

History as Civic Action. An Interview with James Naylor Green

A história como ação cívica. Entrevista com James Naylor Green

L'histoire comme action civique. Un entretien avec James Naylor Green

Jorge M. Pedreira



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/4914>

DOI: 10.4000/lerhistoria.4914

ISSN: 2183-7791

Publisher

ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Printed version

Date of publication: 3 July 2019

Number of pages: 241-257

ISSN: 0870-6182

Electronic reference

Jorge M. Pedreira, « History as Civic Action. An Interview with James Naylor Green », *Ler História* [Online], 74 | 2019, Online since 12 January 2020, connection on 12 January 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/4914> ; DOI : 10.4000/lerhistoria.4914



Ler História está licenciado com uma Licença Creative Commons - Atribuição-NãoComercial 4.0 Internacional.

HISTORY AS CIVIC ACTION. AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NAYLOR GREEN

Jorge M. Pedreira

CHAM – NOVA-FCSH–UAc, Portugal

jorge.pedreira@netcabo.pt

241

In this interview, James Green, a prominent Brazilianist, tells us about his interest in Brazilian history, his life as a civic and political activist against authoritarianism in Brazil and for gay and lesbian rights, and his academic work and career. The purpose of the interview, besides bringing his work to a wider audience of European historians and social scientists, is to reflect on the relationship between academic work and political and ideological activism, and to discuss the problems of subjectivism and the use of individual testimonies in the making of contemporary history. We invited James Green to reflect on those matters, so he could share with us the views of someone who, because of the nature of his work, could not help but deal permanently with such questions.

Keywords: Brazil, gay and lesbian rights, civic and political activism, authoritarianism, subjectivism.

Resumo (PT) no final do artigo. Résumé (FR) en fin d'article.

James Naylor Green was born in Baltimore in 1951. Since 2014, he is the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Professor of Latin American History, an endowed chair, previously held by Thomas E. Skidmore and affiliated to the Departments of History and Portuguese and Brazilian Studies of Brown University, where he was formerly professor (2009-2014) and associate professor (2005-2009). He is also a fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs and a visiting professor in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As a student and member of a radical Quaker group, he took part in the protest movements and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and became interested in Latin America, anticipating major political changes there. In the early 1970s, he became involved in the movement against the Brazilian military dictatorship in the United States. After graduating in political science in Earlham College (1972), he travelled through Central America and arrived in Brazil in 1976, eventually getting established in São Paulo, where he soon joined the opposition to the dictatorship. He lived in Brazil until 1982, as an English teacher and a student of political science in the University of São Paulo. During this time, he was a political activist and one of the founders of SOMOS, the first gay rights organization in Brazil.

Upon returning to the United States, James N. Green continued his civic engagement, as a community and union organizer, and then he decided to go back to the university. He completed his Master's degrees in 1992 and 1993, and then received his PhD on Latin American History from the University of California Los Angeles in 1996, with a dissertation on male homosexuality in twentieth-century Brazil, that would be the basis for his first academic book, published in 1999, which received two awards in the United States.¹ At that time, he had already started his academic career at the University of California, Long Beach, where he stayed for eight years (1996-2004), before he moved to Rhode Island and Brown University, where he replaced Thomas Skidmore, the renowned Brazilianist.

James Green has become a prominent specialist in the history of modern Brazil. His research has focused on two main topics, the history of homosexuality and the resistance to the military dictatorship of 1964-1985. After the first book, he has published two other books on those topics, one on the opposition to the dictatorship in the United States² and the other on the life and action of Herbert Daniel, a gay revolutionary and AIDS activist.³ Here, as in previous publications, he tried to challenge some myths about the attitudes of the Left towards homosexuality. His three books, as well as other works of his, have been translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil, where he is a reference, having received awards and distinctions. He is a frequent presence in political and academic circles, among them in the conferences organized by the Brazilian National History Association, ANPUH. James N. Green has also co-edited important research books and special issues of academic journals,⁴

1 *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999 [translated to Portuguese as: *Além do Carnaval: a homossexualidade masculina no Brasil do século XX*. São Paulo: Editora da UNESP, 2000]. The book received the Paul Monette-Roger Horwitz Trust Award by the Lambda Literary Foundation for the best book by an emergent scholar and the Hubert Herring Book Award (co-winner) by the Pacific Coast Council on Latin America (PCCLAS) for the best book on Latin America.

