No.

Because often, you know, I think historians miss the point that, you know, we research and write about peoples and places that, you know, are not just past they're also present, very present sometimes. And I don't think it's a habit among many of us historians to go to these places or to, you know, getting contact or in touch with the peoples whose past we researched. So I said no, and he was like, well, you need to come and then he facilitated me some phone numbers from current leaders of San Juan de Onderes. And I ended up coming the next weekend to the upper *central sierra*. And what I learned from there, to circle back to your original question, was some form of very informal and I don't know if I would call it informal, but like self-taught ethnographic work, right? I had to operate like an ethnographer or an anthropologist in ways that I had never been exposed to.

A book that came to my mind constantly during during my doctoral dissertation was Nancy Shepherd Hughes *Death Without Weeping*, this beautiful book about Belem do Para and motherhood. And I was like, how do you think as an ethnographer, right? And so I ended up producing a dissertation that, you know, it was what dissertations often are, a very, very incomplete piece of work.

But it was clear to me my doctoral defense and in subsequent periods that I don't think I have produced quite a piece of historical research as I had produced something that was, and felt to many people, like a hybrid piece of research. And I guess to validate that claim, you know, the first book talk invitation that I received was from Brown University's Department of Anthropology. And in general, I would say, anthropologists have paid much more attention to my work than historians.

So, you know, recently, I have been looking in other directions for future projects I've been looking at climate, I've been looking at recently dynamite. And all of these different topics are leading me into directions that I think I believe they're still grounded in a historical lens and a historical approach to questions. But by definition require just just openness about, you know, disciplinary tools and new forms of epistemology.

John Galante

Yeah, I mean, I always feel like as historians, we are interdisciplinary in a way are we we have the openness to be. Yes, we use archival materials, typically written documents. But we can you can be an

economic historian, you can be a social historian, a cultural historian, historian of whatever it might be, historical anthropologist. It is, not to push you back into the History camp, because I don't I don't think that's fair, but at least we have, I think, as historians some ability to kind of be interdisciplinary in our work based on whatever we can find. Right? And not just related to our question, per se, our interests, but also what the what the documents end up being, or maybe the people ended up being if it's an oral history project.

Javier Puente

I strongly agree. I think the only footnote I would add to that is, you know, especially if there are any grad students listening to this episode right now, existing in an interdisciplinary sphere, you know, it creates a certain appeal from from certain peoples and places and potentially employers, but it's also a huge risk, you know, it's, they're not that many interdisciplinary journals. And, you know, I think, academia at large and the networks of production of knowledge are still in the process of getting updated to really welcome this interdisciplinarity as a valid form of creating knowledge. And, you know, many of the colleagues who operate as, as gatekeepers are still, you know, sort of representative of a very old-fashioned way of looking at disciplinary boundaries, and they might not react entirely positive towards interdisciplinary scholarship.

Joe Aguilar

Sort of a follow up question based on something you were saying, I'm interested in what you said about a self-taught ethnography, or learning how to do the process of ethnography. What did that look like in terms of your own research? And what did you have to learn? How did that research come about?

Javier Puente

I think when you're talking about ethnography, one of the first things that emerges almost naturally, organically is accessibility. Being Peruvian and researching in Peru, just like enabled some things. Looking fairly Peruvian can enable another set of things. My grandfather was a Quechua speaking *campesino*, you know, from Huancavelica. So, you know, there's, there's some form of like connection to, not the same region not the same peoples, but, you know, what you would, I guess broadly describe as the same culture. Having some, some Quechua knowledge also, you know, enabled another degree of things. And, you know, I think that gave me some, some pre-emptive access to perhaps some things that someone with another layer of externalities would perhaps have to build up progressively and gradually.

Once that happened, I think, the other thing that plagued me and really, you know, I cannot like quite assert this strong enough, Shepherd Hughes book about motherhood in in Brazil, is this fantastic book that I mentioned before, one of the earliest reflections in that book is the role of humbleness in ethnographic research, right. Like how, you know, you're venturing into a world that you believe you know, that you believe you have come to get a grasp of based on all the, you know, platitude of a scholarship that you have read, but you don't really know. Right? And that sort of attitudinal posture, that is, you know, like framed with humbleness and with openness to be awed, I think it's indispensable for launching any kind of ethnographic work. And listening, right?, listening, I, you know, to continue that sort of like background, what's shaping up to be a background story about my experience in San Juan de Ondores.

