

Does Latin America Have a Common History?

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“Nothing more than a geographical reality? And yet it moves. In actions, unimportant at times, Latin America reveals each day its fellowship as well as its contradictions; we Latin Americans share a common space, and not only on the map. . . Whatever our skin color or language, aren't we all made of assorted clays from the same multiple earth?” Eduardo Galeano¹

Nearly forty years ago Lewis Hanke edited a volume titled *Do the Americas Have a Common History?* This book of essays sought to revive discussion of Herbert Eugene Bolton's call for the writing of a “history of the Americas” in his 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Association.² In his writing and his teaching over a half-century, Bolton promoted an approach that sees all of the Americas as part of a common set of historical processes.³ Although few historians have chosen to follow Bolton's entreaty, and most historians of the Americas probably *do not* believe that we should try to write a history of all the Americas, Bolton's controversial essay does force us to think about the commonalities (and dissimilarities) in the colonization, conquest, and development of all the Americas. I would like to pose a similar question that compels us to think hard about an enormous part of the Americas that we *do* generally assume to have a common history. I want to pose the question: Does Latin American have a common history? And, if it does, what exactly is that common history? I want us to take a hard look at Latin American history and rethink

1. “Ten Frequent Lies or Mistakes about Latin American Literature and Culture,” from Eduardo Galeano, *We Say No: Chronicles, 1963/91*, trans. Mark Fried (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 162 and 164.

2. Lewis Hanke, *Do the Americas Have a Common History? A Critique of the Bolton Theory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964). Bolton's address was delivered at a meeting in Toronto, Canada. It was then published in *The American Historical Review*, 38:3 (April 1933), 448-74 under the title, “The Epic of Greater America.” The essay is reprinted in the Hanke volume.

3. For a full biography of Bolton see John Francis Bannon, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: The Historian and the Man, 1870-1953* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978). Bolton trained more than 100 (!) Ph.D.s at Stanford and Berkeley from 1909 to 1953.

our assumptions about the very notion of “Latin America.”

Now, to cut to the chase and give you the bottom line up front so you will not be kept waiting breathlessly for my conclusion, the answer is yes, Latin America does have a common history . . . but . . . and all the importance of this essay is in that pesky conjunction. As I will argue, although historians (as well as others) have long operated on the widespread assumption that Latin America has a common history, when pressed hard, they have a very difficult time specifying what that common history is beyond very broad general processes, and most of those took shape in the colonial period. Even more important, historians are often hardpressed to specify precisely which pieces of the American landscape should be included into that common history. In this essay, I will briefly set out what I think that common history consists of, how common it really is, who shares it, and, most importantly, when it is no longer common. As we shall see, it is that last point that I regard as the most important. Before doing that, however, we need first to take a look at what we mean by the term “Latin America.”

Common Assumptions

Where do we get this notion of “Latin America” in the first place? As David Brading has shown, it is not until the early seventeenth century that peoples of Spanish descent in the Americas begin to see themselves as some sort of collective entity defined by the geography of the New World. An emergent “creole identity, a collective consciousness that separated Spaniards born in the New World from their European ancestors and cousins” was taking shape within a century after the Columbian voyages.⁴ By the mid-seventeenth century, the conquest and early process of colonization had been completed and the population of “Spanish” Americans had been in place long enough and had reached sufficient levels in what James Lockhart would call the “central areas” (New Spain, Peru, the Caribbean) to create some nascent sense of rootedness.⁵ Small pockets or

4. D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 293.

5. In the mid-seventeenth century there were perhaps 500,000 Spaniards in the Americas, more than half of those born in the New World. The majority of the Spaniards were concentrated in Mexico and Peru. Brazil, in contrast, had a “white” population of less than 50,000. Despite the demographic catastrophe produced by conquest and disease in the sixteenth century, the Native American population of New Spain and Peru still numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The African slave populations of the Caribbean and Brazil were in the tens of thousands and (in the case of Brazil) growing rapidly. Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 108-15. James Lockhart, “Social

enclaves of neo-Spains (to steal and twist a term coined by Alfred Crosby) had taken root in the Americas.⁶

Yet these enclaves were just that, small islands of Europeans in a vast sea of Indians and Africans. Quite clearly the native peoples of the Americas did not see themselves as part of a larger society or culture (Indian or European) across the growing regions of the Spanish American and Portuguese colonies. The Africans, mainly concentrated in the islands of the Caribbean and on the northeastern coast of Brazil, had even less of a sense of belonging given their traumatic dislocation from their homelands in Africa to strange lands, cultures, and languages in the New World. Some of these Indian and African peoples, and their descendants, were slowly being drawn into the cultural and linguistic world of the neo-Spains (and neo-Portugals) by the end of the seventeenth century. From the first moments of conquest, racial and cultural mixture had begun to produce intermediate groups who did not fit the “ideal types” of the racial hierarchy. Their very presence and influence, in fact, meant that the neo-Spaniards were forced to define themselves and their newly-emerging societies as distinct from (even though very strongly identified with) Spain. To complicate matters further, the very tiny Portuguese presence in Brazil, even in the late seventeenth century, meant that the development of a neo-Portuguese sensibility was even weaker than the process taking shape in the Spanish colonies. Any sense of connectedness with their Spanish American counterparts was also very weak, and to some extent the experience of the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” (1580-1640) had possibly even heightened a sense of difference.⁷

By the late eighteenth century this sense of creole identity, of Spaniards in the New World had been spurred forward both by the growth of creole populations in Spanish America, but also by the impact of the Bourbon Reforms. Ironically, these imperial reforms spurred on creole “nationalism” and helped create a stronger sense of connectedness among the creole elites from Mexico to Argentina.⁸ This sense of common identity, promoted and

Organization and Social Change in Colonial Spanish America,” in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America, volume II, Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 265-319, esp. 314. Lockhart develops the notion of “central areas” in James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

6. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), esp. p. 2.