2 *"We Cannot Remain Silent": Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States, 1964-85*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010 [translated to Portuguese as: *Apesar de vocês: Oposição à ditadura militar nos EUA, 1964-85*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009].

3 *Exile within Exiles: Herbert Daniel, Gay Brazilian Revolutionary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018 [translated to Portuguese as: *Revolucionário e Gay: A vida extraordinária de Herbert Daniel*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2018].

4 For instance James N. Green, Luis Roniger and Pablo Yankelevich (eds), *Exile and the Politics of Exclusion in the Americas*. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2012; James N. Green and Gerardo Leibner (eds), *The History of Latin American Communism*, special issue of *Latin American Perspectives*, 35 (02), 2008.

as well as readers and textbooks such as *Modern Latin America* and *The Brazil Reader*.⁵

True to his activist drive, he served in the leadership of organizations and associations. He was member of the executive committee of the Brazilian Studies Association (2001-2004), president of the New England Council on Latin American Studies (2008-2009) and Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (2005-2008) at Brown University, where he now leads the Brazil Initiative. Since 2015 he is the executive director of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA), where he formerly served as Vice-President and President. He is the Director of the Opening the Archives Project and the National Coordinator of the US Network for Democracy in Brazil.

In this interview, we asked James Green to tell us about his interest in Brazilian history, his life as a civic and political activist against authoritarianism in Brazil and for gay and lesbian rights in the Americas, and his academic work and career. The purpose of the interview, other than bringing his work to a wider audience of European historians and social scientists, especially in Portugal where it is still not very well known, is to reflect on the relationship between serious academic work and political and ideological activism (which is now an important and controversial issue in American universities), and to discuss the problems of subjectivism and the use of individual testimonies in the making of contemporary history. We invited James Green to reflect on those matters, so he could share with us the views of someone who, because of the nature of his work, could not help but deal permanently with such questions.

The interview was done in James N. Green's office at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, on the 4th of December 2018. In transcribing the interview, we chose to keep the characteristics of the oral discourse.

Jorge M. Pedreira (JMP): *Your interest in Brazil goes a long way back. It is much earlier than the beginning of your academic career. What made a young American become interested in Brazil?*

James Naylor Green (JNG): I was raised as a Quaker, which is a Protestant pacifist religion. I was very politicized as a young person and became involved in the anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States. I was

⁵ For instance Peter Smith, Thomas E. Skidmore and James N. Green (eds), *Modern Latin America*, 7th and 8th editions. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010 and 2013 (9th edition edited by J. N. Green and Peter Smith, 2018); James N. Green, Victoria Langland and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (eds), *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, and Politics*, 2nd edition. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

even arrested in a protest in Washington DC. At that time, I came to the analysis that the next Vietnam would be in Latin America. So, I went to Mexico, in 1971, to study Spanish, and learn about Latin America. When I finished college in German and Political Science, with a group of six other Quakers, we formed a collective and lived in Philadelphia. We had a study group, and each week we chose a country and a topic. I chose Brazil. I don't know why. To find material in English about Brazil I was in contact with a group in Washington DC called the Committee against Repression in Brazil. It was founded by a Brazilian exile, who had been arrested and tortured in 1970,⁶ and who was living in the United States and had organized a protest against the third general in the military dictatorship, Medici, who visited Nixon in the White House in 1971.⁷ He had formed this committee and I met him and he was very charismatic and I was very young and romantic. Anyway, I started doing work with him against torture and repression in Brazil in 1973. Then his sister, whom I became friends with, invited me to go to visit Brazil with her. So I travelled through Central America, and Colombia and then entered Brazil by the Solimões River in the Amazon, in the border between Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, and I travelled throughout country, ending up in São Paulo. There, in São Paulo, I became involved in the anti-dictatorship movement.

JMP: *You lived eight years in Brazil...*

JNG: The time is six years... Well, I really don't know how many years I have lived in Brazil, because I go every year two or three times. Anyway, I lived there from 1976 to 1982 and I was in an anti-dictatorship group and was also a founder of the gay rights movement in Brazil. Then I came back to United States, and I was a union organizer and a community organizer. In 1989, I decided to go back to the University and get a master's in Latin American studies at California State University, Los Angeles, and then a PhD at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). I chose to study Brazil. I originally wanted to do a history of the labor movement, but I went to Berkeley and talked to a professor and she told me that's not History, that's Sociology. Well, I didn't want to be a sociologist, I wanted to be a historian, so I chose UCLA and I worked on the history of homosexuality in twentieth-century Brazil. After that I worked in California for eight years, at California State University, Long

⁶ The Committee Against Repression in Brazil was founded by Marcos Arruda, a former student and prominent activist, who became an exile in the United States, after being arrested and tortured in Brazil.