After I had arrived and had tried to sleep in at, you know, 13,500 feet above sea level, for the first time in my life, I met the current leaders of San Juan de Ondores. And quickly after explaining my project,

they mentioned this archive that they had. And so I was like, yes, documents come to me. And they were like, no, no, no, no, no, no, you have to ask for permission to gain access to these to these documents. And that permission has to be granted by the *comunidad* in a sort of communal assembly.

And, you know, that alone, you know, there were a number of things that that I haven't fully described yet, I think this is the first opportunity which I have to that I have to discuss this. In my mind, as a Peruvian, as a *limeño* really, right, if the leaders say you can access them, that's all you need. Right? Like the hierarchy has spoken, right? The *presidente comunal* has said that I can access these documents. This idea that you have to submit yourself to like a communal really like popular vote, no matter what democratic values I hold, felt so strange to me yesterday. Just to give you an example of like the reach and limits of our democratic training in Peru.

But anyway, so I prepared a speech for the next weekend, I presented the project, and I was granted access, not with a unanimous vote, but just a simple majority. And then I moved to the *comunidad* for four months to just research on these papers. And as I was researching on these papers, and living with the *comunidad* in a house that that was facilitated to me, I think I started to create a common life with with, not not with the *comunidad* as a whole, you know, that that's a longer story, but with some members of the community. And that quotidian existence, I believe was part of that sort of like almost organic ethnographic work that emerged.

And one final thing to make, to not make this answer too long is, you know, if you if you're researching the Andes, you need to drink alcohol, you cannot be dry or sober, whatever word you want to use, *abstemio*. Some of the best conversations that I had with people from the *comunidad* happened over room temperature beers, you know. There is no cold beer in the Peruvian Highlands, it's just room temperature, because everything is freezing. So, you know, get used to that.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

MAKING 'THE RURAL STATE'; PERU'S CENTRAL SIERRA

John Galante

So I could really appreciate in looking at your book, *The Rural State*, right, this effort to sort of revisit things that we think we know about, from a particular point of view. And not just bottom up, but a very particular place, a very particular type of community.

Javier Puente

I didn't plan to write this book. I didn't plan to write any books. I never thought I would write a book. That was I was not a goal of mine. It was totally unexpected. I never thought about pursuing a PhD. And certainly insofar as this topic comes, I think the topic found me. I didn't find the topic.

When I was doing a preliminary trip after my first year of the PhD program, I I needed to find a topic for a second year research paper. And I feel like most scholars of my generation who are fascinated about Peruvian history at large, particularly like 20th century Peruvian history and certainly rural politics, I wanted to do something related to the internal armed conflict in Peru. Like this very violent, very turbulent period between 1980 and 2000, in which almost 70,000 Peruvians were killed either by *Sendero Luminoso*, this Maoist political party/ terrorist organization, or by the counter-subversive forces of the Peruvian state.

And with that in mind, I ventured into Ayacucho. Ayacucho, for those of you who are not seasoned in Peruvian history, is the new Huamanga, Huamanga being one of the most important colonial cities in the Americas really. You know in the 20th Century, Huamanga became a laboratory of many, many interesting political, social, and economic experiments, including the opening of a new university, or reopening of an old university as a new university, the Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga, that was in its original conception was destined to really change the futures and the destinies of rural peoples not just from Ayacucho, but from everywhere. Instead, the San Cristobol de Huamanga University became this crowded cradle of revolutionary ideals and eventually of subversive paradigms and of *Sendero Luminoso's* armed struggle.

So I visited Ayacucho and I was a scholar trying to find a topic, or an a proto-scholar trying to find a topic. And and what I found there was that either nearly everything that was being discussed about Ayacucho had already found an author, or that some of the topics felt a little bit too dire to me. I think, you know, this is not judgment on folks who research on like really dire questions and like gruesome subjects of which history has plenty, particularly in Latin American history and Global South history at large. But I don't think because of my personal and family trajectory, which we can also talk about at some point, I don't think I'm emotionally prepared for intellectually addressing some of these dire questions.

So I returned to Lima in despair thinking, oh my god I'm gonna fail. And as I was doing some last attempts of finding like this research topic, just for the second-year research paper that I had to prepare during my coursework, I encountered this digital file of the Fourth Russell Tribunal held in Rotterdam in 1983. Russell Tribunals are a post-World War Two development that basically emerged as a necessity for creating a symbolic court in which some pressing issues such as genocide would be addressed, increasingly so in sort of global comparative perspective. There have been a number of these Russell Tribunals held through the 20th century. I can't remember what was the topic of the second and the third Russell Tribunal, but the fourth Russell Tribunal was on the rights of global indigenous peoples. This is 1983. This is the peak of the militarization of the armed conflict. And within this file, there was the documents of San Juan de Ondores suing suing the Peruvian state before the Russel Tribunal.