7. See Stuart B. Schwartz, “The Formation of Colonial Identity in Brazil,” in Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

8. Brading, 467-91, “The New State.”

spurred on by creole elites, played a powerful role in the wars for independence in Spanish America. (Perhaps its greatest statement is Bolívar's "Jamaica Letter".) Yet, as Bolívar himself learned so bitterly, local and regional roots in the collapsing Spanish colonies too often were more powerful in their attraction than any greater sense of identity as Americans or Spanish Americans. Trying to unite these similar, yet disparate, peoples—Peruvians, Mexicans, Chileans—into a single community exhausted even the extraordinary talents of Bolívar leading to his famous despairing quote about "ploughing the seas."⁹

The term "Latin America" only emerges in the mid-nineteenth century in the aftermath of the wars for independence. Apparently first used by the Colombian, José María Caicedo in 1856, it was quickly adopted by the French under Napoleon III to provide ideological cover for his imperial and colonial ambitions in the Americas.¹⁰ This subtle but important shift from Spanish, Hispanic, or Ibero America to Latin America had (and continues to have) powerful implications for defining a field and a region. It moved the sense of the collective from neo-Spaniards to include not only neo-Portuguese, but also the neo-French. (Ironically, most of the inhabitants of the most important French possession were hundreds of thousands of Africans and neo-Africans on the western side of Hispaniola.)¹¹

The wars for independence and the processes of nation-building in the nineteenth century helped forge a sense of a collective past and present throughout the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies. In the midst of the bloody struggle, Simón Bolívar could speak of "the hearts of all the peoples of Spanish America."¹² By the 1890s José Martí could speak of "our America" and José Enrique Rodó, writing from the other end of Latin America, could address the "youth of America" in 1900, both clearly speaking of Spanish or Hispano America.¹³ Ironically, this collective

9. The original quote is "America is ungovernable. He who serves the revolution ploughs the sea . . ." Brading, 618.

10. Arturo Ardao, *Génesis de la idea y el nombre de América Latina* (Caracas: 1980), 83. See also, Arturo Ardao, *España en el origen del nombre América Latina* (Montevideo: Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, 1992).

11. At the outbreak of rebellion in Saint Domingue in the 1790s the colony probably had some 450,000 slaves, 40,000 free people of color, and 40,000 whites. Two-thirds of the slaves were African-born. Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 25 and 278.

12. Simón Bolívar, *The Hope of the Universe* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983), 85. The date of the statement was 28 April 1814.

13. José Martí, *Nuestra América* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1980) [originally published in 1891] and José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000) [originally published in 1900].

identity would arise partly in response to the growing power of the United States throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the writings of both Martí and Rodó this was quite conscious and deliberate. Both saw the construction of a Latin American identity as a means to combat the growing imperial power of “América del Norte” and a way to avoid the “delatinization” of “Hispano-América.”¹⁴

Latin American intellectuals like Martí and Rodó were reacting to the efforts of the United States to extend its sphere of influence throughout the hemisphere. In many ways, the “creation” of “Latin America” in the minds of citizens of the United States takes place at the end of the nineteenth century. The Pan American movement, despite its efforts to forge a hemispheric alliance of nations, did so by identifying the U.S. as a nation with a heritage and history distinct from the “other” America. From the “gentlemen scholars” such as William Hickling Prescott and Hubert Howe Bancroft in the nineteenth century, to the modernization theorists of the late twentieth century, much of the discussion of hemispheric solidarity has been built upon a discussion of how to “overcome” the differences between the United States and Latin America.¹⁵ In this long tradition, the “problem” has been how to overcome Latin America’s history (read culture) by making its people more like U.S. citizens (i.e., having them adopt “our” values).

Throughout much of the twentieth century, especially after 1945, Latin Americans developed their sense of collective identity in opposition to U.S. power and imperialism in the region, and scholars in the United States too often defined Latin America out of an experience shaped by the Cold War and government funding efforts designed to fight that war in the academic arena. This oppositional approach has been fuzzy from both directions, and the linguistic terminology has contributed to the fuzziness. Citizens of the United States, calling themselves “Americans,” have never been very clear on what exactly is to the south, and the term “Latin America” has been left vague and poorly defined. Those who have consciously taken on the identity of “Latin Americans” (usually from Brazil and Spanish-speaking nations) have often taken to calling those from the U.S. “North Americans” a vague term that should include Mexicans and Canadians. From my perspective, both perspectives tend to leave out or avoid those areas of the Americas that make definitions the most problematic and interesting: most of the islands

14. See, for example, Rodó, 196.

15. For an important discussion of this topic see Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and US Hegemony in the Americas, 1898-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), esp. 16-17. See also Marshall C. Eakin, “Latin American History in the United States: From Gentlemen Scholars to Academic Specialists,” *The History Teacher*, 31:4 (August 1998), 539-61.

of the Caribbean (especially those where Spanish is not the principal language), Belize, the Guianas, and regions of “overlap” (what Bolton called the Spanish Borderlands). (One could also include much of the Caribbean coastal zone of Central America.) It is precisely in these “transitional zones” that the definition of Latin America and the United States becomes most difficult and challenging.