⁷ Emílio Garrastazu Medici (1905-1985) was a general and the 28th President of the Brazilian Republic, the third of the military dictatorship, between 1969 and 1974.

Beach. Then I got a job here at Brown University, to replace Thomas Skidmore, the eminent historian of Brazil.⁸

JMP: *You knew him well.*

JNG: Yes, yes. I became a close friend of his and responsible taking care of his literary production and his work. I am going to reissue his book on the history of Brazil, the third edition, and I took over his textbook on Latin America as well. So, I came into history by the backdoor, kind of... Later I was the President and now I am the Executive-Director of the Brazilian Studies Association, and I am involved in many activities connected to Brazil.

JMP: *This personal experience of yours has clearly influenced all your academic career, as a professor and a researcher, which is very coherent. You have worked on areas in which you have also been active civically and politically, you have worked on homosexuality in Brazil and on the question of the resistance to the military dictatorship.*

JNG: I have three monographs, the first is *Beyond Carnival, Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*, the second *We Cannot Remain Silent, Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States*, and this third book about Herbert Daniel, who was a gay revolutionary.⁹ Because I had a very strong criticism of the hierarchical, almost imperial relations between United States and Latin America, when I became an academic, I wanted to find areas that I could work in that would add to the knowledge in Brazil, instead of just kind of appropriating it. So, I chose topics that were not being produced in Brazil. No one had done a social history of homosexuality before, and it was very hard to do. It wasn't easy to find material, but I did it, and that book became a classic. The second book on the opposition to the dictatorship was important because the Brazilians thought that, because the United States government had supported the military in 1964, all Americans supported them. I wanted to show that there was a resistance movement and, because there was censorship at the time in Brazil, people didn't know about what was happening abroad.

⁸ Thomas E. Skidmore (1932-2016) was a Brazilianist, a researcher and professor of Modern Brazilian History. He published influential books on Modern Brazil, namely *Politics in Brazil 1930-1964: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) and *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil: 1964-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). He also co-edited an important textbook with successive editions, *Modern Latin America* (1st edition New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁹ Herbert Daniel was a medical student who joined the armed struggle which fought the military dictatorship and who had to conceal his gay sexual identity from his fellow guerrilla fighters. He was briefly exiled in Lisbon after the Revolution in 1974, becoming later an internationally renowned AIDS activist.

The third book on Herbert Daniel was really a desire to challenge the Left about prejudices and ideas by telling the story of an amazingly interesting person who was a medical student and then a guerilla fighter and was involved in the kidnapping of the German and Swiss ambassadors to release 110 political prisoners and was an exile in Portugal. He went to Portugal in 1974. He is underground, he leaves the country and instead of going to Paris, he goes right to Portugal and he spends a year in Portugal. He works in a publication called *Modas e Bordados*, which was the feminine weekly supplement of a very old newspaper. A feminist had changed it into a feminist publication.¹⁰ He wrote for that for a year, than he lived in Paris and he came back to Brazil, where he became involved in the democratization process. It was another book that no one had written and I did that.

JMP: *You had already published an article on the question of the attitudes of the Left towards homosexuality...*

JNG: Yes, “Who is the macho who wants to kill me”, which is a wonderful story that I discovered interviewing someone.¹¹ That is something entirely different, about two revolutionaries who were in prison, and they start having an affair, and this causes enormous anxiety among their colleagues. There is even a possibility that they decided they were going to do a *justiçamento revolucionário* (revolutionary execution), which means to kill them. It’s not clear if that really happened or not. It’s actually an article about memory and how we construct our history and how people remember the past, as well as it is a question of documenting a phenomenon. In addition to being a very engaged academic and working very closely with my colleagues, I have given several keynote addresses at the Brazilian historical association, ANPUH. I’m also very much engaged in international solidarity with Brazil, especially since the overthrow of Dilma Rouseff in 2016. We organized a big international campaign against the *golpe*, brought her to the United States and she did a tour here in 2017, and we became good friends. Then more recently with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, we organized a national network in the United States for democracy in Brazil, to defend democracy in Brazil, to educate the American public about the situation and to find out how we could show support to the social movements, the NGOs, the universities, the professors, the progressive forces of Brazil against this rightwing assault.

