

THE UNITED STATES IN LATIN AMERICA

No one, to my knowledge, has studied this important subject, although during the last fifteen years a whole legion of North American journalists and professors have written copiously on related matters. Strictly speaking, there are here two problems: the "image" that Latin Americans have had and has of the United States, and what the United States has done in Latin America.

← If by "Latin America" we mean an entity sufficiently homogenous to merit a single name, we should not take the expression very seriously ^{this time.} ~~here~~ Certainly, it is comprised of twenty units with a common historical past and at present very similar aspirations. But throughout the nineteenth century the way of life in each country was dictated more by geography and immediate needs than by a common heritage. So it is logical to assume that the Mexicans' "image" of the United States was more vivid than that of the Argentines. The latter were a good twelve thousand kilometers away, where as the Mexican literally rubbed shoulders with the North American. Nor should two countries as remote from the

United States as Brazil and Bolivia--the first bounded on one side by the Atlantic Ocean and the second without^t access to even a backdoor ocean like the Pacific--have had identical images.

Nonetheless, there was a moment when all the Latin American countries were in the same situation: after shaking off the rule of Spain or Portugal, not one knew how to govern itself. Therefore, in order to set up their governments, they looked around for a model or source of inspiration. This ^{re} occurred between 1810 and 1820, that is, when the United States was a shadowy figure without the appeal or prestige of England, France, Russia, Turkey, Austria ^{or} even ^{the Netherlands.} ~~Holland.~~

The Latin American Nations did not, however, think of taking Russia, Turkey, Austria or Holland as a model. It is ^{say exactly} difficult to ~~understand~~ why this should have been the case, although perhaps a more or less satisfactory explanation can be found. Austria was too distant and Russia and Turkey must have seemed both far away and exotic. More important, their social structures and forms of government, which were neither progressive nor even contemporary but reactionary, disquali-

fied them as possible models.

England, already mistress of the seven seas and initiator of the Industrial Revolution that was expected to bring economic salvation to mankind, should have exerted a strong attraction. It also had a liberal philosophy and a democratic way of life that represented a Latin American ideal. But ~~it~~^{it} had one fatal defect: it lacked a written constitution and this was precisely the magic formula sought by Latin America.

France, the eternal "enchantress" of the world, had sounded the bell of universal freedom with its revolution of 1789 and its declaration of the rights of man. When the Latin American countries awake to independence, Napóleon was leading his armies all over Europe, sowing by cannon fire the revolutionary seed of an enlightened cesarism that appeared to exactly fit the needs of Latin America at that time.

~~And~~ so Latin America took from France its first and principal inspiration for constituting its governments. The United States, which should have been pleased, was not even aware of the resulting situation: apart from Mexico's very brief and Brazil's more prolonged experiment, all the Latin American

countries chose a republican form of government, some ^{even} adopting the purely North American federalism.

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Although the Latin American countries (with the possible exception of Mexico) knew at that time very little about ^{it,} ~~the~~

United States, they somehow realized that the ~~Latin~~ was creating a broader and more egalitarian, that is, a genuine democracy. In view of the extreme poverty of its countries, Latin America could ill afford the English type of democracy that with agonizing slowness sifted its benefits down to the people from the lofty heights of the aristocracy. It foresaw the ~~the~~ tremendous scope of one of the most striking principles of the North American political philosophy: all men can be made equal under the law, if not in fact; but before and above all else, each and every man must be given the same opportunity to prosper and achieve happiness.

The United States, so it seemed, was trying to create a deeper and more far-reaching democracy which would offer all its citizens the possibility of succeeding in life and would perfectly combine the task and responsibility of ^{society} ~~group~~ and individual. The ^{society} ~~group~~ was to furnish the social conditions

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necessary to afford everyone an equal opportunity and the individual was to exploit that opportunity to the extent of his ability, efforts and desire.

Since Latin America was on its own, its political image of the United States was also shaped ^{by} ~~the~~ the isolated position maintained by this country then and long afterwards. Even had it wished to, the United States could not have entered into the ^a ~~alliances~~ alliances and feuds so characteristic of nineteenth century Europe; and Latin America, on bad terms with Spain and Portugal, could not expect understanding, still less friendship, from France or England, who were more sympathetic to the former mother countries than to colonies who equated rebellion with a capacity for self-government.

But Latin America was also attracted to the United States because of its economic exploits: the dazzling spectacle of a vast territory explored, conquered and developed; an economic structure raised and literally expanding every day with no sign of ever reaching a limit. In the United States, economic progress was made and ^{the} ~~wealth~~ wealth was discovered, created and distributed with a speed and on a scale that captivated Latin America.

Here was the only way to escape from the poverty that it blamed on the errors and neglect of Spain and Portugal, but never on their inept and feckless sons.

Latin America, then, visualized the United States as a people determined to enjoy a life of political liberty and economic prosperity. It was this conviction that led Brazil and Mexico to adopt the official names they still bear: the United States of Brazil and the United States of Mexico.