And that to me just sounded fascinated, like, there's this scenario of almost complete societal meltdown, in which *campesinos* and *comnidades* of Peru are becoming the key targets of political violence on multiple fronts. And amidst this debacle, a *comunidad* decides to sue the Peruvian state. So I read through the documents, I found it fascinating, I wrote my research paper of the second year on these documents, and then I just couldn't stop digging.

It was that, but also that encounter that I mentioned with the San Pedro de Pari *campesino*, who led me to, or what led me to write the dissertation and the book. I really want to believe that this topic, and this narrative needed a voice and I'm just the facilitator of that voice.

John Galante

You talk about the global countryside, or a global rural history, I think it's also one of your terms for it, And, and so and you've already mentioned kind of the Global South a couple times in this conversation. The book doesn't talk a ton about those global connections, nevertheless, you situate it in that space. And I'm just wondering what you what the conception of that is, like a global rural community or something like that.

Javier Puente

I think there is a point in which I, I claim in introduction of the book that we have this image of the modern world as a primarily urban world, right. And we have this image or this like landscape, global landscape, vastly dominated by the nation-state, and the nation-state being, again, like an urban-based development. This is one of the most global things, right?, Global north, Global South, and Global Inbetweenness, they all live in cities. We are obsessed with with like, just demographically grouping ourselves in like higher and higher and taller and taller piles of people.

And I explain in the introduction of the book that this is a very recent development, that not long ago, probably throughout most of the world, most of the people live in the countryside, right, or what we now call the countryside. And that the history of all these things that we have come to hold dear about modernity or post-modernity and globalization is largely based on the very incipient initial process of deruralization of world, right? As the world became more urban, it had to become less rural. Right?

There is an exercise that I think it's less doable in the United States, although I'm sure there is a version that I can do in the US, but it's it's widely or it used to be widely done in in Peru, when I was a college student. A teacher stands in front of a classroom and says, Alright, if you're born in Lima, raise your hand. And you know, 90% of the classroom would raise their hands, right? And then okay, if your parents were born in Lima, keep your hands raised. And then you get like 50% of the classroom, right? And then if your grandparents were born in Lima, keep your hands raised. And then you get like 10% of the classroom. Like that's a deruralization of the world, right? That's the process by which Peru in this case became the sort of like Lima-centric development.

And with that idea in mind, what I wanted to test for the book is, okay, so if the nation-state it's a formation that precedes this sort of like urban development, what can we read about the state with a rural key? And what I try to go through in the book, that I believe is very Peruvian, but it can be potential extended to other latitudes of the world, is this number of features, experiments, laboratories, tests, initiatives, policies, that a state, a postcolonial state, of which the globe the Earth has the majority of the states are postcolonial states, including the United States of America, even though they want to forget that. What do they do with their countrysides, right?

And so one of the earliest processes that I identify is this anxiety about the internal geography of a country that, you know, in its emergence, you have identified the external boundaries, the external contours of your country. You actually were finally able to draw a map after like several international conflicts and wars, and you're finally able to settle your frontiers. But then, you know, one day you wake up, you being the state and say, Jesus, what's happening inside? Right? What do we know about these territories that we have now circled, and have claimed that is ours?

And the answer is, we don't know much. Who lives there? What happens there? How is this going to be potentially productive for our interests? Right. And soon after envisioning how the internal geography of this territory is shaping up, you realize that population is perhaps one of the most important features of any form of governance that you want to inflict on these territories. Right? You know, it is important to understand how nature and environmental conditions work and what you can produce and what you can extract. But it's also important to understand who lives there or who is going to be the labor who will get to work on this on these lands. And so very rarely how population is distributed will really satisfy how you as a state are thinking that the sort of like population settlements should be working towards a common quote unquote, national interest.

So there comes a process of social engineering of like trying to envision devices and policies and procedures that can make a best most efficient use, efficient as defined by the state of course, of population sources, right. So you organize the population, in this case in the Peruvian case you have Andean communities, right. So what do we do internally with these communities? Now, now we have *comunidades*, right, now we have both a geographical but also a human geography organization of the countryside.

What do you do next? Well, okay, well, we need to promote certain values, we need to like enforce certain standards, you know, education, production, you know, health. And so what I'm trying to describe here is that a number of very distinctive efforts that the state later on unfolds at a national scale, be that population management, censusing, building schools, building roads, you know, creating national documents of identity, all of them at some point, I think, were tried first in these rural experiments, and having countryside people as the key subjects of, of these initiatives.

