

Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 9 No. 1 July 30, 2008

Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945. Alan McPherson.
Washington, DC: Potomac Books. 2006. Includes maps, illustrations, xi-xv, 207 pp.

Reviewed by Eileen Rosin*

In this slim volume, Alan McPherson describes the character and evolution of what he calls the “interdependence” between the United States and Latin America—that is, the involvement of each of the two in every sphere of the other’s existence. In the opening pages, he explicitly states that his book does not make the case for interdependence being overwhelmingly positive or negative for either the United States or Latin America (p. 2), although later he does express hope that it will move in a more positive direction (p. 15) and admits that the relationship has been highly unequal. It is hard to read this condensed version of U.S.–Latin American relations without coming to some conclusion as to who are the winners and who the losers.

He opens with a short but useful recap of relations between the two since Latin America gained independence from its European colonizers through the second World War. He then devotes five chapters to rough breakdowns of eras by decade: the cold war and dictatorships, 1945–58; anti-U.S. sentiment, socialism, and intervention, 1959–69; dirty wars, industrialization, human rights, and poverty, 1970–80; proxy wars and debt, 1981–90; “transnationalisms,” neoliberalism, and the drug war, 1991–2005.

McPherson seems to believe that the United States has viewed Latin America in the way it finds most useful at any given moment with little consideration for the region’s inhabitants. At different times, Latin America has served the United States as a source of raw materials, as an expanding market for U.S. goods, as an element (though not necessarily a player) within its global political aspirations, as a “tropical paradise” for U.S. tourists, and as territory for defending the hemisphere against communism.

In a way not often seen in such works, the author brings out the cultural prejudice and outright racism that U.S. politicians and officials have shown toward the region and its peoples, and the accompanying perception that Latin Americans were incapable of governing or developing themselves without the presence of a “higher civilization” such as the United States.

He traces the occasional ups and more frequent downs in this respect. For example, Secretary of War Henry Stimson in 1927 said that Nicaraguans “were not fitted for ... popular self-government” (p. 10), expressing at least one rationalization for the more than 35 U.S. interventions in as many years (1898–1933). President Truman said that Latin Americans were “very emotional” and hard to deal with (p. 23), while his secretary of state, Dean Acheson, blamed “Hispano-Indian culture—or the lack of it” (p. 23). After his 1950 trip to Latin America, George Kennan, known as the “father of containment,” considered Latin Americans to be children incapable of governing themselves, and recommended supporting the region’s dictators against communist penetration (p. 24).

The culmination of U.S. disdain for Latin America was to be found in Henry Kissinger, who told Chile’s foreign minister in a 1969 meeting at the White House, “What happens in the South is of no importance” (p. 74). His “realist” foreign policy held that events in such countries were significant only when they affected the world’s power centers. Since morality was irrelevant, U.S. support for brutal dictatorships and their methods was considered an acceptable way to ensure stability.

At the end of World War II, the fruits of U.S. activities in Latin America overwhelmingly went to the U.S. government and citizens, while the United States’ assertion of its power in the region produced great resentment among Latin Americans. Latin America had been very involved in the fight against fascism and was moving toward increased democratization—earlier U.S. efforts promoted democracy through the growth of the middle class, labor unions, cooperative associations, and democratic political parties.

However, these advances were destroyed by anti-communism, which took the form of counterinsurgency and support for dictators. And, as McPherson convincingly illustrates with his description of the overthrow of Guatemala’s Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 (pp. 36–39), anti-communism often served as cover for the United States’ true

objective: the protection of U.S. business interests. Meanwhile, democratic sectors became disillusioned, and instead of being encouraged, were now labeled as potential communists, thereby providing justification for the repression that followed. Latin American military leaders were able to obtain increased U.S. political and financial support by claiming to be fighting communism.

I have a few complaints about the book. It is not clear why he is, apparently, promoting the use of the nebulous term “interdependence” when “relationship,” “transnationalism,” “symbiosis,” “integration,” “intimacy,” and so on, would more clearly serve at the relevant moments.

Second, the book is too short to deal fairly with the long and complex history of U.S.–Latin American relations, and in fact, I detect a bit too much zeal with the blue pencil in spots where events are left unclear. For example, in the chapter on the rise of dictators, I found the ins and outs confusing—it was not always clear what led up to a dictator’s taking power and left me wanting a little more explanation, especially in Chapter 1. Or perhaps the editors weren’t paying attention—when he writes that, “... new initiatives extended that [military] training to civilians—in short, the police—thus suggesting that U.S. assistance in no way defended against attacks from abroad” (p. 59). I am not sure how the first part of the sentence led to the second, unless he meant to say that U.S. military assistance was not sufficient to counter the communist threat, or was portrayed as such to justify asking for more aid.

Third, at times he presents Latin Americans as if they were a single, homogenous group. For example, he says that Latin Americans were hungry for a higher standard of living and democracy, but puts it in the context of the first Sears department store in Mexico, which opened in the late 1940s. A similar generalization is made in the surprisingly weak final chapter, called “Conclusion: Food for Thought.” McPherson discusses the growing U.S. taste for tropical fruit and the incursion of U.S. fast food chains into Latin America to exemplify the strength of U.S.–Latin American relations. He admits that this is not a “perfect illustration” of the relationship, but says that “like any act of consumption, eating and drinking involves choice.” This may be true for the middle classes and elite sectors, but applies only tangentially to the vast majorities of poor Latin Americans who are struggling to put food on the table from one day to the next.

These shortcomings aside, the book is a handy and readable summary of U. S.–Latin American relations for new students of the subject, and McPherson’s emphasis on socio-cultural aspects makes it a useful read for anyone interested in the region, and the appendix of excerpts from a short list of key documents elucidates the tenor of thinking underpinning policy decisions throughout the fifty years covered in the book.

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