Introduction

Latin America's Useable Past

Strolling through Mexico City's Parque Lincoln on any given Sunday, it is easy to forget the world beyond this small bit of paradise. Motorized toy boats meander around the small pond. The water is clean and inviting. Children run around and laugh inside the high fences of a public playground that puts most North American parks to shame. The mouth-watering smells of Argentine and Italian bistros waft through the air, reminding you that you are in the heart of Polanco, one of the nicest neighborhoods in the city. Surrounding art deco apartment buildings provide a sense of safe and comfortable living, while the *belle époque* grandeur of the nearby Ford Foundation mansion evokes both a wealthy past and a beneficent present. People are out and about, seemingly unafraid. Bicycles abound, evidence that some of those eating lunch by the park took advantage of the relatively new practice of closing down the Paseo de la Reforma (this city's great nineteenth-century boulevard) on Sunday mornings so that people may ride, run, or walk from Chapultepec Park to the Zocalo.[1] No one here seems to mind that the greening of Sunday mornings has brought an end to the tradition of holding protest marches at this same time, along this same route.

Sundays tell a different story in Ecatepec, just a few short miles away. Many residents here are at work, in locations across the metropolis, selling in the informal and formal sector, driving busses and taxis, cleaning, working in shops, earning the few pesos upon which they depend for their survival. Open-air stalls sell tacos, *dulces* (sweets), and any number of treats, but the table-cloths are made of plastic, not linen. Children play in largely neglected parks, many of them decades old, where instead of falling to a rubberized mat the unlucky toddler hits the pavement with a thud when tumbling from a swing. Here and there one also sees the tragic signs of a discarded childhood, youths splayed out on cardboard mats, their minds lost in a haze produced by thinners or cement, homeless, desperate. The smell of diesel fuel is stronger here, the dust in the air more present, the result of untended roads, construction sites, and the paucity of trees and grass. Few people here rode bicycles on the Paseo de la Reforma this morning.

At times these two versions of Mexico City seem unknown to one other. This is a survival strategy on the part of both. While the crossings are continual (poor people sustain communities like Polanco through their labor and consumption, and the wages paid by

Polcano residents allow the poor in Ecatepec to survive), a certain amount of blindness allows residents of both communities some peace of mind. Poor people stay out of rich neighborhoods, for the most part, when they are not at work, as life is easier and the violence and powerlessness of everyday life less jarring when one stays closer to home or in more welcoming locales. They know their neighbors, often look out for one another, and feel somehow safer in their own community. The wealthy, for their part, are just as jarred by their adventures into the slums. They are not welcome there, and are more content when they can imagine that the world beyond their own neighborhoods does not really exist. One might describe this as a kind of fragmentary consciousness, in which residents of both Ecatepec and Polanco carefully shape their view of the world to make daily life in the city viable. Whenever possible, phenomena that are too difficult to confront must be made invisible.

The fragmentary nature of life in the metropolis reminds us that we need to go beyond the lines drawn on a map to understand the boundaries that we use to make sense of the world around us. In North America, we might call a person Mexican, perhaps Latin American, or even *Latino* or *Chicano*[2] if he or she comes from Mexico City, but do these designations really tell us much about a person or their place of origin? Do they even tell us if a person identifies with a shared community, or what that community might be? Residents of Polanco and Ecatepec may all be Mexicans to the wider world, and *chilangos*[3] in the eyes of other Mexicans, and may even be mutually dependent on one another, but it is not at all clear that they imagine themselves as residents of a common city or that they share common interests. It is equally difficult to weave them into a common history.

A Common Past

History found itself in the curriculum of public schools in the nineteenth century precisely because it seemed like an ideal tool for producing communities. Historians were charged with writing national histories, stories that explained who we are through reference to where we came from. Nationalist histories proliferated in the former colonies of the Americas during this era, as local intellectuals endeavored to give shape to their nations through reference to the ancient indigenous past, colonial society, and the glorious quest for independence. Often written by prominent politicians, these histories served as foundational narratives for the post-colonial states of the Americas, proof that they had every right to stand apart from their former rulers.