John Galante

If that state-building project, nation-building project is equivalent across states and nations, then there's potential for the resistance to also be connected across communities within various states and nations potentially, if the some of the same factors are impacting rural people, then maybe some of the ways that they resist could be worth looking at in parallel, or even through linkages.

Javier Puente

And across time too, there is a book that I I really wanted to cite in my book as some form of homage, and I never found that quite the right place to do it. It has been so influential in nearly every single thing and idea that I hold about the relationship between state powers and rural peoples and that's Eugene Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France*. Fascinating book, old fashioned, I think very few people read it these days. And, you know, this is a book about late 18th and early 19th-century France, right?, France in the aftermath of the French Revolution. And yet, there are so many synergies, so many, you know, similarities and parallels, between the experiences of rural peoples confronting the nationalizing muscle of post-revolutionary France, and rural peoples in Peru.

John Galante

So, if those processes, which ultimately we might refer to in the 20th century as development, developmental initiatives, developmental state, and then obviously we have developed countries, right, which would suggest that that process was somehow complete.

So resistance to those processes of development, state-building, nation-building, occur in many places, in many situations, across periods of time. We often refer to countries in Latin America as developing which means underdeveloped, which means that process is incomplete somehow. Sometimes it's suggested that it's because of failures of the state to implement that development.

But I think another way to look at it is those through those processes of resistance, that have resisted development. If those processes that resist development are successful, through maybe bottom-up agency, then a country is underdeveloped or still developing because of the successful agency of the communities and groups that resist it. So if Latin America is developing, it's because of the success of rural populations or marginalized populations or other populations in resisting development. Do you follow me?

Javier Puente

You know, I have more than an answer to your question, which is it isn't really a question, it's an idea.

So one of the ideas that is embedded in your idea that I sort of resisted, pun intended, was this notion that rural populations, and really like any sort of like historical actor subject to powers that are beyond their control, they only debate their existence between obedience and resistance, right? And that collaboration, cooperation, willing contribution to the construction of the structures of power is a thing. And I, I believe that scholarship on, nuanced scholarship on colonialism, has, you know, quite ably discussed this, you know, what was the role of indigenous labor in the construction of the colonial mining enterprise, right? Or what was the role of indigenous knowledge not just as labor but also knowledge?

And, yes, I think parts of the book want to portray this image of a moment in which the invitation of the state to join the sort of like emerging national community, abiding to certain state regulations, not only felt compelling and appealing, but also inviting to rural peoples. And once they accepted that initial invitation, then they found the rooms, not just wiggle room, but like real like, you know, institutional vacuums, to fill them with their own visions of how that state or how that nation should operate. So that's the first thing I want to say.

The other thing, is that a word that came to mind when you were sharing that idea, John, is incompleteness, right? And we often see the incompleteness using these conscious or unconscious ruling measure that feels very teleological, right, and very western-centric, not to say US-centric, right, in which there is there's stage one of development, there's stage 10 of development, right, and anyone who doesn't reach stage 10, therefore its incomplete. And just like you're saying that the incompleteness is a successful intervention of those who resist.

I mean, there's a way in which you can see the incompleteness as a success, right, because we take for granted that the State wanted the completeness of the project. That's an assumption. Maybe the failure was a success. Because if something is incomplete, then the room you have to operate and fail in like future iterations of governance, it's absolutely justified. Right? And so the incompleteness is not just the the result of the agency of those who resist, but it can also be potentially the shared goal of those who rule and don't do not want to rule efficiently, because that's a way of ruling, and those who resist and likewise, they don't want efficient rule because that's total governance.

Joe Aguilar

And sort of relatedly too, you talk early in your book about how the *central sierra* in Peru became so politically and socially vibrant. I'm wondering if you might discuss a little bit what's so unique about this particular region.

Javier Puente

For those of you who are not seasoned about Peruvian geography, the *central sierra* is this highland region adjacent to Lima that you can access, if you leave with your car by around, say, 5am, you can get to the capital of the *central sierra*, in many ways the capital of the *central sierra*, Huancayo, the core of the Mantaro Valley, in I would say probably six to seven hours. And that proximity makes the *central sierra* really like sort of like the pantry shop of Lima. Like most of what gets to be consumed by Lima, which is the largest city of Peru, it has 14 million people right now, that's roughly a third of the national

population if not more, most of what it consumes agriculturally and also in terms of livestock comes from the *central sierra*.