Our current conception of Latin America has its most powerful roots in the efforts of foundations and government agencies to “map” world regions in the post-1945 era. The National Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Smithsonian Institution formed the Ethnogeographic Board in the 1940s. Through their work, and especially after the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, academia in the United States carved up the world into regions or areas and universities scrambled to build “area studies” centers. Latin America was one of the most clearly coherent world regions with its dominant Iberian linguistic, political, and cultural traditions. In many ways, it is a more coherent region than “Europe” or “Southeast Asia” with their multiple languages and ethnicities. Yet, again, the area studies programs faced dilemmas from their inception in how to deal with “non-Latin” regions, especially in the Caribbean basin.¹⁶

The tendency has been to ignore these areas. In the U.S., standard textbooks on Latin America throughout the first half of the twentieth century took a very neat political approach to defining Latin America as the twenty republics that gained their independence from Spain (18 countries), Portugal (Brazil), and France (Haiti) in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ U.S. foreign policy powerfully shaped the definition of the region including only independent nations, and excluding or ignoring those areas of the Caribbean and northern South America that remained under colonial rule (British, French, U.S.). From the earliest texts of the founders of the field of Latin American history (such as William Spence Robertson and Percy A. Martin, founders of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*) to Hubert Herring’s *A History of Latin America* (1955, 1961, 1968), this was the standard approach. These books were nearly always diplomatic, political, and military history with only the occasional nod toward society and culture. Even the noted journalist, John Gunther, in his wide-ranging travels did not

16. For a fascinating analysis of the “invention” of world regions see Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), esp. 162-82.

17. Panama, of course, is the oddity here gaining its independence as a part of New Granada in the 1820s, and then again in 1903 as an “independent” republic.

bother to look beyond the standard twenty republics.¹⁸

The decolonization of the Caribbean (including here the Guianas) in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s clouded the traditional picture, and this can be seen easily in the textbooks published after 1970. One of the biggest selling volumes has been E. Bradford Burns' *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*. In the first edition (1972), Burns takes as his subject the "traditional 20" saying that "Geopolitically the region encompasses 18 Spanish-speaking republics, French-speaking Haiti, and Portuguese-speaking Brazil," yet his statistical tables include Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.¹⁹ By the sixth edition (1994) this definition has shifted to include "five English-speaking Caribbean nations" (with the Bahamas joining the other four above). Despite the book's title, the statistical tables cover "Latin America and the Caribbean."²⁰ Benjamin Keen's *A History of Latin America*, possibly the bestselling, comprehensive history of Latin America over the last twenty years, covers the "twenty Latin American republics."²¹ What must be the most widely selling volume on post-colonial Latin America, Skidmore and Smith's *Modern Latin America* avoids the thorny problem of definition in its prologue, yet the first edition (1984) includes individual chapters on Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Cuba, and Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.²² In the second edition (1989) Skidmore and Smith added a chapter on the Caribbean that included Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Lesser Antilles.²³ In contrast, Edwin

18. William Spence Robinson, *Rise of the Spanish-American Republics as Told in the Lives of Their Liberators* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1921); Herman G. James and Percy A. Martin, *The Republics of Latin America: Their History, Governments and Economic Conditions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923); Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America from the Beginnings to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968); John Gunther, *Inside Latin America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941).

19. E. Bradford Burns, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 3 and 239-44.

20. E. Bradford Burns, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 2 and 347-8.

21. The first edition appeared in 1980 as *A Short History of Latin America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) with Mark Wasserman as the co-author. Wasserman had dropped off the title page by the fourth edition (1992) and the sixth edition is co-authored with Keith Haynes *A History of Latin America* (2000). The quote comes from p. xii of the 2000 edition.

22. Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). All countries in the appendixes at the end of the book come from the traditional twenty.

23. Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Williamson's *The Penguin History of Latin America* (1992) and Clayton and Conniff's *A History of Modern Latin America* (1999) stick to the traditional definition.²⁴ The influential and authoritative *Cambridge History of Latin America* (11 volumes, 1984-95) takes Latin America "to comprise the predominantly Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking areas of continental America south of the United States—Mexico, Central America and South America—together with the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic—and, by convention, Haiti. (The vast territories in North America lost to the United States by treaty and war, first by Spain, then by Mexico, during the first half of the nineteenth century are for the most part excluded. Neither the British, French and Dutch Caribbean islands nor the Guianas are included even though Jamaica and Trinidad, for example, have early Hispanic antecedents . . .)"²⁵ With the exception of Puerto Rico, this definition could easily come from the James and Martin volume in 1923!

All of these definitions hinge on an analysis of some set of commonalities among nations in Americas that make them part of something called Latin America, as well as their differences from the United States. At the heart of the matter, then, is the notion of what binds these peoples and countries together, a common history that is, at the same time, not shared with the peoples of the United States. So what are the major features of that common history that binds the peoples of so many countries together into a unit that we can call Latin America?

A 'Common' History?

