

Jon Beasley-Murray
University of British Columbia
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca



LAST100: VIDEO 9: “Commerce, Coercion, and America’s Empire”

Last time, we talked about the transitional moment at the dawn of the twentieth century, when the cracks in Latin America’s modernization process became evident, as Europe’s influence waned and the United States became the dominant power in the region. We looked at narratives produced by *modernista* writers such as Nicaragua’s Rubén Darío, Cuba’s José Martí, and Mexico’s José Vasconcelos. These writers projected images of Latin America’s distinctiveness (an answer to the perennial question of Latin American identity) that often drew on the colonial heritage, now re-evaluated as a source of spiritual and aesthetic superiority to a supposedly crassly materialist USA. Yet the ways in which such intellectuals frame their arguments often reveal a deep ambivalence, and an acknowledgement that if the United States got its way in the region, it was not through force alone. To many Latin Americans there was something admirable, even seductive, about their neighbour to the north.

Meanwhile, new forms of discontent surfaced, most obviously (but not only) with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Radical ideas flourished, in some places thanks to the growth of an organized working class (and sometimes imported ideologies, such as Marxism and anarchism), elsewhere as a result of new tensions in the countryside as residual powers such as large landowners struggled to maintain their hold. The sources of such protests could not be entirely ignored, and they were both acknowledged and displaced. In Vasconcelos’s hands, for instance, the post-revolutionary Mexican government peddled a myth of harmonious mixture or *mestizaje* to account for but also disarm difference. Next week, we will look at the rise of populism, a not unrelated political strategy that pins the blame for social tensions on national and international elites, to whom the ideal of a unified “people” is opposed.

Global Interconnectedness

As we will see, populist rhetoric (and often its economic policies) stress national autonomy and self-sufficiency. But we have often noted that it is not so easy to demarcate and disentangle Latin America from the rest of the world. Indeed, arguably the worldwide interconnectedness that we now call "globalization" began back on the mythic date of 1492. Since that moment, the region has always been a key node in a network of global flows of travel and trade, capital and labor, raw materials and commodities, ideas and representations, without which the modern world would be unimaginable.

During the colonial period, these flows were primarily organized and channeled by the colonial powers, above all (for Latin America) Spain and Portugal. They sought as far as possible to ensure a monopoly on the trade and profit from extraction of the region's resources. This monopoly was often contested—the history of piracy is the story of attempts to intercept and reroute such flows from their "legitimate" trajectories—and in the end the tensions and perceived injustices of colonial regulation in the Americas North and South (for the United States, think of the "Boston tea party") helped motivate local elites to fight for political independence.

The nineteenth century, then, saw the growth of free markets and the arrival of new agents, such as the British capitalists, merchants, and engineers who built much of the railroad infrastructure of a country such as Argentina—and who incidentally also taught South Americans to play football, an innovation that England football fans might later have cause to regret, seeing the national team humiliated by the likes of Maradona and Ronaldinho. So here, too, economic (as well as military and political) transactions were always accompanied by, and often inseparable from, cultural exchanges with sometimes unpredictable consequences.

Enforcing an Informal Empire

For the twentieth century, similarly, the fact that certain countries developed a passion for baseball over football reveals that they have been impacted by the United States with

particular intensity, whether through economic activity (Venezuela), occupation (Puerto Rico, Panama), military intervention (Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic), or a combination of the three (Cuba). More generally, US cultural products from Hollywood film to fast food, rock'n'roll counterculture to name-brand drinks and, as Alexander Dawson documents, cigarettes and so on all came to saturate the Latin American marketplace. Not to mention automobiles, televisions, hi-fis, white goods, and other accoutrements of the consumer lifestyle to which even the poorest often aspire. Commerce, coercion, and (we should add) culture went hand in hand in the growth of a US "informal empire" throughout the hemisphere.

This empire may have been informal, and its guiding principle may have been the free market, but it was enforced through violence when necessary. Dawson notes the many direct US interventions in the region: thirty-two separate occasions over the six decades from 1898 to 1958, mostly in Central America and the Caribbean: Cuba (repeatedly), Nicaragua (also repeatedly), Panama, El Salvador... and perhaps most notoriously, Guatemala in 1954, when the CIA leveraged a coup against the democratically-elected reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz, at the prompting of the United Fruit Company (a corporation still in business, after various mergers, as Chiquita). In short, where the United States felt that its political or commercial interests were in jeopardy, it was quick to send in the Marines or otherwise wield a big stick, to maintain order on its own terms.

Nor did this pattern end in the 1950s. The USA continued to back undemocratic and/or oppressive governments in the region, with a rationale reminiscent of Franklin Roosevelt's (apocryphal) comment on Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza: he "may be a son of a bitch, but he's *our* son of a bitch." The US also intervened covertly, and often in breach of not only international law but its own laws, too, to try to bring down governments with which it disagreed. In some instances the details are murky, and the precise facts or extent of the United States role subject to dispute. But examples range from the failed "Bay of Pigs" invasion of Cuba in 1961 to CIA support for the 1973 coup in Chile, and from the "Iran Contra" scandal of the 1980s, when funds from the secret sale of weapons to Iran were funneled to a motley bunch of rebels in Nicaragua, to the full-scale invasion of Panama in 1989, not to mention more recent (and more

controversial) possible involvements in regime change or attempted regime change in Honduras in 2009 and Venezuela throughout the past two decades.

