

HISTORY AND TRANSLATION  
IN LATIN AMERICA

HISTORIA Y TRADUCCIÓN  
EN AMÉRICA LATINA

Guest Editors/ Edición a cargo de  
Tal Goldfajn, Ori Preuss, Rosalie Sitman

Introduction

or

Why Should Historians of Modern Latin  
America Take Translation Seriously?

TAL GOLDFAJN, ORI PREUSS, ROSALIE SITMAN  
*Tel Aviv University*

*Not to be devoured is the most perfect sentiment*  
Clarice Lispector

*Translation in the Americas is less something that happens  
between separate and distinct cultures and more something that  
is constitutive of those cultures*  
Edwin Gentzler

In the last two decades scholars from a number of disciplines – mainly literary theory, translation studies, sociology, cultural studies – have become increasingly interested in defining the role played by translation in the shaping of Latin America<sup>1</sup> Viewed not merely as a linguistic transfer but as cultural interchange and as a way of asserting power, translation has informed studies on such topics as exploration and conquest, multilingualism, cultural construction and identity

---

guivony@netvision.net.il opreuss@post.tau.ac.il rsitman@post.tau.ac.il

formation in Latin America. The consequent greater awareness of the role of translation and translators in the region's colonial and postcolonial history has undoubtedly led to a deeper understanding of the fundamental task of translation in the construction of cultures and identities throughout Latin America.

In the literary field, for instance, various scholars have dramatized the crucial role that translation has played in the history of Latin American letters. Indeed, it has been argued<sup>2</sup> that translation is the *most* important topic in Latin American fiction, more important even than the well-trod magic realism theme; hence understanding the use of translation as a theme in Borges, Cortázar, Vargas Llosa, García Marquez, Fuentes or Carpentier, amongst others, is not only a key to understanding the fiction itself but also a source for exploring central issues of identity formation in Latin America.

The present special issue is the result of the encounter between two historians and a translation scholar from Tel Aviv University who have worked together on several translation projects from Spanish and Portuguese into Hebrew<sup>3</sup> and who are intrigued by the complex relationship between translation and history in Latin America in general, and, more specifically, by the way in which translation has been approached by historians of modern Latin America. We wondered, for instance, why it is that historians most often disregard translation despite its marked constitutive role in the region's history, and the obvious fact that historians not only work with translated material but may, likewise, act as translators themselves. Our initial aim in this volume, therefore, was to bring together scholars from the field of translation studies with historians specializing in Latin America, in the hope of providing a possible context for a dialogue between these two fields. However, as the project progressed, the first became more dominant and the location of the encounter between the disciplines moved mainly to the texts themselves, where the *traductólogos* clearly engage with issues and concerns more typically associated with the craft of the historian. Focusing on diverse cases across time and place in the region's history, and emphasizing different methodological and theoretical approaches, these essays provide a window on the advances of the field, at the same time as they raise important questions and possibly point to new avenues for future research for both historians of Latin America and translation scholars.

Moreover, the contributions in this issue suggest that various theoretical concepts within Translation Studies, particularly those concepts derived from the descriptive approach, commonly associated with the names of Even Zohar and Toury<sup>4</sup> and which appeared in the late 1970s, might prove useful to the historian of Latin America: namely, the definition of translations as facts of the target culture; the stress on the history of practice; the concept of collective "norms" that regulate the translators' performances; the idea that translations

can occupy different positions – innovative or conservative – depending on the system's relation with other systems which in its turn defines the translation strategies and conventions adopted, etc. The common assumption underlying all the article is that the activity of translators—far from being simply a reproduction of a text from one language to another, a mere technical activity of interest only to literary critics or applied linguists—offers, in fact, a magnificent field for the study of how literatures and languages are constituted, of how cultures interact, and of how collective memories and identities are constructed. By investigating who the translators were, which specific texts were chosen to be translated and by whom they were chosen; by exploring in which specific historical contexts and under what circumstances the translations were undertaken, for whom and with what kind of declared and/or hidden objectives; by looking at the various ways in which the translators approached the original texts and examining the nature of the translation choices that they made—whether creative, manipulative, subversive, domesticating, foreignizing, conformist, resistant, etc; by analyzing the material contained in prefaces, postscripts and footnotes, as well as the underlying norms of translation in different periods and the effects and reception of these translations, the study of translation in Latin America provides a broader perspective, and very often an alternative picture, of the established history of a given country in a specific period.

