Dr. Victoria Langland—historian of Latin America and social movements expert—talks about Latin America, women in revolution, breastfeeding rights in Brazil, as well as the importance of history in the Trump era, and more, in this interview with a former GSI.
Who is Dr. Victoria Langland? And how did you come to teach this class on revolutionary movements in Latin America?

I'm a historian of 20th century Latin America with a focus on Brazil, and I wrote a book about student activists under the Brazilian military dictatorship (from 1964 to 1985). So I was interested in social movements and the ties between student movements and revolutionary movements in Brazil—although the Brazilian student movements and the revolutionary movements were not the same thing. They don't stand in for each other; but there are some connections there, and some of the counter-revolutionary repression that impacted the armed left also impacted university students. So I don't study revolutionary movements per se [for my book], but they were important within that project.

And my current research seems very different! I'm currently researching the history of breastfeeding in Brazil, basically from the early 20th century to the present. [There] I'm really looking at changing understandings, beliefs, practices and policies around breastfeeding. And one of my overarching questions is: How did breastfeeding change from being seen as a kind of menial, undervalued labor that elite women would push off onto more vulnerable female populations, to being something that is now celebrated by many as an essential, almost sacred part of one's experience of motherhood? At the same time, how do we account for the important development of human milk banking in Brazil? For today Brazil is a leading innovator in human breastfeeding—in collecting donated breast milk, pasteurizing it, and distributing it, free of charge, to infants who need it. They do this in a very low cost way, and they've been modeling this technology and this process to other places around the world. So the book asks what these transformations have meant for various groups of women, for infants, for society more generally, and what these changes reveal about different understandings about race, gender, women's bodies, collective health, the role of transnational infant formula marketing, and so forth. There's a lot in there that I think is really important, especially as we grapple with the current situation in the U.S. where the fact that we have no legally guaranteed parental leave means that breastfeeding is effectively impossible for most families, with truly negative consequences for maternal and infant health.

Are you thinking of integrating this new research into a future class?

Yes, I have a class I've been developing with a PhD candidate in History and Women's Studies, Diana Sierra, although it's not on the books for next year, but hopefully the subsequent year. [It's] a class about motherhood, maternalism and maternal and infant health in Latin America.

Let's get back to revolution. What is the “Revolutionary Movements” class about? And in what ways do you think this subject is relevant to the lives of Michigan students in 2017?

Content-wise, the class really is a way of exploring the history of Latin America in the 20th century through the lens of revolutionary movements. One of the ways I see 20th century Latin American history is as [a series of] struggles against inequality, as that [inequality] has been a persistent structural feature of Latin American society. But it has also been one that people have been finding inventive and creative ways to push against, throughout the full 20th and 21st
revolutionaries were trying to create? In some cases, yes; in some cases, no, in very different ways. We look at women protagonists, what roles they played in what they did, and how those (roles) got understood and recognized, or not.

And we look at the way that revolution is often mythologized and celebrated in very gendered terms, from the hyper-masculinity of Ché Guevara to the ways in which the front-and-center participation of women in the Sandinista revolutionary movement becomes part of the way Nicaragua is understood. So that’s kind of one place [we’re] seeing all that working together.

Since [2014, when] you GSI’ed with me, I’ve made gender more and more central—because I care about it. So I keep finding ways to make this part of every conversation. And now my students are like, “You can’t think of revolution without thinking about gender!” Because I sort of insert it—some questioning of it—in all of our lectures in some way. So I’m very happy with that.

Could you say more about the ways in which this topic—revolutionary movements in Latin America—can be relevant to the lives of your students?

I think anyone who is interested in social justice is interested in the various efforts that people on this planet have taken to create some kind of social justice—how they’ve defined it, what they think is just and for whom, the steps that they’ve taken to try to reach that. So there’s a lot that we can learn just by exploring those actors who have been committed to this and who have undertaken a variety of different means for doing this. So even though the theme is revolutionary movements, these revolutionary movements are very different—and they evolve; they learn from each other; they try things that worked in one place, and try not to replicate things that didn’t work so well in another place. And, you know, there’s not one kind of model that just gets enacted again and again and again in different sites. These are, in fact, diverse and dialogical, right? They move off of one another. So that would be one piece of it.

