

Presentation at WUF Margarita Gutman, Rio de Janeiro, March 23, 2010

As we said a moment ago, this panel will focus on the International Call "Bicentennials in Action" which has a regional Latin American scope, is carried out through a network of academic institutions and civil society organizations from 6 countries in the region, and was initially promoted by the Observatory on Latin America of The New School University in New York.

This initiative takes place within a regional framework in which several countries in the region have elected progressive governments and are in a complex, post-neoliberal transition. This particular context calls for a deeper look into the meaning and challenges implicated by the national bicentennials.

As noted, Latin America is celebrating the 200 years of the beginning of the independence movements from Spanish rule, which led to the formation national states. For Bolivia and Ecuador, the bicentennial celebrations already began in 2009, for Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Venezuela, they will begin in 2010; and for Paraguay and El Salvador in 2011. Peru and Brazil will celebrate in 2021 and 2022 and Uruguay, although it is not clear yet, will celebrate in 2030.

The questions and challenges that arise are many, and of different types. First of all: in the midst of the transition in which many of our Latin American countries find themselves, does it makes sense to pay attention to this anniversary? Or would it be better to let it pass calmly by? But if we choose to pay attention to this date –as in most of these countries is currently happening in a large scale– one wonders how these bicentennials are being built, for what purpose and why, with whom and for whom?

In reality, does it matter what purpose and significance these

commemorative activities have? What is their significance and their political, ideological, cultural and social meaning? What relationship or what is their place in public policies and in the different administrations of each country? How does the media broadcast bicentennial activities? And how is civil society involved in these celebrations?

Also: are the countries celebrating individually, as they did during the celebrations of the centennial at the beginning of the twentieth century, or are there regional activities? For although the struggle for independence culminated in the conformation of sovereign republics, and the centennial was celebrated within the national scope of each country, the processes of liberation from Spain were basically a regional event, and for more than a century the hope of realizing *The Patria Grande* in Latin America was kept alive.

Main points:

To look closer at some of these issues, I shall present first on the following:

- a) A proposal of the social and political challenges of the Latin American bicentennial commemorations
- b) Second, I shall present a brief look at the dynamics of the bicentennials' building process. The objective is to identify descriptors that qualify the general trends observed between 2000 and 2010.
- c) Then, I will attempt a brief overview and critical analysis of the initiatives and activities explained in the first point. I will include a set of questions and future issues opened by this process.
- d) And finally, I will present the call, "Bicentennials in Action," an initiative of inclusion that tries to build a collective knowledge on the bicentennials at a regional level

*Bicentennials: Social Constructions*

Well, first of all, we should keep in mind that any commemoration is a social construction. Because an anniversary is basically a window of opportunity, and it only becomes a celebration when societies, informed of the public holidays, become the promoters and construct actively the meanings and modalities of the events.

*Rite of Passage: memory, present and future*

We propose to understand the opportunity offered by the bicentennials as a rite of passage, which includes the three dimensions of time: a reflective look to the past; an assessment of present challenges; and a collective construction of the future. Many of the initiatives include this three-way view of time.

*Acts of inclusion, mobilization and social justice.*

Based on the values of social justice and equity, which many of the Latin American nations now share, we understand that the diverse and multiple activities, both public and private, in commemoration of the bicentennials should be –from its conception and execution for the legacy they leave for the future– acts of inclusion, mobilization and social justice.

*Processes extended through time*

We propose to understand the bicentennial commemorations as a path, a process rather than the result of an activity that begins and ends the day of the national event.

*Future projects: nation and region.*

In short: the transcendent and lasting sense of the bicentennial commemorations will consist of providing an opportunity for the construction and exercise of new models of country and regional integration, socially equitable, legitimized by the participation of the different sectors and actors of Latin American societies.

*Dynamics of the process. Implementation, national or sub-national agents*

Now, let's look at the regional dynamics of the process. It could be that the decision of the government of the Republic of Chile, made in 2000, to implement preparatory activities for the bicentennial, ten years in advance, is one of the first official activities aimed at building the commemorations in Latin America. There were other initiatives, but they did not prosper.

From then on, in the ten years which have past until today, there has been remarkable growth and multidimensional expansion: the proposed activities were diversified and the number and type of promoters, actors and audiences increased. The number of cities or states that were actively involved also increased. This growth has been uneven and very slow until 2004.

