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Review Essay

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Russell W. Ramsey, "[Latin America: A Booming Strategic Region in Need of an Honest Introductory Textbook](#)," pp. 168-72.

Latin America: A Booming Strategic Region in Need of an Honest Introductory Textbook

RUSSELL W. RAMSEY

According to the Administration's *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (May 1997), "Our hemisphere enters the twenty-first century with an unprecedented opportunity to build a future of stability and prosperity--building on the fact that every nation in the hemisphere except Cuba is democratic and committed to free market economies." Yet two textbooks commonly used for introductory college courses on Latin America present the region in 1998 as a revolutionary cauldron where democracy is a sham, and where the people are pauperized by greedy US corporations and often murdered by huge US-trained armies. This fifth annual *Parameters* essay on the strategic literature on Latin America will examine the question of ideological interpretation.

Regional Surveys and References

Robert T. Buckman's *Latin America, 1998* is the 32d annual entry into the Latin American field by the distinguished Stryker-Post series on world regions. It is packed with detail, yet readable; philosophically ample, yet focused; historically rooted, yet very contemporary. These factors, plus its inexpensive paperback format, make Buckman's volume the regional survey of choice. Simon Collier, Thomas E. Skidmore, and the late Harold Blakemore edited the 2d edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean* in 1992. Neither a text nor a reference encyclopedia, this costly hardback follows the topical commentary format pioneered by the French encyclopedist Denis Diderot in the 1750s. It is therefore neither a complete reference tool nor a purely factual commentary, innocent of ideological slant. The Europa Publisher, Brassey's Ltd., and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, all of London, publish annually updated reference volumes that better accomplish the regional strategic reference task.

Regional Histories and Interpretations

Thomas E. Skidmore is a well-established Latin American historian and, coincidentally, a coeditor of the *Cambridge Encyclopedia* just mentioned. His article "Studying the History of Latin America: A Case of Hemispheric Convergence," in the Winter 1998 issue of *Latin American Research Review*, is a long-needed contribution. Skidmore's title reflects his conclusion that the bitterly divisive historiographical wars of the 1960s have faded, and so they have. Yet Skidmore makes a fascinating case for a newer and richer fabric in the post-Cold War era. Benjamin Keen is one of the grand old men of Latin American history. The 6th edition of his edited *Latin American Civilization: History & Society, 1492 to the Present* (1996) has long since replaced *A History of Latin America from the Beginnings to the Present* (3d edition, 1968), by the late Hubert Herring, as the North American college student's standard introductory textbook. Contents up to 1947 emphasize social history and conflict issues, with reason and balance. Thereafter, Keen abandons his scholarly stance and includes nothing but paeans to socialism, a political and economic option which clearly was rejected within Latin America by 1996. The reader not only gets an artificially inflated view of socialism's legitimacy in the region, but also is left with a void about what everyone else was thinking and doing during the Cold War.

James D. Cockcroft's 1997 volume, *Latin America: History, Politics, and U.S. Policy* (2d edition), is a costly paperback that will pass as an academic textbook for many in an era when the lines between adversarial journalism

and scholarly appraisal have been blurred. Should this be the only text used by college students in an introductory course on Latin America, however, those students will be taught, under the guise of academic legitimacy, a large number of explicit falsehoods about Latin America, the United States, and the relationships between the two bodies. Cockcroft uses a standard format by which to pass off his spin-doctored commentary. Each topical portion uses selected historical strands to show the need for bloody socioeconomic revolutions to remedy centuries of injustice. Then comes a descriptive portion showing the local Marxists as the only people who understand the public and have any support. Finally, there is a de rigueur passage which villainizes US regional policy in regard to each topic, showing how Wall Street, the Pentagon, and the oligarchs who govern the United States conspire with evil *latino* power figures to abuse nearly everyone.

Splendid fiction, this material: authors who blame all troubles in Latin America on US Cold Warriors leap quickly from the cognitive to the affective, thence to the realm of entertainment. Some of the sophomores may actually read it. An intellectual explanation for the apparent popularity of this neo-Marxist fantasy, ten years after its universal rejection at the grass roots throughout Latin America, is the object of your reviewer's 1997 article "Neo-Marxism Rides the Black Legend." Only by accepting that the people of Latin America are so functionally inept as to be historically dominated by their own entrepreneurs, generals, and politicians could anyone conclude that the region needs US Marxists to ride to its rescue with revolutionary cadres and a Utopian formula.

Political and Economic Studies

How is democratization faring in the wake of global neo-liberal economics within Latin America? Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline have edited the 4th edition (1996) of their volume *Latin American Politics and Development* to reflect the massive post-Cold War changes. For the national security analyst, strategist, or graduate student, this is the volume of choice. Wiarda and Kline are political scientists, but they amply build in the sweeping effects of the global neo-liberal economic movement and its political influence on Latin America. A splendid complement is the 1995 volume by Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*. These authors show how emerging Latin American political parties are moving from a single-issue orientation (borrowed from French models) to the inclusive "party as a tent" model seen in the United States. Finally, Ernest Bartell and Leigh A. Payne edited *Business and Democracy in Latin America* in 1995, showing how the giddily optimistic "trickle-down" prescriptions and predictions failed partially in the 1980s, but also how the enhanced base of entrepreneurship has indeed produced a broader set of political constituencies.