I believe that the very essence of any notion of Latin America emerges primarily out of the view that the region and peoples arose out of the process of conquest and colonization by European powers, primarily the Spanish and Portuguese. The "Latin" in Latin America derives primarily from this vision of the creation out of European conquest. These processes of conquest and colonization, the complex struggles between conqueror and colonized, are at the very essence of any definition of Latin America. This is, if you will, the touchstone of Latin American history. This perspective has been around for centuries. Brading's colonial creole "first Americans" defined themselves out of this process of conquest and colonization in the

24. Williamson's statistical tables, in fact, do not even include all twenty! Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin, 1992). Lawrence A. Clayton and Michael L. Conniff, *A History of Modern Latin America* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

25. Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America, volume I, Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), xiv.

sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the first wave of historians wrote about the drive to create new nations in Latin America as the triumphal struggle of European civilization over the barbarism of native peoples and Africans. (Sarmiento, of course, is the foundational text in this genre.)²⁶ The so-called “second conquest” of the late nineteenth century was rationalized by many Latin American intellectuals and elites as the final stage of the “first conquest” in the sixteenth century.²⁷

This tale of European conquest and colonization was a reductionist tale from its beginnings. It was really the story of the conquest of James Lockhart’s “central areas”—the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru. By the end of the sixteenth century the fringes of the two Spanish viceroyalties were just that—frontiers sparsely settled by Europeans (or by anyone else in many places). In the case of Brazil, it is even difficult to speak of a “conquest” of the small enclaves on the Atlantic coast. More than 98 percent of what is now Brazil lay beyond the pale of European conquest and colonization.²⁸ When creole identity began to emerge in the Spanish American colonies in the seventeenth century, the vast majority of what we would include today in any definition of Latin America lay beyond the reach of European power and control. Most of the lands remained fragmented pieces of an *indigenous* America. Even in the central areas, the Spaniards and Portuguese constituted small islands of Europeans in a sea of non-European peoples.

In these central areas, what I call the “core regions,” we see unfold the basic elements of the features that most historians today would employ in their definition of Latin America: the imposition of European (1) political and legal structures, (2) languages, (3) religions, and (4) cultures (to use a very broad and amorphous term). Until the 1960s, traditional historians generally saw this process as unilinear, often inevitable, and desirable. (There were important dissenters such as Juan Bautista Alberdi.)²⁹ Much of the “story” of the field of Latin American history since the 1960s has been

26. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie, vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga*, 7a ed. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1989) [first published in 1845].

27. See, for example, Steven C. Topik and Allen Wells, eds., *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

28. See, for example, H. B. Johnson, “Portuguese Settlement, 1500-1580,” and Stuart B. Schwartz, “Plantations and Peripheries, c. 1580-c. 1750,” in Leslie Bethell, ed., *Colonial Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-38 and 67-144; and, James Lang, *Portuguese Brazil: The King’s Plantation* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), esp. Chapter 1.

29. For a discussion of Alberdi and his denunciation of the perspective of his contemporary Sarmiento, see Burns, 51-3.

challenges to this powerful and enduring paradigm. Although many today would probably acknowledge that the process of Europeanization has been overwhelming and ongoing, the approach over the past forty years has been to emphasize the resistance of non-European peoples to the juggernaut of Europeanization, and to highlight the give-and-take in the process.³⁰ Conquest and colonization, to put it another way, was not a unilineal and complete process, but rather a bitter struggle among Europeans and non-Europeans that has produced a complex cultural mix that defines contemporary Latin America. Rather than emphasize the role of elites, political, military, and diplomatic history, historians in recent generations have placed more emphasis on racial and social mixture, culture, and non-elites, especially peasants, slaves, workers, and women.³¹

The history of Latin America then emerges out of the collision of peoples that begins with the “Columbian Moment” in October 1492. Before the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the “New World” there was no Latin America. On that warm Caribbean morning in October 1492, Columbus unwittingly brought together two worlds and three peoples in a violent and fertile series of cultural and biological clashes that continue today. A common process of conquest, colonization, resistance, and accommodation across the region provides the unity that allows us to speak of something so mislabeled as “Latin” America. Five hundred years after that moment of conception the descendants of the “Columbian Moment” bear the highly visible reminders of this common process: they live in nation-states formed out of western and southern European political and legal traditions; speak Romance languages as the dominant tongues; overwhelmingly they practice varieties of Christianity (especially Roman Catholicism); and they are integrated into the capitalist system that arose out of the North Atlantic world.³²

These common processes provide historians with a framework for defining and demarcating Latin America for the sixteenth century, and much of the seventeenth century. The appearance of serious European competitors

30. An important critique of the traditional paradigm is Steve J. Stern, “Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 24 (1992), 1-34.

31. William B. Taylor, “Global Processes and Local History,” in Olivier Zunz, ed., *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985), .

32. The classic text on the creation of a notion of “America” is, of course, Edmundo O’Gorman, *La idea del descubrimiento de América* (México: Centro de Estudios Filosóficos, 1951) translated as *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961).

in the Americas after 1600, and especially by 1650, begins to complicate the task of definition. When the English, Dutch, and French enter into the region, especially the Caribbean basin (broadly defined), the Iberian monopoly on conquest and colonization ends. These three nations stake out territories that had once been (even if only nominally) under Spanish control, areas that had been part of “early” Latin America. One of the great stumbling blocks in defining Latin America after 1650 is what to do with these regions. For most traditional textbooks, these areas generally disappear from discussion after they slip from Spanish control. In many surveys (and in some areas studies centers) an attempt has been made to avoid the definitional problems by speaking of “Latin America and the Caribbean.”³³ By including everyone, we do not have to define what we mean for either term. The inclusion of some non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations in recent textbooks is a variation on this approach. Bring them in, but do not worry about explaining the rationale. This approach, however, avoids the tough question of the nature of the relationship of these regions to Latin America. Are the English-speaking islands too “English” to count. Why include Haiti and not Quebec?

