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LAST100: VIDEO 8: “Signs of Crisis in a Gilded Age”

Last time, we looked at the peculiar, even distorted, form that modernity has often taken in Latin America. We saw that modernity is not one single thing, but many. If we define modernization in terms of industrialization, urbanization, and so on, its effects were spread unevenly across the world such that (for instance) peasant miners in Bolivia or slaves on Caribbean plantations were vital parts of a networked process that produced “development” in the global center at the same time as it ensured “underdevelopment” at the periphery. Against the views of nineteenth-century liberals such as Esteban Echeverría, then, modernization and “civilization” did not necessarily march hand in hand; indeed, modernity produced pockets of “barbarism” all of its own.

We also noted that countries such as Mexico, Peru, or Brazil might get modernity in bits and pieces: innovation without emancipation; secularization without universalism. Likewise, the fruits of modernity were very unequally distributed within such societies, and precariously established. Not only did residual institutions and forces (such as the church or the landowning class) often maintain surprising power, the elites benefitting from a “dominant” logic whose center was elsewhere were vulnerable to “emergent” alternatives that suggested potential futures different from the one envisaged by a linear narrative of historical development.

Hence Alexander Dawson refers to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, at first sight a period of growth and prosperity for much of Latin America, as a “gilded,” rather than a “golden” age. This was a form of modernity that tended to be superficial—a matter of “look and feel.” Under the surface, trouble was brewing, and the signs of crisis soon became evident everywhere from Argentina to Mexico, Nicaragua to Peru. This led to a period of turbulence and transition, in which distinct visions of the future emerged and entered into conflict.

The USA Flexes its Muscles

It was also a time at which the center of the "dominant" logic of global history was moving, from Europe to the United States. This process would take some time to complete, but as Spain lost its final colonial possessions in the hemisphere (the Caribbean islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico), with the Spanish-American War of 1898, the USA increasingly flexed its muscles in what it regarded as its "back yard." Just as the region was trying to define itself beyond the legacy of European colonialism, new threats (and perhaps new forms of colonialism) made Latin Americans uneasy.

We have seen some of that uneasiness when, several weeks ago, we discussed José Martí's essay, "Our America" ("Nuestra América"), of 1891. Martí was a Cuban patriot, who died in the effort to liberate his country from the Spanish yoke. But when, in one of his many somewhat florid metaphors, he refers to "giants in seven-league boots" that "crush" a "prideful village" underfoot, he is thinking of North (Anglo) America, rather than Europe, as the new colossus overshadowing the region.

"To Roosevelt"

The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío's poem, "To Roosevelt" ("A Roosevelt"), addresses this same conjuncture. It was written in 1904, the year that the United States showed its willingness and ambition to reshape the continent's political and natural geography by splitting off what became Panama from Colombia and embarking on the construction of a canal to link the Atlantic to the Pacific, a project that the US took over from the French, in another symbol of the transfer of global dominance from the Old World to the New.

Stop the video, and read Darío's poem—it is quite short, so should not take you long. Then I have two questions for you. First, in Darío's depiction, what emotions or affects does the United States provoke? Perhaps fear, awe, sadness, rage? What else? Jot down some thoughts. Second, what are the poem's key lines? If you were to pick a line or two that sum up the essence of the poem, which would you choose? While you think about that, I need an energy drink. But I’ll be right back.

[Pause]

So what are the affects of Darío’s poem? I suggest that we see a complex set of responses to growing US dominance.

There is certainly a measure of awe and respect: “You are strong, proud model of your race; you are cultured and able”; the US President Roosevelt is compared to the great emperors of the Ancient World, such as the biblical Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, and to Alexander the Great, whose military campaigns conquered territory that stretched from Greece to what is now India. Note that the Roosevelt of the poem is Theodore, rather than Franklin Delano—FDR held office later, during the Second World War. Theodore Roosevelt was famous as a rancher and a hunter of big game (he wrote books with titles such as *The Wilderness Hunter*), as well as for his exploits heading a regiment of volunteer cavalry known as the “Rough Riders” that fought in Cuba during the Spanish-American war. In Darío’s poem, he exemplifies a more general US will to power that is perhaps unaware or careless of the consequences of its actions, but which is undeniably impressive. The United States can do great things.

Darío suggests that Latin America’s initial reaction to this “grand and powerful” United States is a visceral fear: “a profound shudder runs down the enormous backbone of the Andes.” The region is physically moved by the expression of a US prowess that is material and economic (“joining the cult of Mammon to the cult of Hercules”) as well as cultural and political. When the poem mentions “Liberty [. . .] rais[ing] her torch in New York,” the reference is both to the idea of freedom and to its physical incarnation in the statue (donated by the French) that guards the harbor off Manhattan. The ideas and ideals driving the United States take concrete form, tangible shape, larger than life like the Statue of Liberty itself.