Latin America was invented in the process. The term was first proposed by the Colombian José María Caicedo in the mid-nineteenth century to describe former colonies in the Americas whose languages shared a common origin, grouping French-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking regions in the hemisphere together.[4] Others adopted the term soon thereafter, sometimes in an effort to simplify a collection of nearly thirty countries for outsiders, and sometimes because the idea of Latin America offered a vision of strength through unity. Reformers and revolutionaries have long embraced the ideal of a united Latin America that could stand up to the power of both Europe and the United States. In order to make their case, they invariably turned to history, producing narratives that create a common Latin American past as precursor to a single future.

There is real power in the story. In crafting a Latin American past, we have the opportunity to justify or critique existing power structures, to offer a vision of greater or lesser unity, and to help shape the region's relationship to the outside world. This indeed is the reason that local elites began writing national and regional histories in the eighteenth century. The nations they described were then mostly an illusion, conjured up from the ancient indigenous past and their own sense of personal injustice. Still, they offered a compelling vision of a common past that could in turn presage a common future.

Today, the same impulse remains. Because we want to describe something we call Latin America, we produce narratives that somehow connect vast and diverse peoples to a common community. We choose a specific place, incident, or person, and somehow describe them in ways that suggest that they speak for some larger Latin American experience—a part standing in for the whole. Alternately, we rely on other narrative devices, making sense of Latin America through dramas about good versus evil, stories of backwardness and progress or the primitive and the modern,[5] or equally odd narratives of cultural sameness (they are really no different than us). Latin America thus becomes legible because we tell its history through reference to other familiar stories.

We might, for instance, introduce the wealthy residents of Polanco as models of civilization or capitalist fat-cats. Residents of Ecatepec then become ignorant drug-abusers who reinscribe their own poverty through their lifestyles, or oppressed revolutionaries in waiting. Linked to nationalist narratives, romantic or tragic stories about these individuals remind us that all Mexicans, as Octavio Paz once suggested, are children of *la Malinche*.[6] And, if we want to suggest even grander commonalities, we might mention the Dora and Spiderman backpacks that one sees in both places in order to convince the reader that, as participants in global mass cultural phenomena, children are the same, wherever you go. The narrative is yours to choose, and reveals little more than your own ideological preferences.

History, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, is not what happened, but is what is said about what happened.[7] The stories we tell are invariably limited by the incompleteness of the historical record, and its tendency to reflect the views of those whose power allows them to leave traces of their lives in archives, libraries, and private collections. Out of these materials historians of Latin America tend to produce two types of narratives. The first, the grand story of change over time, endeavors to look at the way that phenomena like colonialism, capitalism, demographic, and environmental change offer broad explanations for why Latin America has taken a specific historical path.[8] Social history, economic history, even political history tend to be rooted in these larger explanations, and at various points in this text play an important role in considering the broad transformations Latin Americans have experienced since Independence.

These powerful, broad explanations come at a price. In narratives that cover a century or more, we lose the opportunity to consider the ways in which specific historical moments are singular unto themselves and to understand the ways that large sweeping narratives often speak as much to our desire to make sense of a past that may, in fact, be incoherent. These narratives also sacrifice a close reading of the fragmentary historical record, a reading that might shed important light on the ways that people lived within the political, social and other forces that shaped their lives. These particular stories can offer insight into the ways that power was arranged different places and times, insights about the values, beliefs, and assumptions (things we often call culture) that animated daily life. What we

learn about ourselves from these moments is often as significant as what we learn in grand historical narratives.[9] We see, for instance, the ways that assumptions about race, class, and gender influenced the arrangement of power in discrete moments, the ways that inclusionary and exclusionary practices constituted specific social, economic, and political terrains. We are also confronted with the problems of agency in those moments.