After the mid-seventeenth century, and even more so after the early nineteenth century, it becomes harder and harder to speak of a common experience for Latin America. The difficulties arise out of both the multiplication of European colonizing powers and the even greater diversity of “colonized” peoples. In Mexico, Central America, and the Andean world (especially Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) the presence of large, dense Indian populations has produced a racial and cultural mixture that, on closer scrutiny, makes these countries very unlike Europe and distinct from the rest of Latin America. In the Caribbean and Brazil, the massive importation of millions of Africans from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries makes these countries very different from “Indo-America.” The absence of large Indian or African populations, and the massive immigration of Europeans to Argentina and Uruguay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has produced yet another major variation on the Latin American heritage.³⁴

It is precisely the multiplication of political and administrative units that complicates the task of the historian of Latin America, especially after

33. Of the 29 federally funded Latin American Studies centers, 7 are centers for Latin American and Caribbean studies (New York University, Florida International University, University of Illinois, Indiana University, Duke University, Michigan State University, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee).

34. Only in an overwhelmingly “European” Uruguay at the turn of the century could a “Latin American” intellectual have produced a manifesto like *Ariel* that defines the heritage of Latin America as not even “Hispanic” but, in truth, Greek in its origins with France as its shining exemplar.

the wars for independence in the early nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth century the two Spanish American viceroyalties fission into four in recognition of the growth of significant population centers over the previous two centuries. The Brazilian colony (although less developed than Spanish America) had developed a series of administrative and political centers by 1800. In many ways, the wars for independence provide the historian with yet another common process, but one that ultimately complicates the story dramatically.³⁵ Although Brazil manages to remain intact, the Spanish American colonies split into ten independent nations by 1830, and the fragmentation of New Granada and Central America produces another six nations by mid-century. As if the problems of defining sixteen national histories as pieces of one larger region were not enough, politics and shifting political boundaries would now further complicate any definition of Latin America.

Cuba, for example, does not gain its independence until 1898, and even then, its “independence” is questionable. The Dominican Republic, perhaps the most complicated political story of the nineteenth century, gains and lose its independence, becomes part of Haiti, and even tries to join the United States.³⁶ If annexation had taken place, would we now see the Dominican Republic as simply another state like California or Texas? Both these cases indicate some of the problems with defining Latin America using political criteria, but they are simple compared to Puerto Rico. Here is a place that nearly everyone would agree is a part of Latin America, yet the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a free associated state, and Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. The tortured political status of Puerto Rico has led most historians to avoid even discussing it as part of Latin America in their textbooks, except in the colonial period.³⁷

Despite the political fragmentation and the definitional problems that produces, all of the regions south of the Rio Grande do continue to face

35. Key synthetic works on the period include: Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Independence of Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Bushnell and Neill Macaulay, *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Richard Graham, *Independence in Latin America: A Comparative Approach*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); and, Jay Kinsbruner, *Independence in Spanish America: Civil Wars, Revolutions, and Underdevelopment* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

36. Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 1998).

37. For a recent volume that grapples with the legal implications from the perspective of U.S. law and identity, see Christina Duffy Barnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

similar cultural, social, and economic problems and processes in the nineteenth century. Whether in Brazil, Central America, or Jamaica, the rise of export-oriented economies; conflicts over the continually diversifying racial mix and hierarchy; and literary and artistic trends all offer enough similarities that we can continue to speak of the common economic, social, and cultural processes in regions south of the United States. It is in fact, the shifting political boundaries that perhaps exert the most influence on the growing differences in these economic, social, and cultural processes. For example, the conquest and inclusion of Florida, Louisiana, Texas, and much of the Southwest into the United States between 1803 and 1848 fundamentally alters these processes. Property rights, race relations, and economic activity (to name three key issues) move in profoundly different directions after U.S. control. Spanish elites, slaves, and the racially-mixed will experience a world very different from their counterparts who live in the newly-independent nations of Latin America in the nineteenth century. Politics does make a difference, and an enormous one.³⁸

The differences produced by the differing political experiences of the former colonial regions increase dramatically throughout the twentieth century. In politics we see a range from decades of dictatorship and authoritarianism in much of Central America, Cuba, and Haiti, to the more open and democratic systems of Costa Rica, Argentina, and Chile. Yet, despite this wide range of differences, political scientists have been able to continue to see the traditional twenty countries as a coherent region for comparative purposes. This is possible, however, by ignoring most of the Caribbean. It is not possible to include Belize, Guyana, and Jamaica (to name a few cases) in this comparative regional analysis because of the much longer colonial experience of the British, Dutch, and French Caribbean. Once again, the exceptional case of Puerto Rico makes it the problematic stepchild in any comparative political analysis of Latin America. Much of comparative political analysis reinforces the notion of Latin America as the twenty traditional republics, by definition leaving out all the most problematic cases.³⁹

