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Exploration | Exploración

More than adding a "C" to the acronym: Where is the Caribbean in Latin American Studies?

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Abstract

In principle, Latin American studies tend to include the Caribbean. In practice, however, the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean remains off the radar. It is time to rethink this marginalisation of the closest of neighbours. If Latin American studies have – at times implicitly, at times formally – added an "and the Caribbean" into their name, they need to do more to live up to that claim. They need to do so not for the sake of fairness towards smaller countries, but because the Caribbean is central to understanding how the world, Europe and Latin America have evolved over the past 500-plus years, and continue to evolve today. *Keywords*: Caribbean, Latin American Studies, Europe, US Virgin Islands, identities, politics, history.

Resumen: Más que una "C"en el acrónimo: ¿Dónde está el Caribe en los estudios latinoamericanos?

En principio, los estudios latinoamericanos suelen incluir el Caribe. Sin embargo, en la práctica, el Caribe no hispanohablante sigue sin estar presente. Es hora de replantearse esta marginación de los vecinos más cercanos. Si los estudios latinoamericanos han añadido, a veces de forma implícita, otras veces de forma explícita, "el Caribe" a su nombre, deben esforzarse más para estar a la altura de esa afirmación. Deben hacerlo no por una cuestión de justicia hacia los países más pequeños, sino porque el Caribe es fundamental para comprender cómo han evolucionado el mundo, Europa y América Latina durante los últimos 500 años, y cómo siguen evolucionando en la actualidad. *Palabras clave*: Caribe, estudios latinoamericanos, Europa, Islas Vírgenes de Estados Unidos, identidad, política, historia.

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Introduction

When Trump launched his quest to acquire Greenland, you had to look to the Caribbean. Here, on the three small islands that make up the US Virgin Islands, this did not sound so outlandish, but rather, it echoed their own past. Just as Greenland was under Danish rule until the United States purchased it back in 1917, it is now suddenly in the spotlight of global politics, as this deal from over a century ago has become a crucial legal argument in fending off Trump's grab for the Arctic.

But more on that later. For now, the point is that few students of Latin American studies will have heard of the history of the "Danish West Indies" or how they became the US Virgin Islands. Too small, too unimportant. And, in a sense, "too Caribbean": the Spanish-speaking islands such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico clearly fall within the remit of the Latin American studies community. But even the biggest of their neighbours tend to disappear from their radar. How many articles has the Latin American studies journal of your choice published on, say, Trinidad & Tobago?[1] How many panels on Jamaica have you seen at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) conferences? How much time do your "Introduction to Latin America" classes dedicate to the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean?

This is a problem, not so much because of a sense of fairness towards smaller countries, but because the Caribbean is central to understanding how the world, Europe and Latin America have evolved over the past 500-plus years and continue to evolve today. In this sense, studying the Caribbean is indispensable for Europeans and, I would think, Latin Americans, in order to understand themselves.

Without Louverture, you will not understand Hegel without Pétion, not Bolívar. That is, without the Haitian revolution, you will not come to terms with the pitfalls of European enlightenment and the cruel underbelly of its project of modernity. And you will ignore why Bolívar sailed to Haiti to secure the support of its victorious revolutionaries before setting out to liberate South America from Spanish rule. Yet, where on the mainland are the monuments to celebrate the Haitian contribution to Latin America's independence? You will not grasp the emergence of capitalism if you do not speak about Barbados. If you ignore the mosquitoes of the Caribbean, your account will fail to explain why the South American mainland did not become British colonies, although "Britannia ruled the waves" since the 18th century.

The reader might now say: Wait, wait, wait! Hegel never left Europe, did he? Capitalism, that was Manchester, wasn't it? Moreover, what is that about the Caribbean mosquitoes? My history books never told me any of that! This is precisely the point. The scholarship is out there, as is its message that studying the Caribbean is studying Europe, the Americas, the world. Buck-Morss' *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009) shows that when Hegel wrote what is famously known as his "master- slave dialectic," he was aware of the enslaved

uprising against their masters in Haiti but chose to remain silent about it. Sven Beckert's forthcoming *Capitalism: A Global History* highlights that the first industrial revolution took place on the Caribbean's colonial sugar plantations long before John Watt invented the steam engine, and that it was based on this economy, which rested on the enslavement and murder of millions of Africans, that capitalism emerged in England. In fact, if you do not mind a small quantity of dust on a book, you can read that argument already in Eric Williams' *Capital and Slavery* (1944), written some eighty years ago.