Agency—that is, an individual's capacity to be an agent for change or stasis—is a key concern of both the grand and the particular narratives of the Latin American past.[10] Do broad historical forces (say, global capitalism) overwhelm individual agency, so that we are simply cogs in a machine whose gears cannot be stopped? Are we the subjects of systems of power so overwhelming and diffuse that we cannot change them?[11] Do visionary figures make history, bending events to their will (Fidel Castro?), or are they produced by the events that they seem to control? And what of contingency? Do unexpected political and social forces come together in unpredictable moments to change the course of history (the masses, or multitude[12]), prompted not by predictable motivations but by forces and habits[13] that by their very nature defy control and organization? Is history a straightforward and predictable unfolding of events, or is it a shambles, something that only has the order we impose on it?

These issues matter a great deal to historians of Latin America, in part because this region has long been the subject of a series of grand historical projects, suggesting that, at heart, Latin America is a problem in need of a solution. Simón Bolívar was one of the first to make this claim, insisting that the region needed to build a strong unified front lest it be swallowed by the emergent United States. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw countless others who, in one way or another, echoed his concerns. Latin America was too unequal, too poor, too "underdeveloped." At times these complaints took a darker turn, suggesting that Latin America had a cultural problem (too Catholic, too Spanish) or a racial problem (too African, too indigenous). These meta explanations approach the region based on broad assumptions that make Latin America a problem to be solved instead of a region whose multiple histories are not easily reducible to problems and solutions, and whose experience might inform the way we view our own past and present.

It may be that the very project of trying to tell the story of the Latin American past as a common history forces these types of short-hand, as efforts to keep this vast region in the frame seem to invariably require a series of intellectual tricks. This is why this book turns instead to the idea of the fragment as a means of exploring the Latin American past. This concept informs this text in two ways. We begin by acknowledging that lived experience in this part of the world is fragmentary. Proximity does not always mean that different communities and individuals in the region share a common sense of the past or the present, let alone the future. Second, the concept of the fragment informs the way we approach the past itself. In writing history, we take small bits and pieces of experience and transform them into a narrative. No history can be an exhaustive rendering of the past, so we must decide which fragments we will privilege and which story we will tell. In doing so we also reveal the extent to which history is a story about the past told in order to justify the present or make a claim on the future, and not simply a naïve arrangement of facts, an unvarnished truth.

Fragmentation does not speak to an absence of nations or nationalism. Latin Americans embrace their national soccer teams, join together in the veneration of national symbols,

and celebrate national holidays. Yet these practices do not erase the deep divisions found here, divisions that are rooted in centuries of experience. When celebrating the victories of their national soccer teams, poor Latin Americans sometimes turn against their more wealthy compatriots. They might venerate some of the same heroes, but often do so in idiosyncratic ways. If we were to ask ten Venezuelans to describe Simón Bolívar's values, we might receive several radically different answers. The same would be true were we to ask ten Mexicans about their great national hero, Emiliano Zapata. Even Roman Catholicism, which was once thought to be the cultural practice that linked all people of the region, is practiced in highly particular ways from one community to the next. Every time we offer a single rendering of Catholicism, Zapata or Bolívar, we tell one version of the past as the Latin American past. In doing so we privilege one set of voices while silencing others.

This text seeks a way out of that dilemma by proposing a fragmentary history of Latin America. The following chapters do not purport to render a single Latin American past. They are instead offered merely as a collection of eleven stories from that past. While chronologically ordered, and chosen because they are among the stories that Latin American historians generally consider important, they were also selected because each story defies easy narration. The stories told here do not offer authoritative ways of understanding an episode from the Latin American past so much as they suggest that each story could be told in multiple ways. Neither do they connect seamlessly or easily into a single narrative about Latin America. It would seem that many of these accounts are connected. We leave it to the reader to decide the nature and significance of these links.