All this is reprehensible, of course. Which is not to say that such escapades did not have their defenders, including within the region. Equally, I do not want to imply that all US citizens agreed with their government's activities, when there have often been vocal protests and impressive movements for solidarity with victims of US foreign policy. The discipline of Latin American Studies itself, though it is (like other Area Studies) in part an outgrowth of US Cold War anxieties, has also been a vehicle for such solidarity, as well as for putting the record straight about abuses of power within the region.

But it is not enough (nor is it very productive) merely to reprehend. The relationship between the United States and Latin America is more complex than simply that of a schoolyard bully with his victim, and it has gone through different phases over the years.

"Good Neighbour" Films

US media representations of Latin America can be seen as attempts to negotiate, rethink, and think through the complexities of this relationship, in ways that often reflect back on US sensibilities in uncanny ways. Take the films of the so-called "Good Neighbour" period, when (leading up to and during the Second World War) the bid to secure Latin American markets and raw materials, as access to European markets grew more precarious, led to a charm offensive aimed to influence public discourse and attitudes in the US and Latin America alike.

Busby Berkeley's *The Gang's All Here* of 1943, for instance. The movie opens in apparently realistic mode: a ship, the S S Brazil, docks in New York, and passengers and goods are unloaded. The passengers include businessmen and well-dressed young women. Another posse of young women, excitedly waving handkerchiefs, run up to greet the new arrivals. We see dockworkers transporting bags of coffee and sugar. Slowly, a still more exotic cargo descends from above: an enormous mass of tropical greenery, vegetables, and fruit. The camera zooms in and pans down this cornucopia, to reveal a woman who seems to be wearing the entire unwieldy consignment as a fantastically extravagant hat.

Somewhere between merchandise and passenger (such that it is hard to tell the difference between the two), this is the Brazilian/Portuguese actor Carmen Miranda, at the time a bona fide superstar—soon to be Hollywood's highest-paid entertainer, and indeed the number-one earning woman in the entire United States. She joins in the song that has been playing in the background, singing (in Portuguese) what has become a Brazilian classic, the patriotic samba "Aquarela do Brasil" ("Watercolor of Brazil")—a song made famous by another Good Neighbour movie, Disney's *Saludos Amigos* of 1942, and which has since been covered by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Kate Bush to Arcade Fire. Miranda herself may be largely forgotten now, but the cultural imports with which she is entangled endure.

As soon as Miranda arrives on the scene, the pretense to realism fades away. We are on a stage set, in a night club. All this is self-consciously spectacular, an extravagant and over-worked fiction, albeit grounded on a real relationship. A car-horn interrupts the music, announcing a new figure—a top-hatted dignitary accompanied by a marching band—who offers Miranda the freedom of the city, but not before half-whispering to her: "Any coffee on you?" A new song strikes up, "You Discover You're in New York," whose premise is that, at least at times and in certain places, Latin and Anglo America are now practically indistinguishable: "You hear a tropical drum, You drink a tropical rum, You're in a tropical spot, And yet, you really are not [. . .] And you discover you're in New York." What was once out of reach is suddenly close at hand.

I will let you watch the rest of the scene. You might also want to view other performances by Carmen Miranda or other snippets from Good Neighbour movies. Check out Betty Grable and Don Ameche singing "Down Argentine Way," Donald Duck in *Saludos Amigos*, or Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters performing "You Don't Have to Know the Language" in *Road to Rio*. These are all easily found on YouTube. Here are some questions to consider as you do so... What is being exchanged here? Is it an equal or an unequal exchange? What if any claims to truth do these movies make? What if anything do they tell us about either Latin America or the United States? While you think about that, I need a rum myself. But I'll be right back.

[...]

There is a lot to say about these films. Dawson suggests that, in them, "particular cultures and individuals [are] flattened into a single image of Latin American sensuality for a global audience" (195). I see that, but I also think that these movies are more knowing and self-conscious than this implies. See for instance how quick-witted and alive Miranda is at her best, or how the movies wink at us to say "We know all this is ideology, and we are not fooled, but let's enjoy it while it lasts."

Dancing with the USA

In short, if these are stereotypes (and they are), they go both ways. If this is exoticization (and it is), Latin America is also tangible and close at hand. If the whole scene in *The Gang's All Here* is unrealistic (and it is), it is the movie that reveals that everything is staged for our benefit, and that revels unabashedly in the surreal fantasy it portrays. If the performance is premised on cynical economic self-interest (and it is), the film scarcely hides that point. And if Miranda is the butt of the movie's jokes (and she is), she gives as good as she gets, plays her role with detached amusement, and pockets a fat paycheck.

The dance between Latin America and the USA has been a *pas de deux*, a collaboration in which often both sides freely acquiesced, and in which it is not always clear who has the upper hand. The seduction has been mutual. This is not to say that the relationship is characterized by equality, or that there have not been gross abuses. Far from it. But just as Argentines rejoice when they get the chance to put England out of a Football World Cup (most famously in Mexico in 1986, with Maradona's cheeky handball and magnificent goal), there are always opportunities for a spot of symbolic revenge.

2020

CC-BY-NC

works cited

Dawson, Alexander. "Commerce, Coercion, and America's Empire." *Latin America Since Independence: A History with Primary Sources*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. 181-205.