The economic history of Latin America after 1870 also has powerful similarities that many standard surveys have analyzed. The rise of export-oriented growth in the late nineteenth century built on monoculture, the shock of the Great Depression and the so-called “inward turn” after 1930, and the end of the era of “import substitution industrialization” in the 1970s

38. For a fine example of the impact of changing legal and political regimes see Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
 39. See, for example, Gary W. Wynia, *The Politics of Latin American Development*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

with the subsequent rise of neo-liberalism are powerful processes common to much of the region. Like the political processes, these commonalities have allowed economists and historians to look at the traditional twenty nations in a comparative framework.⁴⁰ This framework, however, becomes even more complicated than the political analysis as the region enters the twentieth century. Is it still reasonable to include Brazil, with its enormous industrial economy, in the same analysis with Haiti, Honduras, or Guatemala? As in the case of the political scientists, the economists face problems even if they attempt to incorporate the British, French, and Dutch Caribbean into their analysis. Despite many similarities, these small nations remain under colonial control until late in the twentieth century, and do not experience the standard phases described above precisely because they are not independent nations.

Perhaps the strongest areas for continuing similarities, across the traditional twenty countries and the “problematic” regions, are in race relations, social organization, and culture. Despite very different political histories over the twentieth century, the evolving mixture of Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans (supplemented now by a growing population of peoples from Asia and the Middle East) continues to provide historians with comparative possibilities that allow us to see the region as a whole. This, however, does not define the region of Latin America, since one of the most fruitful pieces of the comparison is with the experiences of racial mixture and race relations in the United States. Here again, the feature that differentiates the experiences (despite common beginnings) is the impact of differing political regimes. The same could be said of social organization as well. The racial and social hierarchies all across the Americas have been profoundly shaped by differing political regimes.⁴¹ The good news is that this provides us with a framework for seeing all of Latin

40. Some notable examples of this comparative tradition are John H. Coatsworth and Alan M. Taylor, eds., *Latin America and the World Economy Since 1800* (Cambridge, MA: The David Rockefeller Center Series on Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 1998); Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin American Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Celso Furtado, *Formação econômica da América Latina* (Rio de Janeiro: Lia, 1969); Osvaldo Sunkel and Pedro Paz, *El subdesarrollo latinoamericano y la teoría del desarrollo* (México: Siglo XXI, 1970).

41. The comparative tradition in the study of hemispheric race relations and slavery is long and highly developed dating back at least to Frank Tannenbaum’s classic *Slave and Citizen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946). A couple of recent examples that focus on the impact of politics on race are Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

America as a region. The bad news is that it does not clearly set it apart from the rest of the Americas.

Culture (both elite and popular) offers perhaps the most interesting angle on defining Latin America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some of the strongest parallel processes since the moment of conquest and early colonization have been in the cultural developments in Latin America. Writers and scholars of literature have been some of the strongest proponents (whether they knew it or not) of the existence of a place we could label Latin America. Literary histories of Latin America generally follow the traditional history surveys. They primarily focus on the Spanish-speaking nations and Brazil. The nature of the discipline has often produced literary histories of Spanish America (to the exclusion of Brazil).⁴² The only real definitional problem here has been what to do with Puerto Rico and, more recently, what to do with writers in the United States who write in Spanish or (more problematically) what do with “Hispanic” or “Latino” writers in the U.S. who write in English.⁴³ Generally speaking, the literary historians of the Spanish language in the Americas have generally been very open about the geographical location of writers. No one, for example, questions if José Martí is part of the literary history of Latin America even though he lived and wrote for much of his adult life in the United States. The same is true of Rubén Darío who spent so much of his life in Europe.⁴⁴

Literary scholars, in fact, are at the forefront of the move to break down the traditional political and linguistic boundaries of the regional definitions. The move toward a comparative inter-american literature in recent years, for example, has been motivated by a desire to move away from the traditional regional specializations that have tended to operate as academic enclaves.⁴⁵ Inter-american literature attempts to engage specialists in all the traditional enclaves in a common discussion of literatures of all the Americas. Nonetheless, the very notion of comparison is built upon the assumption that there are clearly identifiable regions and regional literatures to compare. How can one compare “Latin American literature” with “southern literature” (to cite but one example) unless one has an idea of a set of

42. Some examples, old and new, are Enrique Anderson-Imbert, *Spanish-American Literature: A History*, 2 v., trans. John V. Falconieri (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963) and Giuseppe Bellini, *Nueva historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, 3a ed. (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1997).

43. See, for example, William Luis, *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997).

44. Cathy L. Jrade, *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

45. See, for example, Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991).

common characteristics that define Latin America and its literature?⁴⁶ The presence of large numbers of Spanish-speakers in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century, and the massive immigration of peoples from all over Latin America and the Caribbean into the U.S. since the 1960s have made the cultural and linguistic definition of Latin America ever more problematic. As studies of literature and culture demonstrate, the traditional political boundaries of Latin America and the United States break down completely when one attempts to define both regions.