And the Caribbean mosquitoes? Well, they carried yellow fever. Due to asymmetric immunity, yellow fever served as a de facto shield for locally raised populations against European invaders for much of the colonial period. The far superior British forces certainly would have overrun Cartagena in 1741 – and the South American mainland might speak English instead of Spanish today – had more than two-thirds of Her Majesty's troops not perished from the mosquito-borne disease within weeks after disembarking. J.R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empires* (2010) provides a comprehensive account of this and much more. However, ask your specialist Latin Americanist library whether they have the book; I am afraid many will not.

The closest of neighbours – but not on the mental map

The Caribbean has been crucial for Europe, but Europe is not fond of admitting it. Similarly, it also tends to slip off the map in Latin America. Well, not completely. The Caribbean has served as a transit space, from the gold and silver of the Spanish conquest to today's drug routes. It has been a theatre of war for European powers, where they fought their wars on faraway soil and waters. Moreover, it has been present as a hotbed of United States imperialism, from the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico to the recent fleet of warships off Venezuela's coast. However relevant all this is, there is also a case for scholarly interest in Caribbean societies in their own right, as actors with agency, not merely as a region serving others. And this is what slips off the map.

When teaching Latin American studies in Berlin, many of the students in the classroom have roots in Latin America. However, St Lucia and St Vincent, Guadeloupe and Guyana, tend to be no less terra incognita for them than for their peers born and raised in Germany. Geographically, the Caribbean may be close, but mental maps are stubborn beasts. Why is that? Some of the students came to think that it may be due to the historically subordinate role of the Afro-descendent population in the countries they hail from.

To be sure, it is not just about history. Today, the Caribbean tends to receive broad attention only when hurricanes devastate the islands. Beyond this, the omnipresent image is that of the shiny tourist destination. No other region of the world is more associated with the stereotypes of leisure and easy living. Going to study in the Caribbean, doing fieldwork or applying for funding will inevitably trigger tongue-in-cheek comments about beaches and hammocks.

Furthermore, yes, this is different when it comes to culture. There is no shortage of work on the cultural creativity that emerged from the unique mix of people who came together in this stretch of the world. Just take Caribbean music and its global impact, wow! And come the Olympics, the world marvels at the feats of Jamaica's athletes. But it is as if it were not also a region with politics and economies that deserve to be taken as seriously as anywhere else. Take the vast comparative politics literature on democracy in Latin America: Where are your seminal works on the parliamentary systems of the Commonwealth Caribbean? In international politics, the Caribbean states carry more votes in the United Nations than all of South America combined, and they have acquired experience and expertise to leverage this resource. Any interest, dear IR scholars' community?

The European Union is grappling with member states such as Malta that are selling EU passports to shady individuals from around the world. But it is the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean where you can study the commodification of citizenship in full swing. In some countries, the number of "investor citizens" (many of whom have never set foot in the country) is likely to come close to, or even surpass, the number of citizens born in that country – a transformation of the *demos* that raises quite some questions about citizenship, sovereignty and democracy (Byron, 2022).

Alternatively, take the economy. Beaches and bananas, well, yes. However, the Caribbean is also a major theatre of operations for the new digital economy and home to crucial hubs in the international financial system. Even though the Cayman Islands are small in terms of size and population, they are huge in the geopolitics of global financial networks (Goghie, 2024). Anguilla is even smaller, and although not sovereign, it does command its own Internet country code, ".ai". With the boom in AI, this domain name has become a goldmine, as the island government sells .ai websites for hundreds of thousands of dollars (Evans, 2025). A much bigger case when it comes to studying the emergence and pitfalls of the new digital financial technologies is that of the Bahamas and how it became the top offshore haven for cryptocurrencies (Tooze, 2023). For Tooze, this is merely the latest incarnation of how the Caribbean region has time and again "functioned as a Frankenstein laboratory of global capitalism".

All this and so much more is the Caribbean, and it may show why it is inadequate for Latin American studies to give the region only a marginal role. Of course, there is the old language argument, as crystallised in the "Latin" of Latin America. However, we have long moved beyond this concerning the indigenous populations and their languages. And while Papiamentu or Haitian Creole may indeed pose challenges, English – the dominant language of the non-Hispanophone Caribbean – is certainly accessible to scholarly communities.