And there was a good number of studies of the *central sierra* and the many interesting historical episodes that happened there. The *central sierra* was the cradle of Peruvian resistance against the Chilean invasion in the midst of the War of the Pacific and, therefore, the participation of indigenous guerillas in the War of Pacific. And so, there was a good number of studies of the *central sierra* in terms of the sort of valley region that forms in the lower part of this of this area of the Andes.

There are less studies about the upper region. So the *central sierra* has this valley area, and it also has an upper plateau. This upper plateau is, I think, as high as the *altiplano* probably like a few 100 feet less the *altiplano*, the *altiplano* being the region adjacent to Bolivia, Puno, the frontier with with contemporary Bolivia. It has the largest body of water on Peruvian territory. That's not the Titicaca because the Titicaca is shared with Bolivia. This region is the region that has the largest body of water, the Chinchaycocha Lake. And it has what was a century or more ago, has been identified as the richest grazing pastures of the republic, fostering a really rich livestock, sheep herding economy. Most of the studies of this region revolve around the studies of Serra de Pasco. Serra de Pasco was one of the most important mining cores from colonial times to present, lots of silver, lots of copper recently extracted from Serra de Pasco, and other minerals. But there were fewer studies about that other sort of like communal formations and livelihoods that form besides mining.

On top of that, you know, for folks who are more interested about the recent history of the Peruvian Andes and therefore more focused on the internal armed conflict and, therefore, very Ayacucho-centric. Ayacucho being the city that I mentioned a few minutes ago. Ayacucho, you know, without a hint of a doubt, takes a very preeminent and prominent role in terms of being the epicenter of social political violence, number of victims, number of casualties, also the origin of *Sendero Luminoso* itself.

But the second most important region in all these aspects, both in terms of casualties, dynamics of the conflict, and also university origins of a different branch of *Sendero Luminoso* is the *central sierra*. So even if you want to understand this process, it is incomplete if you don't get the *central sierra* together with Ayacucho. So I think all of this, all of these ideas, really try to make me justify that we needed an update of what we know about *central sierra*.

And, you know, perhaps signal that there is a rural conversation beyond and before the internal armed conflict, that should bring us back to questions about the foundations of nation, the foundations of the state in Peru.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++ **IDENTITY POLITICS AND ACADEMIA**

John Galante

So I wonder if we could switch gears a little bit, beyond your scholarship, and talk a little bit about what it's like for you to be a scholar in the United States, to be a Peruvian scholar in the United States.

Javier Puente

So, yes, I think something that becomes apparent to anyone who interacts with me and knows that I'm a scholar of Peru, and I'm Peruvian, is that, Okay that is the way things happen, right? Like, if you are

this, you can research that. But if you are not that, then you cannot research this. And versions of this, I confront them all the time, you know, based on where I teach at Smith College. I have had so many iterations of a version of this conversation. I am XYZ, right, can I study ABC? And my answer always is, of course you can.

I don't know at what point we surrendered, and by we I mean the intellectual, academic, scholarly, global community surrendered to the idea that the only epistemologies that we need our identity-based epistemologies. But it seems that that's where we are. And I try to resist that. And because I have earned tenure, I want to be more open and vocal about resisting this. Because I believe it's leading us to a scenario that is repeating itself so constantly, that I am still waiting for someone to raise their hand and say, Hey, maybe that's the result of this problem.

Recently, we have seen, I think everyone has witnessed what happened to Andrea Smith at UC Irvine, right?, and how she has been unveiled to be a what, I think the term they're using now is pretendian, someone who pretends to be indigenous, and, and is not, right? And it's just one more case of you know like now a vast ocean of cases of people who forged their identities for claiming a space that, yeah it turns out, it's not theirs to claim. But perhaps the conversation should also lean towards, do we need that place?

We do need to open places and break down walls for those alternate epistemologies that have no room in an age of white dominated academia and white dominated universities. But I think, you know, my, my therapist often talks about this, the risk of over correction, right? When the pendulum has been leaning in one direction for so long, the correction often is an overcorrection, just push the pendulum, and the pendulum goes all the way to the other edge of things. That is an overcorrection. That is not where we need to be. And I think we're seeing the results of what we need to change in an exaggerated way. Understandably, so, understandably so, you know, academia has been a racist institution for very long. And it still is, in many ways. But the correction of that cannot be a version of academia in which this sort of like almost seemingly fundamentalist versions of identity politics are dominating the conversation in ways that feels obliterating to other forms of these epistemologies that are very much necessary for having a really, truly plural conversation.