¹⁰ *Modas e Bordados* was the feminine weekly supplement, mostly dedicated to dressmaking and needlework, of *O Século*, a daily newspaper of national circulation, which was published from 1880 to 1976.

¹¹ “Who is the Macho Who Wants to Kill Me? Male Homosexuality, Revolutionary Masculinity, and the Brazilian Armed Struggle of the 1960s and 70s”. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 92 (03), 2012, pp. 437-69.

JMP: *How do you feel about the situation in the universities under the new Brazilian government?*

JNG: The universities have also been an area of resistance and democratic forces during the dictatorship and I think now too. One of the things I'm most worried about as an academic is the way in which this new government will be attacking the universities, directly and indirectly, indirectly by cutting budgets, opportunities, and funding, and directly by legislation or other measures to silence oppositional voices in the universities.

JMP: *Let me ask you one question of some theoretical and methodological reach. This engagement of yours with social and political movements I think it means that in all your work you also want to make a political stand. Did you feel anytime any kind of conflict between being an Academic and doing academic work and that political engagement?*

JNG: I respect historians who come up with some curious question about what was the rate of inflation in Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century and really care about that and do an amazing research on that question. I think you can do research and produce knowledge without any necessary immediate social result. I wanted to do research that had a social impact and that made it very important that everything I did was carefully done, that my methodology was meticulous, that my use of sources was excellent, that I interpreted in a reasonable way, that I wasn't *panfletário*, that I was not producing propaganda, that I was producing serious social history. My first book was very difficult because there were no legal prohibitions against homosexuality; you can't go to court records and find people who have been arrested. You have to be very creative in how you do a social history; and I loved doing it, it was really a fun book to do, because it required being extremely imaginative in order to do that. I produced it, and it had an impact, three kinds of impact. First on individuals. I talk to people today who say "Professor Green I read your book *Beyond Carnival (Além do Carnaval)*, I was living in Mato Grosso do Sul, I was gay and I was totally isolated, and your book gave me the notion that I wasn't alone, I could have a life, I could be OK with myself". Many, many people have told me that the book has been important for them, to change their personal lives. It also changed historiography, because people started really thinking of new issues or questions to be included in historiography, and a new narrative has developed as a result of that, and then, more recently, given the nature of this conservative movement in Brazil, which is far right Evangelical Christian and very homophobic, the ideas of my first book and my activism have been important in changing the discourse of the oppo-

sition of the Left. That's been very important to me, and I am very proud that I have had that influence.

248

The same with my second book on the opposition to the dictatorship, because the Left in Brazil was stupidly and unsophisticatedly anti-American and didn't have any understanding of the complexities of US society. In fact the University of São Paulo (USP), which is the most important university of Brazil, didn't have a professor teaching American studies throughout the entire dictatorship. Professors all argued that the US government supported the military regime and was the enemy of Brazil and was exploring the country. But there was no professor who could teach even the basics of US history and that's an example of kind of a contradiction between an ideology and a practice. And my third book was a fun book. I wanted to tell the story of this person that I found interesting. And again, in all of them, I did meticulous work on footnotes and sources and analyses, so that people see my work is not *panfletário*.

JMP: *In your work, it seems to me that you place great value on the individual's action, experience and memory, as historical testimony, as historical source.*

JNG: The individual within the social. This is the problem. When you are a foreigner, when you are not from a country, and you go and you read documents and you interpret them but you are working on contemporary history if you can't measure against the people that you're studying, I feel that I'm not sure I'm getting it right. My first book, which was over a century, and I didn't have any opportunity to interview people who lived in the 20s and the 30s, but when I did the work on the 50s and 60s, which for us is another period, it's a long time ago, having interviewed people and then presenting my work to them and they're saying you got it right, that's how it was, you had the sensitivity to do that. My partner is a historian of early-modern Europe, he works on religious history, he doesn't have to worry about his saints and his religious women saying, "that's wrong, you didn't get that right!" I have to think about that, people reading my books and saying, "that's wrong, you didn't get that right at all!" There's more of a challenge to do work like I did. In all of my books I have done at least one-hundred oral histories, a lot of it to get the feeling, the background. It's like a person wanting to write about a specific Inquisition case, but needs to read one-hundred of them to make sure you're not reading something wrongly. The problem with that is that you interview one hundred people for an hour and a half each, and they all expect to be a lot in the book, and sometimes there's one sentence about them or one quote and they go like:

“Wait a minute! An hour and a half and that’s all I get is one sentence!” And my press was very strict. They insisted that the book be of a certain length, and so I would not write too much which meant a lot of wonderful things I had to cut out of the book.