The Caribbean's multiple identities

Colleagues from the Netherlands have pointed out that CEDLA is less focused on the Caribbean because this has been the remit of the KITLV, the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies[2]. Anywhere else in the world, grouping Southeast Asia and the Caribbean seems an odd combination. It is, of course, explained by the patchy map of the Netherlands' colonial past. In fact, KITLV today defines its mission as "focusing on the histories and afterlives of colonialism in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Netherlands" (www.kitlv.nl/about/mission). Okay then. Academia has different ways of slicing the world into analytical chunks, and these need not be mutually exclusive. But there is still some argument for also looking at the Caribbean – including the Dutch- or Papiamentu-speaking Caribbean – from an angle that relates it to its Latin American neighbours. To make sense of the plight of Curaçao's oil refinery, the island's newest cohort of immigrants, or even its food prices, you need the links to Venezuela. For this, CEDLA may be a more adequate place. Therefore, happy to see a piece on recent scholarship on the Caribbean in this ERLACS anniversary collection![3]

Suppose this article calls on European and Latin American perspectives to avoid marginalising the Caribbean. In that case, it is aware that many in the region might prefer an identity as just "Caribbean", rather than being subsumed under "Latin American studies", even with the addition of "and Caribbean". It is also aware that, for some, Caribbean identity might refer to CARICOM, with the Anglophone countries at its core. In contrast, for others, it might be the wider Caribbean, encompassing all the islands and the adjacent mainland coasts. Again, identities are multiple, and none of these categories is mutually exclusive. So, great to have a good number of journals explicitly dedicated to the Caribbean (or a subset of it), and long life to both LASA and the Caribbean Studies Association!

At times, the region's role in Latin American studies has been a tug-of-war over names and acronyms. Of course, the very term "Latin America" opens up its own discussion, from José Martí's (1891) "Nuestra América" to today's activists embracing the indigenous term of "Abya Yala", alongside a wealth of scholarly production on the idea of Latin America (e.g. Mignolo, 2005; Global, 2013, or Tenorio-Trillo, 2017).

But back to the Caribbean and where it fits in, in diplomatic circles, "LAC" or "LAC countries" has become the norm, although it remains a stumbling block when communicating with broader audiences. Many institutions that were founded as "Latin American…" have added a "C" to their acronym and now feature as "Latin American and Caribbean…". Others have not. The present publication, ERLACS, was an early adopter and added the Caribbean to its name in 1974; its parent institution, CEDLA, has not. Similarly, LASA never became LACSA, nor did ALACIP, CEISAL, or the Institutes of Latin American Studies

at which this author works. The UN's Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLA, became ECLAC – but only in English; in Spanish it remains CEPAL.

Names matter, yes, but changing them also comes at a cost and can consume much energy. After all, names are what we make them. So, this is not a call for more renaming but more simply, a plea for greater interest in and recognition of the Caribbean as a crucial focus of global politics - and as an integral part of that vast and diverse world region south of the United States that is the object of the area studies we are accustomed to calling "Latin American studies".

Oh yes, I promised to come back to Greenland and the Virgin Islands. When Trump cites military concerns as reasons the US needs to incorporate Greenland, it echoes the US quest for what was then known as the Danish West Indies more than a century ago. In the context of World War I, the United States's immediate motive was to prevent the islands from becoming a German submarine base. Denmark was in no strong position to negotiate. However, as part of the cession treaty, Copenhagen secured a declaration in which the United States government recognises the Danish claim to Greenland. This so-called "Lansing declaration" is well documented in Danish and United States archives (e.g. US Department of State 2025). Greenland's indigenous population could, indeed, question the legitimacy of such colonial deal-making. But certainly not a US President. So, today it is the history of the small Virgin Islands, which comes to centre stage as a roadblock in Trump's grab for Greenland. Who would have thought?

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Notes

1 On the ERLACS website (erlacs.org), searching for "Trinidad" will bring up one article (not counting reviews). However, it is not in Trinidad, but in Brazil. It shows up because one of the authors' names is Carlos Benitez Trinidad.
2 https://www.kitlv.nl/
3 See Osbourne, A., Jaffe, R., de Cunha, O. & Isenia, W.J. (2025) in this special issue.

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