Yet if Latin America’s backbone “shudders” whenever the United States makes a move, at least the region, in the poet’s view, *has* a backbone. Another affect traversing the poem is pride, as Darío invokes an indigenous counter-tradition to offset and even confront the line that leads from Alexander to Roosevelt. For “our own America” (and the resonance with Martí is evident) “has had poets since the ancient times of Nezahualcóyotl; [. . .] and has lived, since the earliest moments of its life, in light, in fire, in fragrance, and in love—the America of Moctezuma and Atahualpa, the aromatic America of Columbus.” Darío draws on this other lineage, opposing “Catholic America, Spanish America” to the protestant, Anglo America of the North. He may be awed by the USA, but he is not over-awed, and the poem even ends with something of a threat: “Be careful. [. . .] A thousand cubs of the Spanish lion are roaming free.” There are other freedoms, other liberties, and Roosevelt is warned not to impinge upon Latin America’s.

There is then plenty of ambivalence in Darío’s poem. It is neither simple condemnation nor unalloyed praise. And this ambivalence shapes the form or style that Darío’s writing takes. To be heard, Darío recognizes that he must in some sense adopt the language of the USA: “The voice that would reach you [. . .] must speak in Biblical tones, or in the poetry of [the great nineteenth-century US poet] Walt Whitman.” And yet part of what makes Latin America different and distinct is that it speaks its own language (or languages), with their own history and traditions. Darío has both to translate his critique of the United States into terms that someone such as Roosevelt would understand, and at the same to resist such translation, for fear that his voice will simply be subsumed within the newly dominant idiom of bombastic ambition.

So if *I* had to pick a line that captures the poem’s essence, I might choose the shortest line of all: the single word “No” that ends the second stanza. The poem turns around this declaration of difference and disagreement. “No,” says Darío. The future is *not* “wherever your bullet strikes.” Other futures are imaginable. Yet it is also surely significant that this is the one line that reads the same in English as in Spanish. The “no” is a point of intersection, a moment of protest that can be understood by South and North on equal terms. It is the point at which these two discourses, Darío’s and Roosevelt’s, diverge and come together at the same time.

Mythologies of Reconciliation

“To Roosevelt” ends with an invocation of religion or spirituality: “Though you have everything, you are lacking one thing: God!” This notion that Latin America had some kind of spiritual advantage over Anglo America was a common one at the time (and in some ways its legacy persists to this day). We can see it also in the Mexican José Vasconcelos’s essay, *The Cosmic Race* (*La raza cósmica*), published a couple of decades after Darío’s poem. “The mestizo, the Indian, and even the Black,” Vasconcelos tells us, “are superior to the White in a countless number of properly spiritual capacities” (162). The end of white supremacy is therefore at hand, to be superseded by a “cosmic race,” the “final race,” incarnated in the multiple mixtures embodied in Latin America, mixtures that (we saw a few weeks ago) caused the Spanish colonial project such anxiety.

Vasconcelos’s strange combination of philosophy, biology, and epic history can seem off-putting. His writing is infused with racist stereotypes that assume that blacks and indigenous people are inferior and need somehow to be “redeemed” (161). Ironically, however, he invokes such stereotypes as part of an argument that, unlike other brands of scientific racism from much the same period, praises mixture over purity, “miscegenation” over extermination, and (unabashedly) “fantasy” over reason. He argues against “scientific eugenics,” but in the name of a truly “mysterious eugenics of aesthetic taste” (160). Yet for all its strangeness, Vasconcelos’s vision was hugely influential; as Mexico’s Minister for Public Education, he helped shape his country’s very particular vision both of the past and of the future.

This narrative, which emerged from the Mexican Revolution (of 1910-1920), sought to erase the tensions and contradictions that had become manifest in the revolution itself. As the Zapatista “Plan de Ayala” indicates, the revolution had been a messy affair, in which diverse interests and visions of the future surfaced, only for many of them to be put down by force or by their erasure through mythic tales of national unity such as Vasconcelos’s. The revolution was a result of the explosion of crises that had only superficially been obscured by an uneven modernity that benefitted the few rather than the many. It was, among other things, a rebellion of the countryside against the city, the landless against the landed, liberals against conservatives, nationalists against a cosmopolitan elite. But eventually, under the auspices of the “Institutional Revolutionary Party” that would go on to govern the country until the year 2000, it generated its own mythology of reconciliation and progress.

Elsewhere in Latin America (Argentina in 1919, for instance; Central America in the 1930s), discontent also made itself felt. The fact that many decades later, insurgent movements such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (in Mexico) or the Sandinistas (in Nicaragua) named themselves after revolutionary leaders from the first few decades of the twentieth century shows that the crises of this period never really went away, but were only displaced to a later date. By then, however, any such protests had also to confront, more or less directly, the power of the United States, which increasingly came to intervene in regional affairs, much as Martí and Darío had feared.

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