
No single volume purporting to trace the history of a region as large as Latin America over a period of more than five hundred years will be able to satisfy every audience. Many will be suitable for undergraduates new to the study of Latin America, others will introduce non-specialist scholars to the place of Latin America within processes and debates of global relevance, and others will provide Latin Americanists with new insights, perspectives, and priorities in their research on the region. Rarely will an historical survey attempt, let alone achieve, all three. Like most in the genre, Hernán Horna’s recent book succeeds on some levels, but not on others.

*A History of Latin America* certainly makes numerous valuable contributions. While many survey histories of the continent omit countries and even entire regions, in order to focus in more depth on other areas, Horna manages to treat every single country in the region in some depth, at least from the independence period onwards. Particularly unique to Horna’s book is the detailed chapter on Central America, which explores the post-independence history of each of the republics in Central America up to the present day. With strong narrative overviews of the post-independence history of every country in Latin America, undergraduate students will do well to find a better single volume work that can be used as an initial point of reference.

Woven throughout the narrative overviews of individual countries, which are grouped together more or less geographically from chapter four onwards, are recurrent themes in the political, economic, and social histories of the different parts of Latin America. The nineteenth-century political wrangling between liberal and conservative factions emerges well from this analysis, with considerable nuance drawn out as to what “liberal” and “conservative” actually meant in different local and national contexts. Caudillismo, populism,
and authoritarianism are other familiar political features highlighted in the text, alongside their relationships to different economic contexts and policies. Economic trends and issues covered in Horna’s book include the export booms of the late nineteenth century, the Great Depression in the 1930s, the rise of Import Substitution Industrialisation in the twentieth century, and the hegemony of neo-liberal policies in the late twentieth century. A comprehensive summary chapter is also provided, surveying political, economic, and social developments across the region in the last two decades. These aspects of the text help to create a compelling vision of the global significance of Latin America and will be useful for non-specialists seeking an introduction to the region’s history in a wider global context, especially during the modern period.

The book opens with an overview of the key features of indigenous societies before the onset of colonisation by the Spanish and Portuguese in the late fifteenth century, an historical period which Horna states in the introduction ‘still remains in near oblivion’ (p. 11). While Horna is right to emphasise that the pre-colonial indigenous past is often ignored or passed over quickly in broad historical works on Latin America, the idea that scholarship as a whole has failed to engage with this subject is misleading. It is striking that this chapter contains very few references to secondary works written during the last twenty years, which have seen an enormous amount of research produced on the indigenous societies of the Americas before the arrival of Europeans.

The colonial period is the most significant casualty of the space constraints that inevitably shape historical surveys. Chapter two provides a very brief summary of colonial-era societies that, like the opening chapter, neglects to incorporate much up-to-date research. This chapter also suffers from weak organisation, with several passages alternating awkwardly between different issues. Stylistically, periodic oddities in the organisation of prose affect Horna’s narrative flow at other points in the text. On occasion, digressive
paragraphs interrupt an otherwise coherent passage, while in other places paragraphs conclude with a pronouncement disconnected with the subject under discussion in the preceding sentences. It is not an endemic problem in the text, but recurrent enough to jar with the reader and to give the impression of a hurried editing process.

The political persuasion of the book as a whole also raises some concerns. While many readers will be very sympathetic to the broad perspective that European and North American imperialism has had very negative effects on Latin American societies, particularly for the lower class, non-white sectors of the population, Horna does display a tendency to over-romanticise those groups who have historically resisted imperialism by Western forces. Political repression and authoritarian rule comes in for steep criticism in Horna’s narrative, except in the case of Castro’s Cuba, which, it is implied, has simply been the victim of an American-led defamation campaign where concerns have been raised about the suppression of political and personal freedoms. The description of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia’s Paraguay in the post-independence period as partly fulfilling the ‘Amerindian dream of a national state... independent from Western colonialism’ will also strike many readers as a misleading romanticisation (p. 56).

In other respects, the political agenda of the book helps to support the broader purpose of debating Latin America’s place in the modern world. In the framework of Dependency Theory, Horna highlights how historical and contemporary Latin American societies have experienced underdevelopment and different degrees of subordination to either Europe, the United States, or the international financial system. He avoids generalisation and gives considerable nuance to the ways in which Latin American societies have engaged in broader global processes and relationships to different degrees and with varying results across time and space.

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