During those first four years in Chile, the first cultural projects and public works began as part of the widespread official program, which was reformulated in 2008 by the President Bachelet. In 2003, the National Committee of the Bicentennial was created in Bolivia. Then, between 2005 and 2006, some initiatives from academic institutions and publications were registered in Argentina and the national bicentennial committees were established in Argentina (2005) and Mexico (2006). Between 2007 and 2008 the year of the bicentennial was officially declared in Ecuador (2007), Colombia and Venezuela (2008), and the creation of commissions in other levels of sub-national governments quickly multiplied, as did the commission of the bicentennial and centennial of the government of Mexico City DF (2007), the committees in the Senate of the Republic of Mexico (2007) and in other several states such as Guanajuato and Durango (2008), respectively.

Also, bicentennial commissions were established in the Argentine provinces of Mendoza (2006) and Entre Rios, Misiones, Chaco,

Tucuman, Buenos Aires and Cordoba (2008). But since 2009, the creation of bicentennial committees **multiplied exponentially** in almost all government levels and their different agencies!!

The number of educational and cultural institutions, which created bicentennial programs also increased exponentially, such as the Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanism (2006) and Derecho (2007) of the University of Buenos Aires, National University of Colombia (2006) National Autonomous University of Mexico (2007) Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico Catholic University, Central University and the University of Chile, to name only some of the first because the list in 2009 is endless!

Also in recent years there has been an increase of proposals that include private agents, for instance the cancelled bicentennial tower project designed by Rem Koolhaas in Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico DF (2007), or a combination of public and private agents, such as the contest for creating a new icon for the city of Buenos Aires (2008). This project was also cancelled, and what it is worse, already forgotten! These examples bring tension between the symbolic dimension of the commemoration and its corporate or real estate use.

Another example of these symbolic tensions can be found in the impressive launch of the contest by the Federal Government of DF for the installation of a monument in the heart of the Federal District, "the arc of the bicentennial", which exposes the tensions between the municipal and the federal government over the territory of the city.

There is also a combination of public and private agents in other types of activities, such as videos and audiovisual projects proposed in Mexico with the collaboration of state and private television companies.

Or in the publication of books, forums or courses and lectures, such as the forums organized by the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and the newspaper *La Voz del Interior* in Argentina.

*At the Latin American sub- regional level*

At the Latin American sub-regional level, some bilateral agreements were made in recent years, including those between Distrito Federal, Mexico and Spanish institutions such as the Cervantes Institute and the Foundation José Ortega y Gasset, or the sisterhood agreement between the cities of Sucre and Quito.

Other projects propose journeys through historical sites of independence, including Rumbo al Sur 2010, which is an automotive caravan that will cross the continent from Alaska to Isla Navarino in Chile in 2010. It received support from many individuals in whole or in part of the journey and it also has a strong presence in Facebook; or the International Sailing Festival in the Caribbean, commemorating the Galleon route organized by the army of Colombia, the Presidency, the city government of Cartagena de Indias and other national and private institutions.

*At the Latin American level:*

At the Latin American regional level, we should mention the creation of the Bicentennial Group, which coordinates the commemorations among national ministries of culture.

It has its origin in the letter of intent created at the Ibero-American Summit held in Chile at the end of 2007, and was signed by Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia. These countries agreed to implement joint activities about the bicentennial.

At the third meeting, which took place in Mexico in September 2008, it was decided to extend the Bicentennial Group to all countries that wish to participate voluntarily, including Spain,

which had been in both previous meetings, and Portugal. Paraguay was also incorporated, and Guatemala, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic showed interest to be integrated as well.

But the story behind these formal diplomatic declarations is more complicated. The issue is that Spain will also commemorate its own bicentennial: the war against France and the promulgation of the Cadiz Constitution in 1812. And Spain repeatedly proposed to organize jointly its bicentennial with its former colonies through agencies such as the General Ibero-American Secretariat SEGIB, the Organization of Ibero-American States OEI, and others. According to Latin American witnesses, Spain is trying to coordinate (and thus control and integrate itself in a Latin American field, in which it is naturally included) the celebrations in Latin American countries.

By the way, this favors the protection of Spanish investment in Latin America.

The strong reaction by the Bicentennial Group stopped that Spanish proposal and continued with the coordination and the "Latin Americanization" of the celebrations, accepted financial assistance from the SEGIB and the OEI, and invited Spain to participate as one of the many members of the group. Incidentally, this was nothing more than a tug at the diplomatic level, but it is interesting the sovereign reaction from the countries that recognize themselves as Latin Americans and defend their right to define the ways to commemorate or celebrate their independence, avoiding tensions such as those presented in the V anniversary of the discovery of America.