Indeed, as Georges Bastin suggests for Latin America in the opening article, and Peter Burke expands in his comments, turning attention to translation as an important subject matter in its own right may enable historians to rewrite significant portions of Latin America's history. The potential of such an endeavor is enormous, considering the sheer weight of the intellectual and material exchanges between the region and non-Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking countries since independence. A fundamental step in this direction is to continue uncovering unknown translations and assemble the ones already known in order to compile reasonably complete surveys of exactly what was translated during specific time periods and in particular places across Latin America. Simultaneously, it is equally important to apply new critical questions, such as those detailed above, to these corpora of translations. For example, scholarly accounts of the independence period regularly mention Spanish versions of French and English texts such as Rousseau's *Social Contract* and the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Federal Constitution;<sup>5</sup> yet they rarely delve into the making of these translations, nor do they view them as ideological “weapons” or as the “protagonists” of processes of nation formation, the way that Bastin and Waisman do in their treatments of Venezuela and Argentina, respectively. The possibilities opened up by these conceptualizations regarding the role of translation and the corresponding methodologies—from rigorous contextualizations to a detailed

analysis of the numerous gaps, shifts and contradictions between the original and its versions—extend beyond the uncovering of translated texts presented as originals, such as William Burke’s rendition into Spanish of *The Federalist* in the *Gaceta de Caracas*, or exposing unacknowledged instances of mistranslations, as in the case of the problematic Spanish versions of Humboldt’s highly influential *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*.

Apparently, historians of Latin America, whether consciously or unconsciously, still tend to identify translations with the original text and its author. This is clear in studies concerning the transfer of ideas from the North Atlantic centers to the Latin American periphery, and not only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but in general. While intellectual and cultural historians have long forsaken the notions of unidirectional “influence” and blind copying in favor of selective borrowing and adaptation of foreign ideas to fit local circumstances, seldom do they dwell on the crucial role of translation in these processes, seeing it simply as a neutral vehicle of communication. Occasionally, reference is made to the specific versions of European or North American works that Latin Americans read, but seldom is the distinct character of the translation taken into account. This is true not only in the case of obscure and relatively marginal texts, whose linguistic itineraries are sometimes hard to trace, but also of some pivotal 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western authors such as Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the consumption of non-French sources is particularly intriguing, since many Latin American literati took an interest in but could not read British, German or Italian works in the original (not to mention East European or, say, Japanese sources). Thus, in the absence of Spanish or Portuguese renditions, they might read them through French intermediaries, some of them highly opinionated, such as Michelet and Quinet. And, as Argentine historian Tulio Halperín Donghi reminds us, to read Michelet’s and Quinet’s translations of Vico and Herder was not the same as reading Vico and Herder,<sup>7</sup> perhaps not unlike Pierre Menard’s *Quijote*, which could only but differ from Cervantes’s *Quijote*. A century would pass before Mexican philosopher José Gaos took pride in dispensing with this kind of French mediation and produced his own Spanish translation of Husserl’s *Meditaciones cartesianas* in the 1940s. That is, his own unique interpretation of Husserl, as described in Nayelli Castro Ramírez’s article.<sup>8</sup>

However, one must bear in mind that high-status genres of aesthetic or ideational value such as *belles-lettres*, ideological treatises, philosophical works or academic publications, which are at the core of the articles in this volume, are by no means the only kinds of texts whose translation merit the attention of Latin Americanists. For instance, a glimpse at the list of publications of the Imprensa Régia, installed in Brazil upon the transfer of the Portuguese Court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, reveals that, alongside Portuguese versions of Alexander

Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, many translations of more "technical" texts are also included, such as Euler's *Algebra*, J. Francoeur's *Traité élémentaire de mécanique*, Thomas Denman's *Aphorisms on the application and use of the forceps: and vectis; on preternatural labours, on labours attended with hemorrhage, and with convulsions*, and Gay de Vernon's *Traité élémentaire d'art militaire et de fortification*.<sup>9</sup> No less important is the translation of popular genres, whose significance grew tremendously with the spread of literacy and the advent of mass media such as film and television in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, attention should be paid to more fragmentary translation phenomena, like the epigraph to Sarmiento's *Facundo*, mentioned in Waisman's essay, or Rubén Darío's quote from Victor Hugo in the poem "Momotombo," analyzed by Anthony Pym in his seminal work on translators and intercultural history—two instances of a single implanted phrase with far reaching implications.<sup>11</sup> In the same spirit, the study of prefaces, postscripts and footnotes should likewise be taken into account, since it may reveal much about the translators' attitudes towards both translation and the translated text, and expose gaps between intentions and the final product.

There are of course further interesting issues that arise in the context of a) translations in the opposite direction, that is from Spanish and Portuguese into other languages, produced by Latin Americans for purposes as diverse as national image construction, ideological export or economic development; b) translations from vernacular languages (e.g. Quechua and Aymará) into Spanish and Portuguese within different countries of the region; and c) the role played by translation in the relationships between Brazil and its Spanish-speaking neighbors. In short, translation crops up at almost every turn as one probes into Latin America's past, and so it is relevant, in its myriad forms, to almost every conceivable subfield of history—economic, social, military, political, intellectual, and diplomatic—both as an "instance" of cultural and material exchanges and "as a kind of litmus paper" that makes them more visible.<sup>12</sup>

A closer dialogue between the disciplines is called for, not only in light of the multifaceted aspects of *translations* in Latin America that we have just discussed, but also in view of the historical facts concerning the *translators* and their specific social and professional circumstances. As the various cases at hand exemplify, translators in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin America often combined the activity of translation with other endeavors. The reader will encounter here statesmen-translators (Mitre and Sarmiento), revolutionaries-translators (Miranda and García de Sena), philosophers-translators (Gaos), *catedráticos*-editors-translators (Gregorio Weinberg), and writers-translators (Borges and Cortázar). Furthermore, as stressed by all contributors to this special issue, particularly Sorá, the process of translation is never completely individual.

