



CLAS CHATS 2: MADELEINE STEVENS 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.

I'm Madeleine Stevens. I'm a rising third year in the Political Science department, a doctoral student, and I study political violence. My dissertation is probably going to be on forced disappearances—that's what I'm studying right now—in authoritarian and civil war contexts.

What drew you to Latin American Studies?

Well, some of it was my experience in Spanish classes. I also grew up with a family that really enjoyed watching foreign films and my dad speaks Spanish, just because he learned it in college. And so we watched a lot of movies from the region when I was growing up. But also because it's a region that's very, very interesting from many perspectives within political science. It's a very diverse region. There's a lot of different kinds of political things going on. Unfortunately, political violence is something that many of these countries have had in common, or currently have in common, which makes it an important region for me to look at. But also having the language skills is important. I'm not going to try to study someplace [where] I can't speak anything

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

I was the grader for Brodie Fischer's class on Revolution, Dictatorship and Violence in Modern Latin American History. It's a bit of a mouthful. I had to double check the name. It was just amazing. I learned so much from Professor Fischer. I learned so much from the readings themselves and from the students—they wrote these amazing final papers in the early days of the pandemic about areas of the region that I hadn't studied before. And it was just...I was very impressed. I don't know whether I would have performed as well under those circumstances of writing a final paper. But it was actually really important because that's how I came up with the idea for my dissertation—it was that class.

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

I have two. One was *Forgotten Peace* by Rob Karl. It's about the period in Colombian history—I started out last summer studying Colombia—that was before the current sort of spate of civil conflicts, before the FARC, sort of leading up to FARC, the period of La Violencia in Colombia. I found that it gave me a really good foundation for understanding events further on. Most books I've seen, especially in political science, are more focused on what happened from the '60s onward

and less so on what built up to that. And it's a very well written book. I was very impressed. I enjoyed it a lot.

But the book that really, you know, again, the book that was most important to my dissertation idea was a book I read for Brodie's class called *A Lexicon of Terror*. It's by Marguerite Feitlowitz—I don't know if I said her last name right—but it's about Argentina, and she interviewed a lot of people who were disappeared and turned up again or whose family members were disappeared by the Argentine regime. She was originally a translator, so she translated books of fiction and poetry. So it just reads beautifully on top of being very emotionally impactful and informative.

What role has CLAS played in your time at UChicago?

For the most part fieldwork funding. The Tinker [Field Research] Grant was really important to me because it allowed me to go get my feet wet with field research my first summer in the PhD program. I have to admit, I didn't know very much about the Center for Latin American Studies prior to applying for that grant, but between being a grader for Brodie's class and holding my office hours in the Center and going to info sessions and stuff like that... You guys are really accessible and knowledgeable and friendly and sometimes you give me empanadas.

What made you choose your dissertation topic?

Well, generally the political violence interest came because I was living in France in 2015 after graduating from college. And I was in Paris the night of the Paris attacks. Nothing happened to me. I was fine. I wasn't directly traumatized, though it was an upsetting experience. But it got me very interested in political violence in general. I wrote my master's thesis for MAPSS on Islamic State print propaganda in French and English.

But then I came to University of Chicago, and I took a class on civil wars with Paul Staniland in the Political Science department. And that sort of broadened my interests beyond terrorism. So it was a little bit of a circuitous route, but I ended up interested in civil wars. And, because of my language interests, pivoted away from French and decided to study Colombia.

And then this most recent dissertation idea... I'm a comparative—I'm in comparative politics. So we have to compare countries and I thought it would be very interesting to look at the issue of forced disappearances in different political contexts within Latin America. So a roundabout way of getting to where I am.

Can you give us a quick summary of your topic?

In political violence a lot of the studies focus on visible violence, such as massacres. And that makes a lot of sense because, for the most part, those things are observable. Violence as a topic is difficult to study, but you don't have to make it harder for yourself by studying what I'm calling invisible violence. So I think that forced disappearances are sort of the perfect example of invisible violence. I'm interested in when different actors use visible violence versus invisible violence and the coercive power of invisible violence. The Colombian Center for Historical Memory has a really amazing quote about force disappearances, that it creates a permanent uncertainty that impedes grieving.

There are, of course, a lot of reasons, unfortunately, that governments and armed groups would forcibly disappear people. But I think one of them is just the psychological impact it has on communities, it's very hard for people to pick up the pieces and move on with their lives if they don't know what's happened to their loved ones.

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

I did start out studying gender rhetoric and the politics of France and ended up in for the most part, South America...But some of it was also some of the questions I was interested in pursuing...at least last summer, I went to the archives to study a question about criminality and peace terms for insurgent groups, so armed groups that aren't just drug cartels or something like that. They started out at least with a legitimate political purpose and have been taking on different forms of criminal activity to fund themselves. So how their peace terms were impacted by that and I went to the archive and they were like, "We don't have this, nobody has this."

But also, it was a question...you know, coming up with the dissertation topic, I say, not having written the dissertation yet, seems like asking questions that you think you might be interested in and poking around and going, "Oh, this isn't feasible," "Oh, I'm not that into this," until you hit upon something where you're like, "Okay, we're going to run with this. We're going to see where it goes." So reading *A Lexicon of Terror* made me go, well, I haven't seen a ton of work on this. There's been more work on insurgent groups' criminal activities than there has been on forced disappearances, at least from what I've seen in political science. I have to look further afield for the literature review and all that.

It's something that has really been interesting to me and it's a very horrible and sad occurrence. But it's sort of fascinating—just this idea of an absence being a form of violence. Like, not just the violence perpetrated against the person who has disappeared. But the violence done to their family and their community.

How does your work connect to broader global issues?

Well, unfortunately, many different kinds of actors, both states and armed groups, forcefully disappear people across the world and have been doing so for I don't know how long. It's a tactic that can make a lot of sense, unfortunately. The broad supposition is that forced disappearance allows some sort of degree of plausible deniability. You can say, "oh, you know, maybe they ran off with a lover or something like that." "They didn't...we didn't do anything to them because there's no body, so there's no proof." But you know, I guess that's basically the way it can connect, that this is not a phenomenon that is unique to Latin America by any stretch of the imagination, and it's something that's very difficult to study so it's important to try to take a look.

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

I think it is my love of lulo. Because I don't, I don't know...how I got this in my head, but I thought...when I went to Columbia last summer, I was like, I'm 26 years old. I've eaten a lot of fruits. I have eaten all the fruits that I'm ever going to try that are going to be exciting or interesting to me. And that's just like the most ridiculous thing. Because I got lulo, like a lulo drink at some

restaurant, and I was just like, “What's this? This is amazing!” And I had guanabana, which I hadn't heard of before, but I didn't like it as much.

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

Well, that's kind of a hard question because I've only been to Colombia. But when I was in Colombia, we went to the Caribbean coast. We went to Cartagena and Santa Marta, me and a couple of other people who were there from the Political Science department doing research. And just going to Bogotá, and seeing the mountains and all that and then seeing the variation, when you go to the coast. It's just...it was a beautiful way to experience a little more of the country.

And realize that I understand, Spanish in the capital a lot better than I understand Spanish on the coast. I'm not fluent by any by any means, but I felt like I'd made a lot of progress when I was in the city. And then I went to the coast and was like, “Oh...no.”

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