JMP: *However, you yourself reflect on the problems arising from the use of individual testimonies, from writing history from the subject’s point of view.*

JNG: I tried to learn from the anthropologists without falling into their *vícios*, their traps, because the anthropologists, I think, became too self-absorbed with the “I” within the research project, and I find it indulgent and a little annoying. I always acknowledge it in my work in the introduction or in some way so that the reader understands what my positionality is, without exaggerating that, because everyone has positionality. I mean you may be writing the economic history of inflation in Minas Gerais after the gold rush, and you might be a Keynesian economist and analyzing statistics that way, or you might be a neoliberal and looking in another way, so I think we bring our prejudices into our work some way or the other and so we have to acknowledge it and then move on.

JMP: *But what I was talking about was the point of view of the subjects themselves.*

JNG: It has to do with the insider or outsider. As a foreigner I know that there are things I just don’t understand about the culture I’m studying. I don’t have that sensitivity of language, and words and meaning and intuition, but at the same time, on certain topics, I know it very well. So, in my first book, I am a gay man and I understood certain things that other people might not understand. The second book about the opposition movement, I had lived it a little bit, so I knew that story very well. The third on Herbert Daniel, I had been involved in the Left, not in the armed struggle, but I had been in the Left, so I understood things. I had a smell for things when I interviewed people that other people didn’t have. And, if you are an outsider, you’re not part of the culture, you can actually criticize everything more easily than when you’re part of the culture, but you can lose things. I mean, I think it’s always a dilemma of what we get and what we don’t get, how we understand and how we don’t understand it. It’s not a science. I don’t think it’s a science. I don’t know if other people do, but I don’t think it’s a science.

JMP: *Let me just add another remark on this question. In at least two of your works, you have explicitly addressed the ways in which the subjects present and rebuild their memories. You have titled your article on the different versions of the US ambassador to Brazil own recounts of the 1964 military*

coup “reinventing history”.¹² And in the postscript to “Who is the macho who wants to kill me”, the paper on attitudes of the Left towards homosexuality that we have already mentioned, you contrast different versions of an episode and question the process of individual memory building and rebuilding.

JNG: The first one on Lincoln Gordon. I really wrote an article with a student of mine, where we followed his changing discourse about the coup, from 1964, when he is exchanging documents with Johnson¹³ to justify military intervention, to how he justifies it in front of Congress in 1966, when he said it was one-hundred percent Brazilian and there was no American intervention and he was lying to Congress, to 1977, when the documents are discovered in the archives that in fact the United States sent a naval task force to Brazil, and he had lied about that. Then when we interviewed him in 2005, when he forgot, he wasn’t remembering what he had said because he was kind of getting old and then totally informed us that there was never a fear of a communist takeover or a danger for the Americans. The justification they gave for sending a squadron of ships to Brazil, at the time when they discovered that they were doing this in 1977, was to save American lives. But when he was talking to me he said that his son was in Brazil at that time, and I asked him “weren’t you afraid for your son?” and he said “Nah! There was no danger to Americans! It’s not like Iraq today”, and then he realized that he had just contradicted the whole argument. So it’s looking at people’s contradictions. I mean I’m a human being with contradictions, and I study people with contradictions. I think I can appreciate them. It’s fun to look again and understand the different memories and ways of understanding people’s own history or people’s history of a subject.

JMP: *You have long been involved in studies about Latin America and Brazil. As a professor and researcher, as the author and co-editor of readers and reference books on Brazil and Latin America, and because of your leading role in some associations and institutions in the United States, you have been in a privileged position to watch the changes in the writing of history on Latin America. How do you see those changes?*

JNG: The study of Latin America in the United States, and when I say Latin America, I mean Spanish Latin America, Brazil and the Caribbean, Latin America and the Caribbean as a unit, even though it is an artificial

¹² James N. Green and Abigail Jones, “Reinventando a história: Lincoln Gordon e as suas múltiplas versões de 1964”. *Revista Brasileira de História*, 29 (57), 2009, pp. 67-89.