Translators work within history as much as they shape it. They are strongly embedded in networks and institutions; they work according to particular norms and traditions; and while they may have their own individual agendas, their practice is more often than not harnessed to larger collective projects, whether political, ideological, cultural, commercial or economic. From Francisco de Miranda's and Mariano Moreno's uses of translation in their struggle for political independence during the age of Atlantic revolutions to José Gaos's importation to Mexico of the Orteguian project of forging a Spanish-language philosophy in post-revolutionary Mexico; from Victoria Ocampo and her *Sur* project of displacement and re-contextualization of texts from the metropolis to the margins in Argentina during the radicalized 1930s and '40s to Weinberg's project of "universalizar autores que pensaron la Argentina, y de argentinizar pensadores universales a través de su traducción y su integración con los primeros," during the time of Perón and afterwards; all these demonstrate the presence of translators at the heart of Latin America's schizophrenic efforts at mental and political emancipation through and against the center. Historians, with their training and orientation towards tracing change over time and across space, are ideally suited and indeed called to the task of tracing the broader origins and impacts of these seemingly disparate individual projects.

Finally, the closing contribution, by historian Charles Walker about his work with Carlos Aguirre on the translation of Alberto Flores Galindo's *Buscando un Inca*, touches upon a series of issues concerning another kind of intersection between translation and Latin American history. As we have already noted, translations serve historians as primary source material, while the process of their making constitutes a worthy subject of historical inquiry. Yet inter-lingual translations are not only something that historians use or study; most significantly, historians themselves also produce translations, whether by necessity or by choice. Historians translate for themselves, as part of their investigation, as well as for their readers, as part of communicating their research findings in their books and articles. And, occasionally, as in the case of Walker and Aguirre's rendition into English of Galindo's classic of Peruvian historiography,<sup>13</sup> historians translate also as part of their mission as cultural mediators. These three modes of translation practiced by historians involve the entire range of questions that Translation Studies ask, as detailed above, and merit much more consideration than they usually receive. This is especially true in the field of Latin American historiography, a fertile meeting ground between North and South, but plagued with the same kind of center-periphery tensions that characterize its subject matter.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, G. Bastin's "Latin American Tradition," in M. Baker, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 505-512; D. Balderston and M.E. Schwartz, eds., *Voice-Overs: Translation and Latin American Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); E. Gentzler, *Translation and Identity in the Americas: New Directions in Translation Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
- 2 Gentzler, *Translation and Identity in the Americas*, p. 108.
- 3 For instance, Jorge Luis Borges, *Siete noches* (1980), and Ernesto Che Guevara, *Notas de viaje* (1993).
- 4 G. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1995). See also A. Pym's discussion of the descriptive paradigm in *Exploring Translation Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), chap 5.
- 5 See, for example, John Lynch, "The Origins of Spanish American Independence," in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Independence of Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 42, 44.
- 6 See, for example, Nancy Leys Stepan, *"The Hour of Eugenics": Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 72; Richard Graham, *Britain and the Onset of Modernization in Brazil, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 241.
- 7 Tulio Halperín Donghi. "En busca de la especificidad del pensamiento político hispanoamericano," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 8:1 (1997), p. 10.
- 8 Lia Wyler likewise notes, with regard to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brazil, that indirect translations via French into Portuguese were common. "Brazilian Tradition," in Mona Baker, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 329.
- 9 Laurence Hallewell, *Books in Brazil: A History of the Publishing Trade* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1982), pp. 26-30.
- 10 On the importance of translation in film in Latin America and in general, see, for example, Ella Schochat and Robert Stam, "The Cinema after Babel: Language, Difference, Power," *Screen* 26 (1985), pp. 35-58.
- 11 Anthony Pym, *Negotiating the Frontier: Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2000), chap. 9.
- 12 For this observation see Peter Burke, "Cultures of Translation in Early Modern Europe," in Burke and R. Po-chia Hsia, eds., *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 10.
- 13 Two other notable cases in point are Emília Viotti da Costa's *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1985), translated by herself from Portuguese into English and John Charles Chasteen's rendition into English of Tulio Halperín Donghi's immensely influential *Historia contemporánea de América Latina* published in 1993 by Duke University Press. Ideally, the prefaces by these three historians to the English versions should have constituted the starting point of a discussion that has not taken place regarding the role of translation in North-South scholarly exchange.