We begin our effort to consider Latin America as both a region embedded in long-term historical processes and a collection of fragmentary experiences by confronting the difficulties faced when we attempt to describe independence in the early nineteenth century (Chapter 1). This is in some ways an arbitrary choice, as independence was a political act that did not dramatically change the lives of most people in the region. It was however significant in the creation of an idea of Latin America, and its meanings and implications for the Latin American future remain the subject of debate today. Chapter 2 introduces the *caudillo*, a mythical military figure who is sometimes blamed for centuries of political strife in the region, but whom others have always seen as a complex, even heroic defender of common people. Even if we describe *caudillos* generally, they are best understood in very specific terms.

Chapter 3 begins with a general concern; it introduces us to the question of what individual freedom meant in societies that had long relied on the forced labor of slaves and indigenous peoples for their prosperity. Independence promised a series of freedoms, and, during the nineteenth century, those freedoms gradually expanded to include all male citizens across the region. Nonetheless, lingering colonial attitudes and scientific racism also conditioned the rights and privileges that non-whites enjoyed. We see here a variety of struggles, not the least of which were the efforts of the newly free to defend their citizenship rights.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore two ways of narrating a single period in the Latin American past. The export boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw similar efforts across the region to create communities predicated on common values, in this instance shared faith in the nineteenth-century version of progress. Electric trams, railways, and booming exports came to signify a modern Latin America, even as millions of rural

and poor people experienced modernity as the violent loss of their freedom and well-being. Through these chapters we see the possibility of narrating this period simultaneously as triumph and tragedy.

Latin America's twentieth-century history was similarly framed by global phenomena that played out in distinctly local ways. The United States cast a long shadow on the internal affairs of many societies in the region during the past century, but in ways that defy easy characterization (Chapter 6). Some viewed the United States as an imperial hegemon, living off the blood and sweat of the Latin American poor. Others admired the United States for its technological innovations, economic progress, and capacity to trade globally. At various points, American-made products were eagerly consumed across the region, often desired both for their quality and for the ways they suggested good taste on the part of the consumer. Then as now, Latin Americans had an unsettled relationship with the United States. The United States is easily the most commonly mentioned enemy of the Latin American people. It is also the destination of choice for the vast majority of migrants who leave the region.

Other episodes from the twentieth-century history of Latin America consider the rise of mass politics and its relationship to Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) in the 1930s and 1940s (Chapter 7), the Cuban revolution (Chapter 8), the Dirty Wars (Chapter 9), and the emergence of a new lexicon of rights with the end of the Dirty Wars and its connection to global technological changes since the 1970s (Chapter 10). Many of these phenomena were transnational. The rise of broadcast media, the intensification of cold-war hostilities after 1959, and the growing influence of rights-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) beginning in the 1980s were all global phenomena. This might lead us to propose a common Latin American (or even larger) experience. And then again, it is also possible that the connections we see in these experiences are imposed from the outside, that it is more important that we understand the specific local ways that each of these developments played out in the latter half of the twentieth century.

We conclude with an eye to the future and the past in Chapter 11, which draws from Albert O. Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* to consider the interlocked experiences of political and economic upheaval since the 1980s. Latin Americans, like people in much of the world, have gone through successive crises since the end of the era of ISI, sometimes rooted in economic challenges, but just as often tied to political, social, and even environmental issues. At the same time, those crises have been accompanied by other developments that suggest that in some ways, things have never been better for the people of Latin America. Extreme poverty across the region has fallen substantially since the 1980s, and, as a whole, the region has never been more democratic than it is today. Nonetheless, for reasons that remain the subject of debate, the capacity of Latin American states to command loyalty from their citizens may be weaker today than it has ever been. Multiple varieties of exit, coupled with a variety of iterations of voice, place Latin America at the forefront of the conflicts that confront our global community today.

It is easy to make sense of these conflicts by making them into stories of good versus evil. Today this is common, as opposing groups demonize one another in order to justify their demands for change or stasis. Interestingly, the power of their antipathies (if not their specific demands) resonates with the ways that residents of Polanco and Ecatepec often view one another (when they view one another at all), each with a hostility that imagines

the other as the cause of their problems. At various points in the Latin American past, any number of individuals and communities have been subjected to this kind of scorn.