Another piece is that to be a globalized citizen, to understand our hemisphere, and to understand our world, we need a better understanding of various regions of the world, including Latin America. And revolution is one of the tropes and the caricatures through which Latin America is often understood and misunderstood by US Americans. Or it’s often presented in a kind of simplistic way that there is one kind of revolutionary model, all Latin Americans—or all of Latin American history, is kind of brushed with this simple brush of, “Oh, they all have a revolutionary background or past,” and that’s not really understood, what that meant for each context. So I think it gives people a better understanding of what’s at stake in Latin America and what people have done.

Thinking of the Trump era, do you see new significance or urgency in the study of history and radical politics?

Content-wise, the class [Revolutionary Movements in Latin America] really is a way of exploring the history of Latin America in the 20th century through the lens of revolutionary movements.
I do think that all history courses are incredibly useful in the Trump era, as they get us to evaluate how we know what we know. One of the things that historians do is we put together varieties of documentary and other forms of evidence—what we call primary sources—to try to think about, what can we learn from each primary source? We think very clearly about who wrote it, and in what context, and for what audience. What’s the impact of this? What do we learn by the existence of this document?

So in a moment in which we’re questioning truth—we’re questioning news, we’re questioning what is false and what is true—I think getting back to basics [is really valuable]: How do you know what you think you know? Why do historians interpret the past this way? Showing students how to read and interpret primary sources, and getting them to really think about their evidence. What kinds of students have you found generally take this class? And what students—perhaps even unlikely candidates—would you most recommend it to?

So I feel like all history courses are really useful in the Trump era, as we think about, “how do we know what we think we know?” Or why do we believe one person’s perspective over another? Is it because it aligns with ours or is it because the material on which they’re basing it corresponds with the argument that they’re making? Because we see that two historians can take the exact same set of primary sources and come to different kinds of conclusions from them. So part of what our students are doing is trying to evaluate: why would they believe this perspective over another? Or what is compelling about this perspective over another?

So that’s one thing, and then I feel like, certainly since Trump was elected, parallels come up in conversation all the time about leaders: What does leadership mean? Where does change come from? You know, in all of the revolutionary cases, merely seizing executive power does not a revolution make. So thinking about the various ways that people have tried to effect changes that go beyond taking office has been helpful, I think, for students coming to terms with this period.

Lastly, I would also think that when we talk about revolution, we talk about counter-revolution—it’s impossible not to talk about that. So we’re often talking about real state power in various cases, and I think that has been something that people are also making parallels with today.

Since Trump’s election, I feel like that’s our mission, as historians: to get [students] to think that there’s not one truth—but nonetheless, truth is not random, that not all interpretations are equally valid.

Right, as you say, two historians can look at the same sources and come up with very different interpretations—but that does not mean that the two interpretations are equivalent.

Exactly; or that they’re just completely ideologically driven: That one person just wrote whatever they wanted and claimed to base it on a particular source; and another person wrote the opposite of that and claimed to base it on the exact same source. And that they both use sources simply to confirm their ideas rather to really try to come to terms with the past.

The students [in the class] come from a diversity of interests and backgrounds. There are certainly those who are interested in revolution as a topic, who have taken courses on the Russian Revolution or the Chinese Revolution, and they’re interested in approaching this topic from different geographic perspectives. I certainly have one student this year who is a Russian studies major, who is making lots of really useful commentary and comparisons about the Russian Revolution. There are (also) a number of students who are interested in Latin America in particular, who have taken other courses on Latin America and who want to know more about the region.