¹³ Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) became president of the United States after the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963) and was then elected for another full term (1964-1968).

creation, has really been driven by US foreign policy interests, in terms of the priorities and the ways in which the US government is involved in Latin America, in which it affects Latin America. The most obvious first example of that is, after the Cuban revolution, the State Department panics, because they're afraid of other revolutions in Latin America, and they realize that there are not good trained scholars in the universities. They give a lot of money to universities to train people, to learn languages, to do research on Latin American and answer the question of what's going on there that there are these revolutionary movements. Ironically, this produces just the opposite of what the State Department wants, instead of creating largely people who agree with US foreign-policy, people go to Latin America, they go to the Caribbean, they see this social inequality, they see elites controlling societies, and they become very critical of them and then come back and they are usually against US foreign-policy and critical of it.

So you see, this is an overall theme. North-Americans fall in love with Latin America for different reasons, whether it's the exotic other, whether it's the warm experience they had when they were high school students living and studying abroad for a semester, or the reception they received when they did research there, or something about the culture that attracts them. The movements in Latin America themselves excite people, so in the 80s after the *Sandinista* revolution of '79, in the threat of US intervention in El Salvador, during the Civil War in El Salvador, there were thousands of young people who went to Nicaragua, and many people were involved in solidarity with Central America, who did activities, actions for a period of time. This was under the Reagan government, which was the big enemy of that time. Then they tell themselves "well I really like this, I'd like to get more involved, I'm gonna go back to graduate school and get a PhD in Central American studies or something". There's been a way in which people's own activism in Latin America or involvement, personally or politically, has encouraged other people to study Latin America.

That's even the case for Brazil. I ran into a former Brazilian exile in São Paulo two weeks ago, who lived in California in the early 1970s. At that time there were maybe 15 scholars on Brazil who they reached out to, to give them support, and I told him we have 600 to 800 now, and our petition against Jair Bolsonaro had 1020 people signing it, when before he and others were lucky if they got seven signatures. There's also been an expansion in production around Latin America, as part of the US Academia understanding that they need to study the world and not just the United States. This is part of the interest that people have in the world, because of the US role in the world, therefore encouraging the demand for profes-

sors teaching South-Asian history, or Indian history, or African history or Latin American history, which is one of the reasons why we've grown as a discipline and a sub discipline.

252

JMP: *To this day, in most American universities, Brazilian studies are incorporated in Latin American departments and research centers. As a Brazilianist, you yourself have been a prominent member of academic institutions and societies that bring together the whole Latin America, like the Latin American Studies Association. Do you see that as an advantage or a shortcoming for the development of North-American academic interest on Brazil?*

JNG: It's interesting because the Latin American Studies Association was absolutely a result of the Cold War. It was founded by people who were given money and scholarships to study Latin America and came back and wanted to build a community, an intellectual community, and they founded the Latin American Studies Association. In the 90s, some Brazilian scholars within the Latin American Studies Association felt marginalized, because they did not feel recognized. They felt that people spelled their names wrong and didn't get things correct, so they formed the Brazilians Studies Associations. It was kind of a split off, one would say. It is much smaller. We have in our biannual conferences about 400 to 600 people and actually that's one of the reasons why we're an attractive association, because the Latin American Studies Association has just mushroomed into an organization of congresses with four or five-thousand people. You get lost in the conferences, you can't even find your friends there, it's really too big. Whereas the Brazilian Studies Association has been much more *aconchegante*, more kind of welcoming and you get to interact with people more easily. It's building a community of people who might be teaching history in a department where there are not that many people working on Brazil and so they want to go to a conference where they can meet their friends or colleagues or learn and so on. It's also building a social community as well as an intellectual community.

JMP: *Because there are differences between the history of Brazil and the rest of Latin America, it's not just the question of the language, the historical experience of Brazil and the rest of Latin America...*

JNG: Well, I mean, there are lots of big differences and lots of similarities, and that's the question. There is as big a difference between Argentina and Brazil, as there is between Argentina and Mexico. So to say that Mexico is a part of Spanish Latin America and Argentina is a stranger, saying that Brazil is a part of Latin America as is Argentina, you know, they are neighboring countries. I think the difference is that one can never forget the national narratives and how important they are in shaping a country's

cultural identity, economics, politics. But there are structural similarities of colonialism, of imperial control, of extractive export of commodities, over 500 years in the relationship to Europe and the United States, but there are other significant national differences.