Shifting Borders and Boundaries

If Latin America was born out of the collision of European and non-European peoples in the late fifteenth century, then the key dilemma in attempting to define the region is tracing the ongoing struggles and combinations of those peoples. The collision of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans was like three powerful streams converging to produce a roaring river that mixed these three peoples into a dazzling variety of combinations producing something new and unique in world history. As the decades and centuries passed, the turbulent river gradually diverged into many different streams, but all had their origins in the great waterway formed by the initial clash of these three peoples. I see two crucial questions: (1) What was the nature of the river once the collision had taken place? and, (2) How far do those streams need to diverge from the river before they should no longer be considered to have enough in common to be considered a single unit? In more concrete terms, when did places like Trinidad and Belize diverge enough to no longer be considered a part of Latin America, and how far do regions like Brazil and Guatemala have to diverge no longer to be seen as part of the world region?

The clearest answers to these questions have been from the angle of political history. The nineteen Iberoamerican nations that achieved their independence in the nineteenth century (and in 1903 in the case of Panama) and Haiti qualify. Post-colonial history, from this perspective, was a continuation and evolution from the Spanish, Portuguese, and French political cultures implanted after conquest. As we have already seen, this is nice and neat, but still not unproblematic. Why include Haiti when it was not an Iberian colony? Why exclude Quebec? Have we somehow bought the napoleonic argument for a "Latin" America? Why simply exclude Puerto Rico when it is clearly Latin American culturally and linguistically? The political definition of the region is the most clearcut and definitive, but it fails miserably when one looks at Latin America as more than simply a

46. See, for example, Deborah N. Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

conglomeration of independent nations.

Even with this seemingly neat definition, one has to be very wary, as the Puerto Rican case illustrates. If one holds a definition of Latin America strictly to political boundaries not only does it leave out much of the Caribbean, it also raises serious questions about the old “borderlands” region. When the United States annexes what I call the “southern tier” states in the first half of the nineteenth century, do the regions suddenly drop out of Latin America? Do the peoples who populated the region before annexation stop being Latin American? As immigration from south of the border continues—especially in recent decades—are not some sections of California, Texas, and Florida arguably still part of Latin America, at least in a cultural sense. Finally, even without these cultural questions we have to recognize the political boundaries of Latin America have been constantly shifting for more than five hundred years. In 1500 Latin America consisted of a few isolated pockets of Spaniards in the islands of the Caribbean. By 1600 it also included the core regions of Mexico and Peru and pieces of the Brazilian coastline. Yet, it was still a small part of the total area that we today consider Latin America. By 1700, the political boundaries had contracted with the losses to England, the Netherlands, and France in the Caribbean. The boundaries contracted further by 1850 with the losses of territory to the United States. In political terms, Latin America expanded and then contracted across centuries.

While the political boundaries (despite some problems) may appear to be the most clearcut measure of the limits of Latin America, and the cultural boundaries may be the most difficult to define, the economic range of Latin America is somewhere in between as a definitional instrument. Perhaps one of the oldest assumptions about Latin America, an assumption that became more explicit with modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960, is that Latin America was created and defined out of the the expansion of the European economy and its penetration into the Americas. (A similar assumption has guided the writing of the history of the United States.)⁴⁷ The expansion of capitalism (even if a backward Iberian form of it) accompanied the political conquest and has continued to spread across greater geographical spaces for five centuries. In the nineteenth century, Sarmiento and others portrayed this as one aspect of the advance of “civilization” (while Rodó feared it). In the oft-quoted words of the Brazilian intellectual Euclides da Cunha, “We are condemned to civilization. Either we shall progress or we shall perish. So much is certain, and our choice is clear.”⁴⁸ This advance of “modernity”

47. The same set of assumptions has also been true of theories of dependency and world systems analysis.

48. Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands (Os sertões)*, trans. Samuel Putnam

in the nineteenth century has returned in a new form as the “triumph” of capitalism, neo-liberalism, and globalization at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.⁴⁹

Unlike the expansion and contraction of political boundaries, this story of the expansion of modern capitalism in the region has long been portrayed by its proponents as one of the inevitable expansion of “European” control and civilization over the interior of the nascent nation-states. Following this reasoning, the countries of Latin America only become true nation-states in the late twentieth century with the complete penetration of the interior through roads, railways, telecommunications—especially radio and television. Since at least the nineteenth century, the disappearance of “traditional” society has been a counter-narrative to this liberal triumphalism. Influential writers have lamented the deculturation of Indians, African, and the “folk” in the face of the juggernaut of the modern European state.⁵⁰ The contemporary version of this narrative has been the critique of the cultural impact of globalization (“coca-colanization”). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries José Hernández and Ricardo Güiraldes wrote nostalgically about the vanishing life of the gaucho threatened by the railroad.⁵¹ Today, Eduardo Galeano objects to the replacement of mate with McDonald’s and the power of multinational capitalism.⁵²

If the expansion of capitalism in the nineteenth century served to define Latin America more clearly, the latest stage of capitalism serves to obliterate differences within Latin America and between Latin America and the United States. Imagine that the complete economic integration of the Americas does eventually take place. The nation-states and their previous common problems of monoculture, underdevelopment, import-substitution industrialization, and the like would blend into one enormous economy (albeit regionalized). Would we then begin to see the Americas as a group of regions characterized by different socio-economic indices (somewhat the way we now see the United States)? It would certainly be difficult to see

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944 [originally published in 1902]), 54.

49. For two recent works in that emphasize the need for Latin American to adopt “modern” values see Lawrence E. Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2000), and, Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

50. Burns, Chapter 4, “An Intellectual Counterpoint,” 51-71.

51. Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra*, 2a ed. (Bueno Aires: Editorial Losada, 1940 [originally published in 1926]), José Hernández, *Martín Fierro*, ed. Ángel J. Battistessa (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1994 [originally published in 1872]).