THIS IMAGE, more vivid for some countries than for others, had been formed at different periods and lasted varying lengths of time. I believe that Mexico, which acquired it first, must have been the first to lose it. The only country on the continent to have had war formally declared on it by the United States, in addition, it lost over half of its territory in 1848 as a result of that war. But not even this terrible experience could entirely destroy the charm of the United States image for a country as guileless as Mexico had up to then. In fact, one of the really extraordinary facts of Mexican history is that despite a war that everyone,

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irrespective of political belief or social position, considered infamous, the Mexicans did not harbor hatred, bitterness or even distrust of the United States, as was demonstrated in the Constituent Congress of 1856. The representatives who attended this congress were highly excitable because of the long struggle between liberals and conservatives; with their own eyes they had seen the horrors of the War of 1846, or as soldiers they had been defeated and humiliated. Nevertheless, after a long and heated discussion of their country's history and after studying how best to work out its future, they all concurred in their admiration of North American political institutions and no one accused the United States of having mercilessly dismembered their country.

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~~NOTWITHSTANDING~~ Mexico's singularly magnanimous spirit, the "image" of the United States finally underwent a radical change there and throughout Latin America. This change closely coincided with the birth of the United States' imperialist mentality and its subsequent imperialist ventures in Latin America. The formation of that imperialist attitude has, of course, been

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investigated by North American historians and political scientists; but, in any case, it is easily explained. Ten or fifteen years after the Civil War, the United States began to feel the power of its wealth in human and natural resources and the urge to use them somewhere on something. Even though, theoretically, they could have been employed within the country, it was inevitable that a portion of that power and wealth be directed abroad. But why to Latin America and not to Europe, Asia or Africa?

Here it would be invaluable to know what "image" of Latin America existed in the United States at that time. This is another study that remains to be done, but it is safe to assume that the image was one of disorder, incompetence and poverty--in short, of weakness. It should be added that the United States could not play at building empires in Europe or in Asia and Africa, the later two regions protected by Europe; then, since it shared its own continent with Latin America, it could launch its imperialism under the guise of "security", that is, self-protection.

Undoubtedly, this was the reason its first imperialist

activities were carried out in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Communications in the United States between East and Far West were for many years so hazardous that it was decided to open up an additional route through a trans-isthmus canal in Middle America. First Tehuantepec was considered, then Nicaragua and, finally, what is now Panama.

Although the pursuit and attainment of this objective would have damaged the United States' good image in Latin America in any event, the shameful means employed to achieve it only made matters worse. The United States took advantage of the most painful of the many crises that Mexico has experienced to exact from it access to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It supported the worst tyrants of Central America in order to keep its option on a canal in Nicaragua. And it did not hesitate to incite and promote the partition of Colombian territory in order to obtain the Panama Canal.

Military and political imperialism were succeeded by economic imperialism--or "pacific penetration" as it was so significantly baptized by the United States itself. At the outset it was welcomed, even eagerly sought after by the

Latin American nations. First, because next to an imperialism as destructive as the military, the economic appeared innocent. Second, because during the ~~second half~~ ^{latter part} of the nineteenth century, Latin American countries thought that only foreign investment would propel them into the ~~regenerative~~ mainstream of the Industrial Revolution. They wanted to have railroads for domestic ~~trans~~portation and ships to carry their products abroad. They were impatient to reach the stage of food processing and other light industries. In short, they wanted to be poor no longer, or stated more positively, they wanted to become wealthy.

This "image" also change with time, and the sheep began to turn into a wolf. The Latin American countries duly accepted capital and know-how from the United States without stopping to consider that perhaps they would have to pay more than just interest, no matter how high the rate. But Mexicans, for example, came to realize that although the railroads constructed with North ~~American capital~~ ^{money} and ~~know-how~~ ^{technology} communicated the center of the country magnificently with the United States, they left most of Mexico itself isolated; that ^{financial} control of its

two most important trunk lines could shift from a trust in New York to one in Boston or California; that for many years North American workers had been paid high salaries in dollars, whereas local laborers received low salaries in Mexican pesos. Therefore, Mexico made up its mind to nationalize the railroads, first by acquiring 51 per cent of the shares on the market and then by declaring the railroads to be the exclusive property of the nation.

The experiences of Central America and the Caribbean, or of Ecuador and Colombia, or of Peru and Venezuela, or of Chile and Brazil, have been no different and often worse than that of Mexico.

WHAT IS the image today? Latin America's image of the United States is worse than ever; the United States' image of Latin America is decidedly better than the one it had up to a short time ago. But after all, nothing fundamental has been lost. The long and bitter experience of a century and a half of relations has left some positive elements ^{w/} ~~with~~ which to improve the future: the United States has learned to give

attention and even respect to Latin America, and Latin America has lost some of its fear of the United States. The day that Latin America loses all fear and treats the United States as an equal and not as a master, it will know that in all the world it will not easily find a better friend and partner.

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