JMP: *Would you say that those differences that come from the colonial period are still present in today's societies?*

JNG: Absolutely, not only that, I used to hate anyone who talked about national characteristics to define a country. I found this being horribly essentializing and was very critical of it. In fact, I have spent a lot of time teaching Brazilian history, deconstructing all the national narratives, about racial democracy, about a pacific society. But I think the experiences in a given geographical political area really do mark a country. So, if you were in a country that has had very little experience of democracy, it's not unusual that, in a given moment, politics can draw on authoritarian traditions and they can become important and strong. You know, since the Republic of 1889, Brazil has had essentially 19 years of democracy between 1945 and 1964 and now 30 years of democracy. Now we have a government which I think is going to try to deconstruct or attack democracy again. In the history of a country of 518 years you have 19+30, which is 49 years of democracy, and you have 480 of authoritarian regimes. That's one thing.

The second thing is the legacies of slavery both in the United States and Brazil, which have marked the social hierarchy, the economic inequality, the notion of middle-class people that doing any kind of labor is inferior that's not to be done, that's something that slaves do. Even the expressions, it's the work of a black person, *trabalho de negro*, are a reflection of that. The land structure, the holding of power of economic elites and their access to political power are still being reproduced in different areas of the country. Cattle and soybean production is different from sugarcane production in Recife in the seventeenth or eighteenth century but the ways in which these economic elites control the politics of the country is very similar today. There are tremendous legacies from the colonial period. Even things like the excess of bureaucracy in Brazil, which we can thank the Portuguese for. The *notários*, the ways in which we need to have everything authenticated, because no one trusts anyone and therefore we have to make sure people are not cheating all the time. All kind of legacies of the colonial period that manifest themselves in the twenty-first century, I think.

JMP: *You have certainly followed Brazilian historiographical production in the last few decades. Would you say that there has been a change in the point of view from which history has been written recently in Brazil?*

JNG: It used to be, in the 60s, when there was the first boom of Brazilian historians, that you could follow the production in Brazil, because the academic world was small, you could follow the production in English and you could really know a given subfield, or an area. Today it's impossible. The dramatic expansion of doctoral programs in recent years and the expansion of universities, especially under the Lula and Rousseff governments has meant that it's impossible almost for you to follow all the things that are written on a given topic. The number of master's theses, the number of doctoral dissertations, the number of books is just phenomenal, and it's of all kinds, people of all schools, influenced by European thinkers or North American thinkers or found in debates within Brazilian historiography. It's an incredibly rich, and lively and productive field now. The ANPUH conference every other year is an amazingly exciting world of knowledge production.¹⁴ So, it's almost impossible to follow everything that's happening in any given subfield today. I feel horribly inadequate every time I go to Brazil, because of the number of new things that are produced.

JMP: *Do you think that, in your areas of expertise, that growth has led to a move from traditional ways of recounting Brazilian history, mostly from the point of view of the successors of the white independence-making elite, to the point of view of more peripheral or dominated groups, such as Women, Indians, or Black people?*

JNG: Yes, I mean there was this obvious trend between the traditional ways of telling the history of a nation to the social history movement in the 60s, which really reflected in the 70s, at the end of the dictatorship, and to the cultural turn, and the foucaultian turn and the history of emotions... All of the European and American trends are copied by Brazilians, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes very poorly, and sometimes in a way that I find frustrating, because I find it to be much more imitating or trying to imitate the latest trends, without really finding and developing or using theories and approaches that are more appropriate or help one understand history more. There's no question that there are, you know, all of the new trends of the 60s, history from below, the histories of the marginalized and the oppressed, cultural history of new kinds. It's all there in Brazil, and it's either excellently implemented or carried out or poorly. I think there's a range, as there is in this country or in Europe too. I sometimes find people tediously too trendy and then they get stuck on a person, for instance, Foucault. For some people, he is still the beginning, the middle and the

¹⁴ Regular countrywide meetings of the Brazilian National History Association (ANPUH).

end of history and life. I find good things I can learn from Foucault, but I don't need to be a disciple of Foucault or find him to be a God of some kind. I think I could point other trends. Queer theory is now a big trend among some people. It's OK, there are some good things about queer theory, and there are some bad things about queer theory. Let's not, you know, get fixated on it. But I think it's also a function of a country that feels itself to be a part of the periphery, although it's not necessarily a part of it. The insecurity of being left out means it needs to overcompensate by being in the trends, in the lead of the trends, to show that people are part of the world academic community.