I would say the majority of our
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four or five of their [discussion] section mates, and they pick a fictionalized film that represents a Latin American revolution, from a long list that I have: one for the first half of the course, and one for the second half of the course. They just do it once, but one section does it in the first half, and one section does it in the second half. They pick a fictionalized film, they watch it, and then they give a class presentation, where they show us a clip and tell us a little bit about the film—and then they try to analyze, how is revolution being represented? How or what is Hollywood, or whichever film studio is putting this together, saying about revolution in Latin America? We have everything from Benicio del Toro’s Ché, to some of the great Tomás Gutiérrez Alea films in Cuba, and I have Machuca on the list. What we cover just depends on what they choose.

I find it a great way for all of us to get kind of a little snapshot: We get about ten films, five in the first group and five in the second group—just quickly, little snippets—and see the diversity of ways, and sometimes the lack of diversity of ways (laughs) in which the silver screen represents revolution. And what that does, the work that that does.

That sounds fun, too. Some of those are films I haven’t seen.

Yeah, it’s really fun. They’re doing it the following Monday, the second group. They do a group presentation and then they also write an individual paper on the same film. For both, they interpret a scene, so I ask them to pick one scene that their group is going to discuss, and then pick a different scene for the individual paper. They also do a primary source paper. Those are their two writing assignments: the film and the primary source paper.
You've answered this in some ways, but I wanted to ask you to tell us about some of your favorite elements in the course. Perhaps there's a particular activity or a set of readings you're particularly fond of?

Right, well, I definitely do like the film presentations. I like getting to see what they choose and what they had to say about it—I mean, that sounds so empty, but it's true! The problem for me to answer that question—and you know this—is [that in] lecture courses, you, as the faculty, don't get to see as much about how students are responding. So I can say (in a contrived voice) “What I like to read...”—you know? I don't always know how they respond to all of it.

But, as the designer of the syllabus—even if you don't always know how it comes off in sections—there might be a piece you really loved creating, you know?

Yeah, like I said, I like being able to talk about gender within revolution cause I don't think that it gets integrated usually. It's usually seen like this separate category of, “Now we'll talk about women,” as this separate discussion.

Like a gender week, or day, or whatever?

Or a gender week. So I try to make sure that that's part of what we're always looking at. Cause one of the things that I emphasize is that, if you imagine revolutionary movements struggling to create a new society—in that new society, who do they think are cleaning the toilets? [These] are racialized questions as well as gendered questions: Who do they think is running the military? Who do they think is watching the children? Who do they think is patrolling the cities? Are they imagining a society of equal sexual liberty for all? Are they imagining a multiplicity of gendered identities, including trans-gender? It's like, is that on the table? Well, it's not—okay, so what is on the table? What is it that they're imagining? And what is the lived reality?

Film and photography are another important aspect of the course. In one activity, groups of students watch a fictionalized film of their choice. “They give a class presentation, in which they show a clip form their chosen film, and they try to analyze it: How is revolution being represented? What is Hollywood, or any film studio, saying about revolution in Latin America? We have everything on the list, from Benicio del Toro's Ché, to some of the great Tomás Gutiérrez Alea films in Cuba, and Mochuca. We get about ten films—just quickly, little snippets—and we see the diversity of ways in which the silver screen represents revolution."
That’s been one of the things that I like—and I think my students know that I like it, cause I’m always highlighting it! (laughs).

And I like seeing students work with primary sources. Again, maybe this is what “the professor’s view” is—that I get to see their voices more when they write their papers on primary sources, cause then I get to see which sources really spoke to them and what really intrigued them about these different documents. So that’s more like—I like to see what they liked.

I could also say that I like images a lot. And I think the study of revolution lends itself to looking at [images]. From the Mexican Revolution on, they (revolutions) are highly photographed events. So that makes lectures more interesting, as we have a lot of iconographic material to think about. But revolutions are also represented in culture, so we look at the muralist movement—you know, in visual culture they are highly represented. And I think the imagery is really rich...

This might not necessarily be something for your course, but have you heard of this? [Retrieves a copy of the EZLN’s Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra (2015), which includes an appendage of artwork on glossy pages.]

No.

It’s great; it’s actually a collection of pieces.

I’ll check it out.

I was just thinking about images, cause...

Oh, wow!

Zapatista imagery in 2015.

Oh, that’s awesome, can I write down that title?

Definitely.