



CLAS CHATS 4: KEEGAN BOYAR TRANSCRIPT

This is CLAS Chats, brief video interviews featuring ten questions that focus on the experience and work of students affiliated with the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago. I'm your host Natalie Arsenault, Associate Director of CLAS.

Hi, my name is Keegan Boyar. I'm a PhD candidate in the History Department at the University of Chicago, and my research examines policing, criminal law, and citizenship in Mexico City from the 19th century to the mid 20th century.

What drew you to Latin American Studies?

Since I was a kid, I knew that I wanted to study history, but I really didn't know what region or topic I wanted to study at all. And in undergrad, one of my introductory history classes was actually split between the history of Europe and the history of Latin America. I had never really considered Latin American history before, but I really enjoyed the class and just, I found it really eye-opening. And so later I ended up doing a study abroad for a quarter in Santiago de Chile. I had never been to Latin America before, but I was just really fascinated by the rich history and the culture, and of course the food, especially Chilean empanadas are fantastic. And so in general, I think that what really struck me was how the region in some ways seemed to mirror what was familiar to me from the U.S., but in other ways it was really quite different and it really demanded to be understood on its own terms. I think that trying to figure that out really opened up a lot for me.

What has been your favorite UChicago LACS course—taken or taught—and why?

It's hard to choose. My favorite class to teach, or rather to TA for, is the Latin American Civilizations course, which is an introduction to Latin American history in three parts. And I especially liked TAing the third course in the sequence, because it covers from the late 1800s to the present, which roughly coincides with my research. But really, I just love teaching all the civilizations courses. I really love how the TAs for the class get their own weekly section to teach, which is really generative of just great discussions. It's a great teaching experience. And above all, I just really love getting the chance to introduce people to Latin America and to its history. I really hope that I can show students a little bit of what it is that I love about the region and maybe convince some of them that it's worth studying.

What book do you consider foundational to your education in Latin American Studies, and why?

That's a tricky question to answer, because there are just so many of them, but I think the book that has actually most directly shaped my understandings of Latin America and particularly of its cities and of the role of law and its cities would have to be *A Poverty of Rights* by Brodie [Brodwyn] Fischer. And fortunately she teaches at the University of Chicago and I'm lucky enough to have her as one of my advisers. The book examines how unequal access to legal rights and protections

shaped urban poverty in the making of Rio de Janeiro. Even though my own work focuses on Mexico, it's a book that's really shaped my thinking on some of the central issues in modern Latin America, especially topics that are near and dear to my heart, like urban history, law, informality, and citizenship.

What role has CLAS played in your time at UChicago?

CLAS has played a huge role in my research and in my learning. The Center has graciously supported my research through funding like the Tinker Field Research Grant, which I used to carry out preliminary archival work that was just really important for sort of figuring out my topic early on. And CLAS also supported me with the Foreign Language and Area Studies grant to study Portuguese. And even though I study Mexico, where of course they speak Spanish and not Portuguese, the grant was really helpful in better preparing me to read a much broader literature and really take advantage of the fantastic scholarship that's produced in Brazil, which provides an interesting point of comparison, I think, for my own work.

Besides supporting my research, CLAS has also provided an intellectual home and community. CLAS supports some pretty amazing classes that I've been able to take and TA, that are both from people within the university and through the Tinker Visiting Professor program, which has allowed me to get to know some amazing scholars from outside of the U.S. I've also been a regular participant in the Latin American History Workshop, which CLAS supports and which I co-organized my third year. I've also attended a lot of the presentations that CLAS does on Latin American Studies, which are always fascinating, and in non-COVID times always have pretty amazing food too.

Finally, I've just really appreciated how they've always just been very supportive in general. They've provided me with meeting spaces while I was TAing. They put together dissertation writing groups that were really helpful. Yeah, in general CLAS has just been amazingly supportive throughout my time at the university.

What made you choose your dissertation topic?

When I first went to Mexico on a research trip, I had very little idea of what it was that I wanted to study. My goal was to get to know some of the archives and find something to write about for a seminar paper, but I really had no idea what I was looking for. I mean, I knew I was interested in these broad themes of resistance and collaboration and the negotiation of power, but that's all incredibly vague. So after looking around and feeling pretty overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the materials available in the archival collections, I by chance just started looking at court records from Mexico City from around 1900. And what particularly drew me to them was just the level of granular detail that they contained about everyday life and how at times they contain the voices of people who rarely spoke directly in a lot of other sources.

I was especially intrigued by cases where people were accused of fighting or insulting the police and how these cases really shed light on all sorts of ways that city residents tried to shape policing, whether that was by directly resisting arrest or by intervening themselves or even collectively against what they saw as abusive behavior by the police. I was just fascinated by these cases and the questions that they raised about how different people sought to use and also placed limits on the scope of police power. After writing the seminar paper, I wanted to continue exploring these topics and questions.