My hope is that the stories contained in this text make it more difficult to demonize the people lunching in Polanco, the marginalized poor of Ecatapec, or for that matter, anyone whose story is told here. The text aims to instead offer some insight into the complexities of daily life in this part of the world as we enter a challenging period in the early twenty-first century. Latin Americans live in a fragmentary present, which is a product of their fragmentary past.

The Documents: A User's Guide

The chapters in this book represent one type of story about the past. The documents that accompany these chapters are another. Traces of a specific moment in time, they offer readers the voices of witnesses to history, individuals who record their views because they want to shape the way we understand the past and the present.

The chapters and the documents are complementary, though imperfectly so. Both the documents and the essays provide information, though that is not their primary task. They are interpretations, and as such readers are encouraged to examine them critically. As much as possible, they are not excerpted (where they are, the entire text generally can be found on the book's website, www.routledge.com/cw/dawson). Excerpting is a form of editing, in which someone other than the creator of a text determines what is significant about that text before it reaches the reader. Access to the entire text, changed only by the act of translation, offers readers the opportunity to develop their own interpretations, allowing them to more fully participate in the process of making history.

In some cases I provide preliminary questions that might be useful in reading the documents (more questions can be found on the book's website), though, for the most part, the documents are introduced in a manner that is sufficiently open-ended to allow readers to approach them with their own interests and questions. My intention is to allow these, like all historical documents, to be read in multiple ways. They can be read simply as interesting commentaries, or they can be approached as lenses into specific times, places, and as opportunities to understand the worldviews and desires of their creators. We learn more by imagining the multiple ways that these texts can be read than we do by imagining that there is *one* correct reading. This will allow the reader to produce their own version of the past, to do their own historical thinking.

But what does historical thinking look like? This is a question that arises again and again in contemporary society. We justify so much of what we do through reference to the past (it was always this way, or historical precedent justifies present action), yet in many ways we live in historically illiterate times. These documents are meant to address historical literacy in certain ways. We begin by attempting to situate the documents in time, by endeavoring simply to understand how people in the past made sense of their worlds. After this, we must consider the question of change over time. How have things changed since then? What does it mean that they have changed? How can we situate our present beliefs and practices in historical context? Can we judge the past using the same values we invoke in judging the present? Can we understand the past in ways that do not simply justify our present views?

Some of the documents we use for this task are widely regarded as classics. José Martí's *Our America*, Emiliano Zapata's *Plan de Ayala*, and Augusto Sandino's *Political Manifesto* have been read by generations of students as important historical texts. Others are familiar mainly to specialists, though within the various sub fields of Latin American history they are generally perceived as significant texts. Drawn from letters, short stories, speeches, manifestos, personal memoirs, newspaper editorials, newsreels, and films, the documents introduce readers to a multitude of ways of understanding the past, a range of story-telling techniques, and a significant number of interpretive dilemmas. In the end, they remind readers that history is not simply culled from documents, but is an act of interpretation built upon an act of interpretation. For those who want to delve even further into these questions, the book's website includes links to and copies of other documents that might be of interest.

Some years ago, my students became increasingly interested in the concept of bias. Driven by a larger public debate on objectivity in journalism,[14] they came into the classroom with a desire to distinguish the unvarnished truth from that which was somehow tainted by the values and beliefs of the interlocutor. Many left my classroom disappointed when I agreed with them that historians were biased, though I disagreed with them when they asserted that the absence of bias (as they conceived it) was possible. I told them that these texts, like all texts, were written from a perspective, and that one of the things that historians do is examine the ways that our narratives are influenced by the perspectives we and our historical subjects bring to the text. I insisted that there were many potential truths to be found in the Latin America past, and not one unbiased truth waiting to be discovered. I then encouraged them to take this insight about the past and apply it to their understandings of the Latin American present. It is my hope that the present text contributes to that endeavor.