John Galante

I wasn't expecting that to be what you said, to be perfectly honest. And I really appreciate it. I wonder like, what's the next step then after that? I wonder if the issue is this, that the starting point is identity, like identity matters, right?, and your, your origins and your perspective and your upbringing and your country of origin all matter, right? And are all relevant and shape, right, your work, if we're just looking at it from a scholarly perspective. But is one of the issues potentially starting with identity as the primary and first and maybe all-encompassing variable.

Javier Puente

I think it is, I think it is, there's something to be said about the role of identity as a departure point, as you as you said, as you know, by some folks, the sole framework for understanding everything. Like folks like Andrea Smith, apparently reportedly based on what has been disclosed publicly, refused to have conversations with scholars who are not indigenous, right. And I think the moment academia loses its plurality, I think we're losing what distinguishes us as a very specific sphere within society.

And I think global civil society at large, has been way too eroded and way too polarized. I don't know what your feelings about this is, but I have been feeling since before the pandemic that we're on the edge of some sort of like major massive civil society meltdown, in which it's not even about epistemologies anymore, you have two sides of, of society that feel like they live, alternate different worlds. Like, it's not about their world views anymore, their realities are different, or so they claim. And they're so different that they just refuse to talk to each other. It makes me wonder, you know, to what, to what degree we can, we can sustain a functional civil society with those conditions.

And I think academia carries the obligation. I don't want to claim any kind of like ivory tower privilege, but we do carry an obligation to persist having conversations, particularly in moments in which conversations feel difficult. And this version of this sort of identity politics or identity-based approach to things that feel obliterating against plurality is a source of concern for me, as a scholar, as a professional, as a teacher, and as a citizen.

John Galante

And are you thinking in the US context when you're making those, when you're describing what you just described? Or is, is this global or is it only is it in certain places, right? I'm just wondering where your head is, when you're thinking about the plurality, and those kinds of characteristics.

Javier Puente

I'm thinking primarily about the US, because that's where I exist professionally. And that's the one academia that I'm most familiar with. Even though I'm Peruvian, I'm really, you know, absent in Peruvian academia in ways I'm trying to fix in recent in recent years. And my book is now under contract for translation. So hopefully, I'll be able to join the conversation in Peru sometime sometime soon.

But there is another layer of that, of these ideas that I just shared that that has eyes on Peru, right, and degradation of civility that that's happening there. And you know, that, you know, to some degree, you can say that it's happening elsewhere in Latin America. Right, like? You know, one side calls the other terrorist, right, and the other side calls the other fascist, and that's the end of the conversation. Right.

And, you know, it is concerning, it is concerning. It worries me about the world that we're leaving behind for future generations.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

THE GLOBAL SOUTH

John Galante

It brings me, you know, tangentially to another question I've been wondering about, between notions of the Global South and the Global North, particularly in Latin America, but also elsewhere. And I think that the question, or maybe it's an idea again, is, are those conceptions too rooted in the nation state? So the US is the Global North, therefore, everybody who lives in the United States is part of the Global North. Peru or another country is considered part of the Global South, therefore, everybody who's from or living in that country, that nation-state is a member, part of, right, or at least has origins in the Global South.

Think about wealth disparities across countries that are both in the Global North and the Global South, that may be there are safe places, there are northern places, right?, there are wealthy places, there are developed places in many countries of the Global South and the Global North, and there are underdeveloped, marginalized, poor, developing places in countries that are considered part of the Global North as well as the Global South. And so this notion of a Global South and the Global North, is maybe not best rooted, right?, within the political boundaries of the nation-state.

And I was going to ask you this, this is making my question really long, but I was gonna ask you this, when we were talking about your book, whether a place in rural Oklahoma has potentially some equivalence to the places that you've looked at, in *The Rural State*, your book. And even to what degree a place like Miraflores, in Lima, might have equivalence to something in Miami, just say.

Javier Puente

That's very provocative.

John Galante

Thinking of yourself, potentially, I don't want to put these words in your mouth, as a scholar of the Global South, using that term, invokes to some degree, right, it's broader use, which typically is framed by national borders.

Javier Puente

That's really provocative, especially the argument against Miraflores. I like it. And so when I use the term Global South, in my writing, I am very much embracing the sort of like, I think it's very much a Cold War legacy of the term. Right. And it's certainly I will be naive to indicate that it doesn't encompass a geographical or geopolitical reference. And without getting too much into some form of like neo-dependency theory kind of rationale, I believe that term, maybe is still valid if it gets an upgrade, right?