Can you give us a quick summary of your topic?

My dissertation is tentatively titled, "Ordering the Unruly City: Policing Criminal Law and Citizenship in Mexico City, 1870–1950." In it, I look at the causes and consequences of the changes in policing in that era. And I trace how policing was subject to negotiation by different actors in ways that normalized informal and extralegal ways of applying law and public authority.

During the time period that I study, the ways that public order was understood and enforced really changed dramatically, as officials embarked on major projects to modernize the city by expanding the reach of the police and of laws and of regulations. These efforts had at best a mixed reception. The police in particular were notorious for violence, for corruption, for abuses...and this really well-deserved reputation survived frequent professionalization and anticorruption campaigns. Meanwhile, city residents regularly disputed police authority while at the same time many also complained of lack of police protection. So, rather than see this as just a simple case of State failure, my project really tries to ask why it is that this systematized extralegality around policing survived, and how it shaped urban life and citizenship, and how different people reacted to it and tried to shape it.

My dissertation explores how policing in Mexico City came to be characterized by entrenched extralegal violence, corruption, and the violation of basic citizenship rights, by tracing how these came to actually be central to the construction and the maintenance of informal means of order in the city. I show how policing was negotiated by different actors, including everyone from city officials to the capital's very diverse residents, to the police themselves in ways that really generated their own norms and their own forms of order that were driven by extralegal power, by patron-client relationships, and by the selective application of formal law. This informal negotiated order, it...at times it actually mitigated the ways that legal work sought to exclude or decriminalize many city residents' lives and livelihoods, but at the same time, it relied in large part on discretionary violence, and in doing so it ultimately reinforced the weakness of citizenship rights.

This includes looking at everything from the development of networks of extortion and police protection around street vendors to tracing how residents sought to use the police not to fully prosecute their neighbors to the full extent of the law during conflicts but instead to enforce informal forms of dispute resolution. And throughout all of this, police violence and its threat was ever present. So ultimately the negotiation of police power simultaneously allowed many residents the chance to defend their livelihoods and their social abilities, while also reinforcing their unequal and contingent integration into the modern city and their limited access to citizenship rights.

What unexpected turns has your research taken (or, how have your central questions changed since you first embarked on your research)?

Originally, I had planned to have a greater emphasis in my project on the institutional side of the history of policing, because it's important, but it's still little understood. But then there was a big earthquake actually that hit Mexico City in September of 2017. As a result, the city archives suffered damage and it was forced to close one of its galleries. It was the gallery that contained all of the administrative records from the federal district government from 1929 onward, which included everything from the police department from that year on.

That gallery actually stayed closed for the entirety of my research trip in 2018. That made it difficult for me to write as deeply on the institutional history of the police as I had planned. It sort of forced me to refocus my energies more on the court records and on what they show about the

on-the-ground interactions between city residents and police, which in some ways is actually good as it sort of brought me back to what got me interested in the topic in the first place. But it was definitely a change.

How does your work connect to broader global issues?

Well, to pick one way, I think that the recent wave of protests against police violence especially in the U.S., but in a lot of other places as well, albeit on a smaller scale, including in Mexico where there have been protests against sexual violence by the police, against police militarization and the replacement of the police by the military and against abuses and responding to the COVID crisis, to name just a few...I think that all of that really points to the ways that many people are trying to rethink the role of policing, or if there's even, if there even should be a role for policing.

And although this is in many ways a product of the present moment, it's also something that has a very long history that's really rooted in local contexts. I think that it's very important to try and understand police violence in the broader context of Mexican urban history, as well as the long history of ways that people have tried and often failed to change it. To really try and get a sense of why it is that it's such a deep-rooted problem, and hopefully point toward better ways of responding to it.

What interesting tidbit won't make it into the research report/dissertation, but makes for a fun anecdote?

You really come across all sorts of weird things in the archives. I think that this example is actually too morbid to really be a fun anecdote per se. The one that certainly stood out to me was that in one homicide case record from the 1940s that I was reading, there was actually a bullet wrapped up in a paper envelope and included in the file, which is very unusual in the court cases because they usually don't include physical evidence. I'm pretty sure that it wasn't actually the murder bullet. I think it was just a bullet from the killer's gun, although it's hard to tell because the file actually made surprisingly little mention of it. But that was definitely the most unexpected thing that I've found in an archive.

When you aren't traveling for research, which is your favorite place in Latin America to travel to, and why?

It's really hard to choose, but I think that even when it's not for research, I just love being in Mexico City. I mean the city is just so vibrant and huge that I think it's really impossible to be bored here. There are so many amazing museums, although of course they're all closed right now, but even beyond that, there's so many wonderful places to walk. There's just incredible architecture to see, beautiful parks, and of course the food is just absolutely incredible. So I really never get tired of being in Mexico City. I really do love it here and it'll be very hard for me to leave whenever exactly that ends up being.

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Thanks for watching.