Ecatepec, Ciudad de México

Notes

Introduction: Latin America's Useable Past

1. The former is the city's largest urban park, and the latter is Mexico City's historical central square.
2. These last designations are typically reserved for persons born in the United States, but they can be found sometimes in the media as descriptions of Mexicans.
3. This is a vaguely obscene term for people from Mexico City, commonly used in other parts of the country.
4. For our purposes, Latin America comprises Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. For an excellent in-depth discussion of this question, see Marshall Eakin, "Does Latin America Have a Common History" (a pdf is available on the book's website www.routledge.com/cw/dawson). See also Thomas Holloway, "Latin America: What's in a Name?" in *A Companion to Latin American History* (Waltham, MA: Wiley/Blackwell, 2008). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) also offers an interesting way of approaching this issue.
5. The term often used to describe this phenomenon is orientalism.
6. This narrative suggests that Mexicans share a common culture built on the trauma imposed on indigenous cultures by the Spanish Conquest in 1521. It constitutes a chapter in his epic work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove, 1961). Claudio Lomnitz' *Exits from The Labyrinth* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993) represents one of the most interesting critiques of this tradition.
7. Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).
8. For examples of this tradition, see Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Brooke Larson, *Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia: Cochabamba, 1550–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Stephen H. Haber, ed. *How Latin America Fell Behind: Essays on the Economic Histories of Brazil, 1800–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
9. On this, see the brilliant essay by Clifford Geertz, "History and Anthropology," *New Literary History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (Winter, 1990), 321–335.
10. For more on the concept, see Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (Fall 2003). One interesting reading of this question can be found in Vincent Peloso, *Peasants on Plantations: Subaltern Strategies of Labor and Resistance in the Pisco Valley, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

11 This is the conclusion some read from reading Michel Foucault. See, for example, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).
12 This concept figures prominently in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Jon Beasley-Murray offers an idea of how it applies to Latin America in *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
13 I draw from Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
14 See, for instance, Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (New York: Perennial, 2003).

1 Independence Narratives, Past and Present

1 "Shot Heard Round the World," by Bob Dorough, *Schoolhouse Rock*, 1976. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v = Y6ikO6LMxF4.
2 A good place to start on Sáenz is Sarah Chambers, "Republican Friendship: Manuela Saenz Writes Women into the Nation, 1835–1856," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 81: 2, 2001, 225–257.
3 A free womb law declared that children born to slaves would be free.
4 The full letter was nearly 8,000 words long, and can be found in Spanish on the website.
5 See it here: http://vimeo.com/29701339.

2 *Caudillos* Versus the Nation State

1 "[T]hey do things differently there." From Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953).
2 This is a system of government where power is controlled by a small number of elites.
3 *Mestizo* is a common term in Latin America, indicating a person with both European and indigenous ancestry. It is often used as a racial category, but is also used as a cultural category, with no reference to physical ancestry.
4 Latin American liberals followed the dictates of intellectuals like Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and believed in maximizing economic and political freedom in the interest of progress.
5 The term for the owners of large estates varies from region to region. They and their estates are variously known by the terms *hacendados/haciendas*, *finqueros/fincas*, *estancieros/estancias*, *latifundistas/latifundia*.
6 *Protecturia de indígenas*.
7 Facundo was a real *caudillo*, but the text was indirectly aimed at Rosas.
8 Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina,* 206.
9 This term describes persons from Buenos Aires.
10 These are owners of large estates, or *estancias*.
11 Florencia Mallon's *Peasant and Nation* is fascinating on this point.
12 The term denotes people of mixed racial origins.
13 Translator's note: The political party that opposed Rosas.
14 Translator's note: In 1820, Juan Manuel de Rosas, leader of the Federalist Party, was given the title of "Restorer of the Laws" by the legislature when he reestablished the Federalists' legal government.
15 Translator's note: Refers to the British and other fair-haired, light-skinned foreigners, with a pejorative connotation.
16 Translator's note: Crested *caracara* (Polyborus plancus), a bird of prey common to Argentina and belonging to the falcon family.