*What is being commemorated?*

Before looking at the activities in particular, I would stress that in several countries of the region, the date of the commemoration of the national bicentennial has been the subject of debate. Because,

indeed, the historical narrative is not written in stone: as a product of a society and time, is subject to reviews and it reflects political, cultural and social tensions of the time when it is formulated. But it is not only the agreement on the historic event, but also the subsequent historical understanding which influences the definition. For example, in several Latin American republics, what defines the date of the bicentennial is the continuation of the tradition inaugurated at the beginning of the twentieth century with the celebrations of the first Centennial, whose memory has survived until today, both in the historical narrative and in the public works and the monuments they left behind in the capital cities.

Just two examples:

Colombia doubted at the moment of defining the bicentennial commemorations.

In 2005, the Office of the President reported that the bicentennial would be carried out in 2019, on the anniversary of the Battle of Boyacá, converging with the Vision Colombia 2019 formulated by the presidency.

But, in July 2008 the government changed its position due to the adverse reaction that this decision caused and therefore decided to celebrate the national bicentennial in 2010, on the anniversary of the *Grito de Independencia del Cabildo Extraordinario de Santa Fe de Bogotá* (July 20, 1810). That date has been recognized as the anniversary of the national independence since 1874. Thus, the national government has officially established in Colombia the bicentennial of the independence events covering the period 2010-2019.

Another example of the political tensions that the celebrations bring has also occurred in Bolivia, where Sucre launched the celebration in May while the national government held it in July, being in between separatist tensions that challenge the new

constitution and the leadership of the President Evo Morales from La Paz.

*Activities under way*

To review the many planned activities or those that are currently underway is a challenge that exceeds the limits of this presentation. However, I will cover a preliminary classification and then, I would like to show a calendar that contains over 600 bicentennial activities in the Latin American region.

First, broadly, it is possible to classify the initiatives that are being carried out into two groups in relation to traditional forms of national commemorations:

- 1) cultural, social and political activities; and
- 2) works or material construction works.

The vast majority of the activities belong to the first group and they include conferences, seminars and discussions, courses and lectures, calls and competitions of all kinds, publication of books and magazines. They also include activities incorporating new technologies: documentary and fiction videos, websites, online publications and forums or interactive digital sites.

The topics covered range from historical revisions of the past 100 or 200 years, to issues of cultural identity, modernization and migration, highlighting those concerned with gender and population and Indigenous languages. Other initiatives deal with policies to promote social inclusion through education, or the incorporation of sectors with less financial backing to digital technology. That is to say, they include the concerns and challenges of current societies.

Another group of initiatives uses the umbrella of the bicentennial to include any action that has been running, from government initiatives to product advertising of all kinds.

With regards to the activities of material transformation of the city and all the other kinds of activities, we invite you to make your own explorations in the Agenda of the Bicentennials UBA Website, which already contains more than 600 activities, and that counts on the support of the Observatory on Latin America of The New School. On that Website, you can search by country, date, and different categories such as:

Work and urban plans / projects and architectural works  
Arts / Sports, print and digital publications,  
Calls and Competitions / Workshops, congresses and conferences / Celebrations and commemorative events / Policies and Laws  
Education, academic activities and scholarships / media programs,  
Agencies and institutions / Cultural Events

For example, you can search for cultural or artistic events which give you several result pages where you can access each of their individual links, for instance the contest Branca Bicentennial (Art, p. 4)

#### *Brief assessment of the Bicentennial 2000 2010*

Well, I would like to make 5 comments on this process:

The number of initiatives between 2000 and 2010, but mainly from 2007 onwards, has been strongly **increased and consolidated**.

The activities are **diversifying and opening up** to new agents, actors, and media technologies.

b. Secondly, it is stressed that this process is re-locating, i.e. multiplying the territories where they prepare celebrations beyond the national capital cities of provinces and towns. It also expands outside the national territory, taking on a regional dimension. And this is a remarkable difference from the first centennial, which was held on a strictly national framework. In this way, it is now possible in this second centennial, to find evidence through several

initiatives - mostly cultural, of the almost ideal centennial of the Patria Grade of Latin America.

c. Thirdly, we note that the city works planned and implemented, which will leave physical traces of the commemoration in the cities and territories, are in the minority when compared with the cultural, social and political activities. Two factors may converge in this situation: on the one hand the short time from the date of initiation or construction plans and the date of the bicentennial; and on the other, the need for large capital investments for implementation. In the current global financial crisis, these plans are likely to be compromised or neglected.

d. In terms of the material works, we can say that the axis is not currently on the monuments, even when there are initiatives to search for new urban icons for the bicentennial, but the focus is in transportation infrastructure, remodeling urban areas, plazas, or subsidies for housing construction. They are generally oriented towards improving the quality of life of the population, and some directly benefit the low-economic sectors, such as obtaining support for housing in Quito.