You're mentioning Oklahoma, you know, I teach at Smith College and Smith College is in Northampton. For folks who do not know anything about Western Massachusetts, there is something called the tofu wall. It's not a real wall. It's a symbolic wall that divides a white western Massachusetts from *bodicua* Western Massachusetts, right? And so if you cross the border between South Hadley and Holyoke, you get a very different Western Massachusetts experience. Northampton, very white, very uppermiddle class. Holyoke, very *bodicua*, very Latinx, and riddled by all the trouble and problems and questions that all the Latinx communities and, you know, arguably their their countries of origin confront.

So you can make the case that you don't have to go all the way south to Oklahoma to say that Holyoke is the Global South of Northampton, right? And cases like this are abundant, right?, we are recording in Boston, you know, Cambridge is a Global North, by all means, and there are so many Global Souths that are, you know, circling Cambridge. So you know, it ultimately I think, continuation of using this term requires an upgrade that signals that more than a geopolitical reference, it's a polarity reference, it's a term that refers to a certain polarity.

And what kind of polarity is that? When you were phrasing your, your reflection, what came to mind is the conclusion of Greg Grandin's book on the Panzós Massacre, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, what Greg described then as one of the greatest tragedies, if not the greatest tragedy of the Cold War in Latin America, which was not just the assassination of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans, but also the demise of an alternate vision of democracy. Right? You know, Greg makes this

very compelling case that what clashed in Cold War Latin America was not communism against democracy, but two visions of democracy, one that was US-sponsored that was election-based and delegative and representational, and another vision of democracy that was popular, that was quotidian, and that was very much participative. Right?

And so, you know, when sometimes when you think about what is the South or the North, I think, you know, this is a vision that can frame that understanding of the polarity of peoples who are just trying to envision a different future and an alternate future of how things should work in their lives that is remarkably different to how they work right now.

John Galante

It sounds maybe that, that your conception, the way you're conceiving it I can appreciate the Global South sort of as an idea, or an objective, or an anti-hegemonic point of view, right?

Javier Puente

A horizon of some kind, right? Yes. And by the way I and I don't want to miss the opportunity to mentioned this. It is a horizon that for some twisted reason seems to be better understood by the global right these days, right?, in providing the sort of like, vision of the alternate future that feels deeply authoritarian but, you know, for reasons, reasons that that make authoritarianism compelling to folks who have confronted disenfranchisement for so long. Right?

And I think, just like the Global South needs an upgrade, I think, you know, progressivism, you know, if we want to keep using the same coordinates that we have with us for a century now, you know, the left, right, which also needs an upgrade. But progressivism at large requires an upgrade that brings them back to this, like Global South horizon, that right now, as we speak, seems to be completely seized by authoritarian ideals that promise some layer of enfranchisement that feels compelling to those who have been disempowered and disenfranchised for very long. And while that doesn't happen, we won't win any battles.

John Galante

To take it back to indigenous communities in the Andes, I think their perspective on the political spectrum has often been from the outside. So you ask a *campesino*, you know, or an indigenous person in the Andes, and you say, well, you, if you're, you know, against the state, then you must be on the left. And there's not a natural affinity between those perspectives.

Javier Puente

Perhaps the best example of this is the recent presidency of Pedro Castillo in Peru, the short-lived presidency of Pedro Castillo. Pedro Castillo himself being of rural origins, a *rondero* from Cajamarca peasant militia, a rural teacher. The assumption by, you know, was more or less he's a leftist, he's a comrade. Right? That's how *Jacobin* celebrated him openly. And I was among the few who cautioned about the credentials of Pedro Castillo, and you know, how he could be an outlet for, like new forms of authoritarianism that could emerge. You know, I, it's awful to be in that position of like, I said so. But that's, that's what ended up happening when he confronted demise attempting to do one of the most authoritarian measures in the history of Peru in the last 30 years. Kind of repeating what Alberto Fujimori did in 1992. When he's now, you know, arrested and waiting for conviction. And that also brings us back to identity politics.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++
FUTURE PROJECTS ON EL NIÑO AND DYNAMITE

Joe Aguilar

I wonder if we can also talk about future projects. The project on dynamite sounds fascinating. Can you tell us about it?

Javier Puente

So I have two projects, one larger and one, so far it feels smaller.

The larger project is about climate and indigeneity and the role of El Niño in creating Andean livelihoods, right? And, you know, one of the epistemological twists that I want to work with there is, you know, seeing that, you know, something that is perceived these days as intrinsically disastrous as, as something generative, right, and like, in adapting to this phenomenon, and, or this oscillation and, coexisting with it, you know. Maybe El Niño needs to be recast as one of the foundational pillars of how livelihood emerged in what is now Peru and including the Andes. And, yeah, that's, that's a larger project, I don't know if it's necessarily going to be the second project, I have written a few pieces and published a few articles on the subject and continue to present on it for sure.