JMP: *You have also been involved in the direction and production of a documentary film and you have won an award for teaching with technology. So you have also been using other means for conveying historical knowledge, other than the traditional ones. How do you see the use of such means?*

JNG: Now I'm working with a filmmaker, who has done both a documentary film and a feature film, who has agreed to do a film on Herbert Daniel based on my third book. We're just working right now on the script. We're thinking of another way to tell history. It's interesting; there was a debate about the film. I had dinner with President Roussef two weeks ago and congressman Jean Wyllys who is a left-wing openly gay congressman, and I was telling them that I had a filmmaker and I was really excited. They wanted to know what was the idea for the film. I said we're going to look at his life through his understanding of his body and sexuality and they were very upset about that because they really wanted me to tell the heroic tale of a revolutionary. I said I did that already in the book. I don't need to have a film version of my book. I want to do something new, I don't want repeat, I want to be creative and so we had a short debate about that, and I think the approach that we're going to try to do in the film will do that. That's important to reach new audiences, just as the documentaries that I have either helped make or been in. It's another way to reach people who are much more visual, who are much more interested in media as opposed to reading books. And it's also fun for me because it's a new way of telling history.

JMP: *So, what are your projects for the near future?*

JNG: My new book projects, the next two that I'm going to do, over the next five to ten years, are also forcing me to think of a different way of approaching history. The next one is called *Generation of 77*. It's going to be rethinking of the process of democratization in São Paulo by looking at youth who got involved in the anti-dictatorship movement, from different

angles and different kinds of people, almost choosing seven representative prototypes to understand the complexities of the process of democratization. I will be relying on a lot of oral histories as well as documentary evidence. Then I want go back to the very beginning of my research, which is to do a social history of downtown Rio de Janeiro, the process of seeing a collision of cultures, pleasure and popular entertainment between 1860 and 1930. I want to look at this downtown area, which was the site of theater and actors and actresses and prostitution and homosexuals, who were called *frescos*, and street vendors and immigrants and high culture and low culture, and see how they all interact in some way. It's to try to think of a different way of telling the history of Rio, which has been done quite a lot. If one is going to do something new about that wonderful city, one has to find a creative, an imaginative way of doing it. It's not knowing how to write the history that excites me. When I did my first book, I had no idea really how to do social history. It was as exciting to do the research as it was to figure out a way to communicate that research, and that's one of the things I love about every new project I do is challenging myself not to repeat the same thing again, so each book becomes really uniquely different.

Acknowledgements

This interview was made possible by a grant for a mission at Brown University from the RESISTANCE PROJECT, funded by the EU (778076-H2020-MSCA-RISE-2017).



A HISTÓRIA COMO AÇÃO CÍVICA. ENTREVISTA COM JAMES NAYLOR GREEN

Nesta entrevista, James Green, um importante “brasileirista”, fala-nos sobre o seu interesse pelo história do Brasil, sobre a sua vida como militante cívico e político contra o autoritarismo no Brasil e a favor dos direitos de gays e lésbicas, e ainda sobre a sua carreira e o seu trabalho académico. O objetivo da entrevista, além de levar o seu trabalho a um público mais amplo de historiadores e cientistas sociais europeus, é refletir sobre a relação entre o trabalho académico e o ativismo político e ideológico, e discutir os problemas do subjetivismo e do uso de testemunhos individuais na construção da história contemporânea. Convidámos James Green a refletir sobre esses problemas, para que pudesse partilhar connosco as opiniões de alguém que, devido à natureza do seu trabalho, não pôde deixar de se confrontar permanentemente com tais questões.

Palavras-chave: Brasil, direitos de gays e lésbicas, ativismo cívico e político, autoritarismo, subjetivismo.



L'HISTOIRE COMME ACTION CIVIQUE. UN ENTRETIEN AVEC JAMES NAYLOR GREEN

Dans cet entretien, James Green, un important spécialiste de l'histoire moderne du Brésil, nous parle de son intérêt pour le Brésil, de sa vie de militant civique et politique contre l'autoritarisme au Brésil et pour les droits des gays et lesbiennes, ainsi que de sa carrière et de son travail universitaire. L'entretien a pour but de présenter son travail à un public plus large d'historiens et de spécialistes des sciences sociales européens, mais aussi de réfléchir sur le rapport entre travail universitaire et activisme politique et idéologique, et de discuter les problèmes du subjectivisme et de l'usage de témoignages individuels dans la construction de l'histoire contemporaine. Nous avons invité James Green à réfléchir sur ces questions pour qu'il puisse partager avec nous le point de vue de quelqu'un qui, en raison de la nature de son travail, ne pourrait s'empêcher de faire toujours face à ces questions.

Mots-clés: Brésil, droits des gays et lesbiennes, activisme civique et politique, autoritarisme, subjectivisme.