52. See, for example, “To Be Like Them,” in *We Say No*, 286-97.

Brazil and Mexico, for example, as regions that fit into the same category as Honduras, Haiti, or Guatemala. Economic integration would make the task of definition Latin America in traditional terms very difficult as capitalism increasingly ignores and erodes the political boundaries of nation-states.

So What Is Latin America Then?

If political, cultural, and economic boundaries have been constantly shifting since 1492, how then do we pin down this elusive notion of something called Latin America. To put it simply, who's in and who's out, and when? Here I come back full circle to the moments of origin and my image of the river, of converging and diverging streams. At its most basic, we must begin any definition of the region out of the initial collisions and convergences. Few would disagree with that assertion. For the first century of its existence, Latin America was Ibero America, with Spain and Portugal as the driving forces in the collision of peoples. The commonality, it seems to me, is in the **Iberian** heritage and its transformation through struggles with non-Iberian peoples in the Americas. When the French, English, and Dutch appear on the scene in the seventeenth century they also become part of the non-Iberian collisions and mixtures. In this sense, Saint Domingue continues (for a while) to be a part of Latin America, but so does the rest of the Caribbean. Politically they may fall under the sway of the British, French, and Dutch, but culturally and socially these islands and enclaves will carry with them a powerful Iberoamerican tradition: the spiritual conquest of the Catholic Church, racial mixture, profound social inequities, slavery, and the cultural mix of Iberian, Native American and African peoples. As time passes, the cultural and political influences of the British, French, and the Dutch eventually overwhelmed the Iberoamerican heritage. The societies continue to be racially and culturally mixed, slavery persists, as do the profound social inequities, but the influence of different political and cultural traditions reshaped these former regions of Latin America. (In the case of the British colonies, the different political tradition makes a profound difference in their evolution.)

This means that there are no easy dates that demarcate the entry and exit of regions into and out of Latin America. Instead, there are gradual transitions, and this complicates the task of the historian. Latin America has an ever evolving set of core characteristics and each country or region must be measured on a sort of continuum to gauge its convergence or divergence from the set of characteristics. Jamaica does not suddenly stop being Latin American in 1655 with the English conquest, but gradually evolves away under the demographic, political, and cultural influences from England. Conversely, the borderlands of northern Mexico only gradually are drawn into Latin America, and (after 1848) gradually drawn out. The non-Spanish-

speaking Caribbean then gradually evolves away from Latin America, despite the strong similarities (slavery, social structure, racial and cultural mixture). Puerto Rico, and even more so, places like California, Texas, and Florida also evolve away (in varying degrees) from their Latin American cousins under the influence of U.S. political culture, economic development, and new types of cultural and linguistic mixtures.

My approach takes me away from the mainstream of traditional approaches while maintaining some of their key assumptions. Given my evolutionary approach and emphasis on Iberian heritage, I would argue that not only Puerto Rico but also Haiti have been evolving out of Latin America. Both, especially Haiti, have evolved for more than a century under political and economic influences profoundly different than the Latin American nations. Although I do think that, ultimately, politics makes an enormous difference in the definition, I do not see it in such rigid and clearcut terms as the traditional historians. Political boundaries matter, but culture takes a long time to respond to those political demarcations. When we write the history of Latin America we should not suddenly stop talking about the non-Hispanic Caribbean when the other Europeans conquer islands and enclaves on the mainland. Equally, we should not drop the borderlands or Puerto Rico from our domain after U.S. annexation. Both regions continue to receive powerful demographic influences from Latin America. Their departure from the region is not as farreaching as that of Guyana, Jamaica, or Curaçao.

If we are to speak of something called Latin America it must have some common core elements that allow us to group different geographies together into a single unit. There must be a core, but we also must recognize that the core elements continually evolve. (The only constant in history is change!) That core is not static, nor uniform. The enormous variety of collisions across Latin America produces multiple hybrids (to appropriate, misappropriate? a post-modern term). The beauty of Latin America is that there is enough unity of features that we can, in fact, define the region, yet there is enough diversity that we are always watching the pieces of that region diverge from their origins. Geographically, Latin America has had four core regions—Mexico, Peru, Brazil, and the Caribbean—and a constantly shifting series of peripheries (U.S. borderlands, much of the Caribbean). If there is a “classic” moment in Latin American history it is in the core regions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, before the arrival of the other European powers, yet long enough after the initial conquest to have create societies that are not European, Native American, nor African. They are truly American. After roughly 1700 the great roaring river of collisions begins to spin off a series of streams. By the twentieth century the non-Hispanic Caribbean has diverged enough that it no longer

has many connections with its (distant) Iberoamerican cousins.

In the twenty-first century some of the nations that have long been a part of Latin America may diverge enough that historians in the twenty-second century will no longer include them in Latin America. In fact, the divergences from the cultural core may have become so profound by the sextacentennial that we may no longer be able to speak of a Latin America, except in the past tense. Latin America may have a common history, but not a common future.

The greatest irony of economic integration, should it prove successful over the long haul, is that it may bring all the Americas back toward convergence and greater unity. If this does happen, the proper question may no longer be “do the Americas have a common history,” but rather “do we have a common future?”