But another thing that has happened to me is this sort of like epiphany that, that hit me one day of how ubiquitous has been dynamite in my personal life, right. And there's, there's two anecdotes that, you know, I can share very quickly, one of which is. I come from a military family, and we live in a military village. And we live in a military village in a really complicated time to live in military villages. And when I was five years old, there was a bomb placed in the front gate of the military village, where we lived. And arguably it was *Sendero Luminoso* and they were doing this bomb attempt against military houses. And I vividly remember the conversation about how many cartridges of dynamite was used to create the explosion that they created.

And the other anecdote involves my grandfather, and I don't know if it's an anecdote that I can share publicly. You know, it's my, my grandfather on my mom's side was an activist, a politician. And apparently at some point in his life a very radical activist, let's call him an activist. And in 1948, he tried to participate in the making of a revolution in Peru that involved the APRA – Acción Popular Revolucionario Americana -- the back then sort of like radical leftist parties, and, and the Navy was somehow involved. And his role was to seize a train station in, by the way, in the central highlands of Peru. My grandfather, for the record, was always missing an arm. And when I was a kid, I was, I was told that a crocodile had eaten his arm because he didn't drink his soup. And that's how my mother forced me to drink soup. And, you know, I grew up just like taking for granted that he misses an arm like that's the story.

And then many years after, when I was an undergrad student, I met a friend of his who told me the real story. And the real story is that in trying to seize this train station, he was trying to bomb the train station. And he lost his arm because he didn't place a bomb correct, or the cartridge of dynamite exploded before he was able to like, place it. So yeah, I don't know, if US authorities are listening to this. We'll see if I have any trouble. So I'm going to open this project with these two anecdotes, for sure.

And then this dynamic project tentatively titled *Boom: An Explosive History of Peru* tries to reflect on this, like, unexpected and really, like, you know, still real role of dynamite in shaping the geography and

the political culture of Peru. And so the documents I have collected so far basically are going to be organized in like, I think four chapters. The first one is the role of dynamite in building railroads at the end of the 19th century, and granting access to geographies that had prior to that point being inaccessible at that level with that speed with that specific pace. A second chapter on mining and how dynamite integrates them in this in-depth mining and allows the power of capital to reach new depth of soil. A third chapter on the role of dynamite in fishing that will bring us to the Amazon where dynamite is still used for fishing purposes being like a really like very anthropocentric form of depletion of bodies of water. And the fourth chapter on dynamite being the quintessential weapon of *Sendero Luminoso* against the Peruvian state and internal armed conflict Somehow it feels more doable than the El Niño in your project, but maybe we will find out otherwise.

John Galante

Yeah, I mean, it does seem like your trajectory, even when in your first book when you're describing the, the ecology and the environment of the *central sierra*, even in earlier comments you've made describing the valley and that sort of thing, you know, you just seem very drawn to geography and topography and environment/climate. And so it seems like a natural progression in some ways to move in those directions.

Javier Puente

Pun intended, was a natural break. When I was at Georgetown, I invited the prominent environmental historian John McNeil to be a part of my committee. And, you know, when we finished the dissertation defense, and he congratulated me, I think I told him, like, I'm sorry, I didn't do more of an environmental history. And he said, Oh, you're an environmental historian, you just don't know it yet.

John Galante

Well Javier. Thank you so much for being with us today. This was really fascinating. I think we we did visit a great deal of different topics that all I think relate to, to you to your work to your trajectory and that sort of thing, and definitely have enriched our, our podcast series, for sure. So thanks for coming today.

Javier Puente

Thank you so much, John and Joe.

Joe Aguilar

Thank you so much, Javier

Javier Puente

It was a pleasure.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

CREDITS

John Galante

You've been listening to *Crossing Fronteras*. I'm your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante

This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar

Our series producer is Jill Ruby. Original music for our series was written, performed, and by Carlos Odria. This podcast was recorded at PRX Podcast Garage in Boston, Massachusetts, with the help of Magdiela Matta. Additional support came from a fellowship provided by the Global Labs at WPI, with special assistance from Steve McCauley, Varun Bhat, and Sam Ollari.

John Galante

The creation of the podcast was also facilitated by WPI's Humanities & Arts Department. Funding was provided by an Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language grant from the US Department of Education.

We want to thank all of the people and institutions that helped us in this process.