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LAST100: VIDEO 7: “The Export Boom as Modernity”

Last time, we looked at race in the Americas. We showed how race and racial distinction mark the history of the Americas with particular brutality: from the genocide inflicted on the indigenous by the Spanish conquistadors to terror in the Guatemalan highlands in the 1980s; and with the trade and enslavement of black Africans, which continued until 1888. We discussed how slavery’s legacies are still with us, and how we are all still living with its consequences, which led us to consider the ways in which the past is not even fully past.

We then noted that emancipation was less an *event* than a *process*, comprising struggles that lasted well over a century, and we contested the narrative that suggests that the abolitionist cause was led by liberals: slaves themselves pushed for their own freedom. Even where the discourse of citizenship and rights came into play, these concepts, too, were the object of struggle and contestation. We looked finally at how rights are at best the site of what is often intense disagreement and rhetorical energy, taking the to-and-fro between two nineteenth-century Argentine women as a case study of debates over the discourse of rights, whose echoes resonate even today.

Modernity in the Americas

These struggles for freedom and these debates over citizenship and rights are all part of the contested history of modernity in the Americas. There are some who argue that modernity, emancipation, and enlightenment go hand in hand: that the more modern a society, the more it forsakes prejudice and injustice. This is a view, shared by many nineteenth-century Latin American intellectuals, that projects modern “civilization” as an antidote to the “barbarisms” of the past. There are others, however, who claim that the racial and gender inequalities typical of colonialism are simply the “darker side” of

modernity, that colonialism is already an inextricably modern phenomenon. Similarly, the German critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, writing in the shadow of the Second World War and the Holocaust, famously expressed a disenchantment with the "dialectic of Enlightenment" that promises liberation but brings only "triumphant calamity" and "mass deception."

We now shift our focus from politics to economics and technology. This is not to say that politics disappears entirely; far from it. But modernity is not "simply" political. In fact, the transformations associated with modernity and modernization affect almost every area of life. Modernity is not just a way of thinking; it is also a way of being.

Arguably, modernity begins as early as the fifteenth century: perhaps with Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 1440s; or even with the "discovery" of the New World in 1492. And it was the early seventeenth century that saw, in France, the so-called "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns," in which the Classical heritage of antiquity, so long thought the gold standard of wisdom and culture, was put on trial. One might even say that there are various different modernities, not all of which are necessarily compatible.

But for our purposes, let us define modernity and modernization in terms of the rapid development and spread of industry, urbanization, and capitalist social relations through Europe from the late eighteenth century, and in Latin America from the late nineteenth. This was the era of steam engines, railways, electricity, the telegraph, dynamite, rifles, barbed wire, photography, typewriters, pasteurization, and much more. It was also the time of the rise of cities such as Manchester, Berlin, New York, Buenos Aires, where modernity's products were variously made, put to use, and put on display. Factories, stations, office blocks, tenement houses, hotels, and department stores marked this new urban fabric. And we see also the rise of new occupations (machinist, engineer, boilerman, chimney sweep, bellhop, shop assistant, and so on), and more generally the growth of both a working class of factory workers and labourers on the one hand, and a middle class of office workers, service workers, and managers on the other, displacing the earlier division between landowners and peasants.

The pace of change was often felt to be very rapid, and getting more so. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote of a "constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation. [. . .] All that is solid melts into air." But these developments took time, and they seemed to be taking more time in Latin America. We have seen how, in the early nineteenth century, a writer such as Esteban Echeverría felt frustrated that his country (Argentina) was somehow held back, not advancing at the rate that it should. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, or the beginning of the twentieth, most of the region--at least, most of its major cities--could boast of the trappings of modern development, from cafés and billiard halls to broad avenues and sewer systems.

Dominant, Residual, Emergent

We should be wary, however, of describing modernization as a straight line or linear history, along which all societies follow the same path, from primitive to advanced, so long as they put in the required effort. Such a teleology, by which I mean a movement towards a pre-ordained goal, may be implicit in the very concepts of modernity (always opposed to an ancient that came before it) or of "development" (for which social history is often implicitly seen as analogous to the biological transition from child to adult). In truth, things are more complex.

We come back to the realization that modernity comes at the very least in different flavors or forms. It is not a process that affects all societies in the same way, or even all parts of the same society equally. And again, we return to the notion that the past is not fully past, but now with the added complication that the future sometimes comes early, and is sometimes delayed. The British theorist Raymond Williams explained all this in terms of the notion that all societies have elements that are either "dominant," "residual," or "emergent": the "dominant" logic that structures the way things are is always mixed with (and sometimes resisted by) "residual" traces of the way things once were, as well as "emergent" signs that things might be different one day. In Latin America, this mixture has been (and still is) particularly complex, in large part because of the region's relationship to the rest of the world.