Civil-Military Issues

Brian Loveman wrote *The Constitution of Tyranny: Regimes of Exception in Spanish America* in 1993, an important reinterpretation of early national Latin America. He shows how the 19th-century elected administrations often gave way to "regimes of exception," which were usually dictatorships by military-looking *caudillo* figures. Accurate history it is, but Loveman's nonrecognition of the same slow and irregular departure of authoritarian regimes in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East once again resurrects the old Black Legend, namely that Latin Americans manifest a unique preference for flag-waving pseudo-generals on horseback as chief executives.

David R. Mares corrects Loveman's otherwise valuable historical analysis with his 1998 edited volume of essays, *Civil-Military Relations: Building Democracy and Regional Security in Latin America, Southern Asia, and Central Europe*. These cross-cultural essays leave little doubt that militarism is not the dominant issue when developing countries with weak democratic traditions occasionally vest political leadership in their armed forces. Further, the Latin American region comes off as problematic but rapidly improving in this regard, not nearly so likely as other world regions to call out for the men-at-arms in times of political turmoil.

Jorge I. Domínguez's edited book of essays, *International Security & Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era*, makes no attempt to set a single paradigm. But the quality of the writers whose essays comprise this book make it a classic: Caesar D. Sereseres on Central America, Carlos Escude and Andres Fontana on Argentina, and Ivelaw L. Griffith on regional security collaboration all provide blue-chip contributions. Domínguez concludes his summary essay with a recommendation that the United States needs to recognize the external missions of the Latin American armed forces and legitimize these roles through professional help, a sermon your reviewer has

preached for many years without many amens from the congregation. In this regard, my 1997 book *Guardians of the Other Americas: Essays on the Military Forces of Latin America* details the efforts of the US Army to help the Latin Americans give up their periodic dependency on military strongmen during the worst of all possible times, the defense against Soviet-Cuban subversion directed against their governments.

Donald E. Schulz's 1998 volume *The Role of the Armed Forces in the Americas: Civil-Military Relations for the 21st Century* is an update on the search for new missions as the Latin Americans shift toward the *posse comitatus* principle of civil-military relations. Glenn R. Weidner's paper titled "Overcoming the Power Gap: Reorienting the Inter-American System for Hemispheric Security" (1998) traces and analyzes the quest for a functional regional security apparatus. Weidner, who was involved in conflict prevention during the 1994 Peru-Ecuador border dispute, concludes that old scars, internal and external, tend to prevent the political support that could yield a world model for conflict prevention.

Social Movements and Revolution

Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar examine several of Latin America's indigenous peoples and the effects of globalizing economics upon them. Their *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements* (1998) is a collection of essays by anthropologists from both Latin America and the United States. During the Cold War, Fidel Castro planted Cuban cadres within several Latin American ethnic minority regions with the mission of fomenting revolutionary conflict. Post-Cold War Latin America has seen the continuation of some of these struggles, featuring both domestic and external leadership and support. The Alvarez et al. volume is therefore important strategic reading. Its essays confirm two points. First, the neo-liberal economic movement is not enriching Latin America's ethnically distinct regions very much. Second, there is authentic leadership within the non-assimilated regions that is working to adapt old customs and dreams to economic modernity, while sacrificing neither ethnic honor nor authenticity.

Ofelia Schutte's 1993 study *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* reached similar conclusions. Ways must be found, she concluded, to preserve the ethnic dignity and authenticity of old submerged cultures, even as those same cultures must learn to accept some aspects of modernity in order to enjoy its economic and technological advantages. Finally, Cynthia McClintock's *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path* (1998) achieves two goals. It is the latest and best interpretation of El Salvador's 1980s civil war and of Peru's long struggle to contain the Shining Path movement. Additionally, McClintock sets a new standard of scholarly excellence for this kind of narrative, eschewing emotion yet retaining empathy with the wretched victims of those struggles. Your reviewer found no fact to discount, and few conclusions to dispute.

Summary

Post-Cold War Latin America seems to be following a strong if irregular trajectory to full political and economic modernity. En route, old customs and values from Indo-America, the Iberian Peninsula, and Africa are being modified and sensibly adapted to a careful pursuit of that goal. Latin America may not end up looking like US beltway communities with street signs in Spanish or Portuguese, but it may well do a better job than the Colossus of the North has done in melding the old with the new. The estimate from this corner is that readers of these books, and keen observers of Latin America, will see that neither the Black Legend nor the neo-Marxist worldview ever did have any real connection to this vital region.

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