In relation to the process, there are many initiatives that present opportunities to actively participate in the commemorations, such as the calls, contests, requests for ideas, dreams and comments.

But there are very few ones in which community groups are the creators of the initiative or participants since the beginning in the definition and implementation. And they are not just an audience that responds to proposals already agreed upon.

A paradigmatic example of participation and inclusion is the construction of the Plazoleta Bicentenario, a small square in Santa

Fe, Argentina by the group Sin Techo. This organization and their project's diffusion highlight precisely this community and base character.

By contrast, the activities that are more plentiful recently transform the bicentennial in a massive show. Moreover, the proximity of the celebrations causes a trivialization of them, which is also expressed in multiple associations with the Bicentennial

Or in the proliferation of merchandizing, such as the one that is currently occurring in Mexico, according to the presentation of Virginia Guedea at a meeting we had recently.

The truth is that the municipal and national governments could play an important role in this regard, encouraging the flourishing of initiatives that are coming out from the communities, perhaps small or of limited scope, but there are multiple and well distributed. These experiences are the ones that are marked in memory of those who take part in them, and thereby contribute to the dignity and collective memory of the celebrations.

Naturally, many of these activities and proposals are intertwined in each country with the politics, economy and culture.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in a continent where eight progressive governments were democratically elected, issues such as cultural identity, migration, social inclusion, gender, and population and indigenous languages, emerge in an opportunity like this of the bicentennial, thereby stimulating reflection and the development of future projects.

For this same and obvious reason, the fate of the commemorations is also linked to the evolution of these special local, regional and global circumstances, particularly in times of economic crisis such as the present one.

Given the dynamism of this process, which records news and changes almost daily, which has a growing presence on the Internet, where the amount of news on the bicentennials is shocking, even more so when compared with the scarcity of tickets that we found just two years ago, every observation and analysis leads necessarily to a list of questions:

1. Will the progressive trends in many of our countries modify the approach of the national commemorations by orienting them to participation and inclusion of the population, not only to take part in the festivities, but also in their preparation and implementation? Could also in this way civil society legitimize its participation and own the national commemorations?
2. Will there be a consolidation of the focus of regional bicentennial regional celebrations, which so distinguished from the first centennial?

Because for too many years after independence it was only an ideal of some intellectuals like Manuel Ugarte and important fighters for the future of a unified Latin America.

How will that regional vocation be expressed? Will the expansion and consolidation of connected infrastructures throughout the region be supported, both the material and the digital?

4. Will we be able to reconstruct the powerful cultural unity based on language and the common history of the Latin American world, respecting their differences and their particularities? Despite the slice that can be charged in Latin America by the current global financial crisis, Will we be able to consolidate our American historical and regional destination?

5. Could the bicentennial mark then, a difference to the Latin American world in relation to the processes of homogenization of globalization?

All these questions are purely urban, mostly located in cities, affecting the urban population, and mostly promoted by institutions that operate in cities, including the national government, municipal government, NGOs, educational and cultural institutions as well as the private sector and media.

Well, these are just some of the questions that are part of the focus of the international call Bicentennials in Action, Commemoration, Economic Crisis and Political Mobilization in Latin America.

Because this call invites all members of society to discover, analyze and display the bicentennial commemorations

Because the record, the interpretation and the chronicle of the many activities carried out in these bicentennials, are ways to participate in the commemorations and take part in the transformation of the current reality of Latin America.

This 2nd Call is a new regional initiative that unlike the first, focuses exclusively on the construction of knowledge about the Latin American bicentennial commemorations

In this context, we invite the submission of essays and audiovisual presentations along some of the following lines of work:

1. Documentation and interpretation of the various ways in which Latin American countries commemorate their national bicentennials across public and private initiatives and in civil society.
2. Documentation and interpretation of the relationship between the bicentennial commemorations and the effects of the global economic crisis on local economies.
3. Documentation and interpretation of the relationship between the bicentennial commemorations and local political mobilizations.

What we want to highlight is that these works might cover the areas of media, public policies, urban projects and transformations, public works, social mobilizations, educational policies, scientific projects, commemorative events, cultural productions, production and dissemination of visual images, photographs, videos, films, interactive projects, Internet applications, or others.

This call is made based on a network of institutions from 6 countries whose organizers are the OLA, the UBA and UNAM, the two largest universities in Latin America and the call counts on the collaboration of the OLACCHI and other universities, which, you can see on this slide and in the program for this panel, and the call also has the auspices of UNESCO, OEI, Argentina Culture Secretary.

We invite you then with this brief video, to discover, tell, display, and thereby participate in the Latin American bicentennial commemorations!