But let us pause here to think about examples of these categories: dominant, residual, and emergent. How would you place in them institutions and practices that you run into in daily life? The university, for instance, or the family? The high street or the Internet: are they dominant, residual, or emergent? Or might they be a bit of each? What do you see around you that is a holdover of a past that refuses to go away? What seems to define the way things are? And what might constitute signs of what is to come? Stop the video and take a note of your answer. While you are doing that, I'll have a mug of milk. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

How did you answer my questions about the dominant, residual, and emergent? It is not always easy to decide. Cheap air travel, for instance, might once have seemed a sign of the future; but with our current pandemic, it almost seems to be already in the past. Is the Internet a sign of what is to come, or is it just today's dominant technology, that will sometime be superseded? As we will see when we come to discussing this week's reading, an article from the turn of the twentieth century that confidently predicts Mexico's future, it is easy to miss the way history is going.

Unequal "Development"

I said that modernity in Latin America is particularly complex, and that this had to do with the region's relationship to the rest of the world. This is because the dominant logic has come from outside, and Latin American economies and polities have serviced a modernity of which they were key components, but without seeing many of its potential benefits.

Take Potosí. This is a small and picturesque city, 4,000 meters high in Bolivia's southern altiplano, full of colonial-era architecture but out of the way and off the tourist trail. Yet from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries it was one of the busiest and most important cities in the Americas, if not the world, thanks to the "*cerro rico*" or "rich hill" that looms over it, from which thousands of tons of silver were mined, mostly by

indigenous peasants subject to forced labor, to be transported by mule and then galleon to Europe, where these riches helped to fund the industrial revolution.

Or take the plantations of the Caribbean, a vital node of the triangular transatlantic trade by which slaves brought from Africa cultivated sugar or tobacco and other monocrops, to be processed and exported to New England or France, Holland, the UK. There, cigarettes and sugary tea (or distilled spirits such as rum) came to be necessities for an expanding working class, which was manufacturing goods that both were exchanged for more slaves abroad and enabled the rise of new, consumer lifestyles in metropolitan centers such as Boston or Paris, Amsterdam or London.

Potosí is now one of the poorest cities in the poorest country in South America. Haiti, the Caribbean nation that was once the most productive of France's colonial possessions, is by many measures the least "developed" country in the Western hemisphere. Global modernity would have been unthinkable without such places, and yet it can seem to have passed them by; their "underdevelopment" at the periphery has been the price paid for the global "center" to advance.

At best, Latin America has often managed only a distorted version of modernity, a modernity that is strangely superficial—all "look and feel" in Alexander Dawson's words---and that benefits the few rather than the many. Even today, in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or Peru, riches and advanced technology sit side by side with slums, vast regions all but abandoned by the state, and shocking indices of avoidable disease and infant mortality.

This is a modernity that has come in bits and pieces: in Dawson's terms, innovation without emancipation, or secularization without universalism. Institutions inherited from the colonial period, such as the church or the semi-feudal *latifundio* or *hacienda* system, lost much of their grip (without disappearing; they long remained an important residual presence), and yet they were slow to be replaced, and then only fitfully, by more modern institutions such as universal education or a functioning welfare state.

Porfirio Díaz

James Creelman's 1908 article, "Porfirio Díaz, Hero of the Americas," captures a moment in Mexican history when at least some of the profits of an export-oriented economy seemed to be retained and invested in updating and improving the country's infrastructure. An image of modernity has been established, at least in (some parts of) the capital city and other urban centers. The future seems finally to be on its way, and Creelman's hagiographic sketch of Mexico's president calls him "the foremost man of the American hemisphere [. . .] the hope of the Latin-American republics." While acknowledging the fact that the country was far from enjoying the political rights and freedoms that since (say) the American and French Revolutions have usually been seen as part of the modern social contract, the article lauds Díaz as an "enlightened" despot, that contradiction in terms that has been the fantasy of United States foreign policy in regions they rely on for raw materials and primary products such as silver and sugar, lithium and oil.

But there is another emergent logic in Mexico at the time, which Creelman cannot or would rather not acknowledge, and it will erupt in the Mexican revolution that breaks out a mere two years after his article is published. The future can be hard to see, even when it is close at hand.

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