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Jeremy Adelman

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## Latin American and World Histories: Old and New Approaches to the Pluribus and the Unum

Jeremy Adelman

The rise of world history courses in American universities appears to pose important challenges to Latin American history. Some say that globalization dissolves cultural differences into a sort of transnational convergence. The end of the cold war, others claim, demotes the role of ideology in favor of pragmatic applications of international market verities. The assault on area studies in favor of a universal social science has heightened anxiety among historians and social scientists who labored away in their bounded national or regional modes. As if the pressure on Latin American historians to connect their stories to developments outside the region and to play down idiosyncratic features of the region's past were not enough, "world" history has become a something of a rage. It is not a fleeting one, and it will have both salutary and possibly unfortunate effects on teaching and research agendas, especially as Americans come to terms (if fitfully) with the imperial dimensions of their "homeland." If my own department is any gauge (local quirks aside), Latin Americanists (as well as Africanists and Asianists) are asked to be part of "world" groupings, while European and American history remain relatively immune from the pressures to integrate. To recast the dilemma in particular United Statesean terms, some feel that it is time for Latin American historians (and the subjects they study) to join the *unum* from their *pluribus*.

Appearances can deceive. For one, this picture is overly stark. European and North American historians have been thinking about their subjects transnationally for some time. Nor are most world historians as counterposed to local history, especially of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as might seem at first blush. Even the advocates of "big" history acknowledge that the past had to have a place in which to unfold and that all places are relatively bounded units. Though we might live in a global age, world history as a genre is almost as old as (albeit overshadowed by) national or regional history. While the two

strains have been more estranged than engaged, there have been previous conjunctures through which they have affected each other's developments.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, a special relationship between Latin American and world history that has a longstanding history of its own. It is important to acknowledge this intellectual heritage. To let the challenge of integrating regional or national history into world history pass as a new development neglects generations of historical debate in Latin America and obscures what Latin American history and its historians have contributed to world history. Furthermore, acknowledging the centrality of world history to the unfolding of Latin American historiography highlights what is so fraught, and therefore fertile, about the region's past, and which lies squarely at the heart of its contested histories: the colonial makings of modernity in Latin America, and thus the imperial dimensions of the origins of modernity in Europe.

This essay has a vaguely imperial mission—that is, to suggest that Latin American historians have a decisive contribution to make to world history. Today's critiques of bounded area studies entail certain assumptions that are at odds with the creative ways in which Latin Americanists have for so long approached their subjects. It would be banal—but still true—to say that Latin American historians operate within historiographic traditions that link local and global developments. This essay makes an additional claim: that localized varieties of Latin American history are critical to how we understand world processes. In the rush to draw connections and show convergences, “big” history often misses the ways in which local or regional worlds (note the plural) disconnect and diverge—not because societies are the repositories of autonomous logics of development or survival, but because the structuring processes of world history create deep unevenness, inequalities, and new cycles of fragmentation. This is why although Latin America's precolumbian cultures, their encounters with Europeans, and the colonial and postcolonial structures they developed may have unique and particularized histories, as a whole they address the ways in which power distributes itself and is reproduced on a world scale.<sup>2</sup>

To some extent, these reflections come out of discussions (some more polite than others) I had over a number of years with my coauthors of a general

1. For those interested in the development of world history and its many camps, two recent collections are very helpful guides. Ross E. Dunn, ed., *The New World History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000); and Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

2. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), xi–xiii.

book on world history. The book's title, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the Modern World from the Mongol Empire to the Present*, conveys some of the ways in which we seek to combine world history with regional and local histories. Each of us was and is a historian of a particular spot in the world, and while we endeavored to compose a larger narrative of our times, we were committed to remaining faithful to our regional specializations, even when they seemed (as was often the case) to diverge from the master narrative. We came to see that **this kind of fracturing was as much a part of the story of the world as the making of the unum**. In a sense, we faced the dual challenge of integrating world history into regional history, as well as the other way around.<sup>3</sup>

It helps to take some historiographic stock, if only to contextualize this conjuncture. For almost two centuries, Latin American historians have been grappling with the relationship between the region's past and world developments. This should not be too surprising, given the importance that colonial experiences and heritages (to take Stanley and Barbara Stein's words) have had on modern life. Even the "liberators" who sought to sever the formal ties between Iberia and its colonies acknowledged that it was much easier to dismantle the vestiges of imperial authority than it was to extirpate the very deep ways in which colonialism shaped social relations across Spain's and Portugal's American dominions.

Latin American historiography has, since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, been torn between two narrative ambitions. The first responded to the urge to write about the past as the making of an exceptional and distinct people. The other involved storytelling that folded Latin American nations into a larger, universal narrative of human advancement. Was Latin America uniquely condemned to wrestle with its dual barbarian and civilized halves, as the Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento suggested, or was its past the springboard to a higher phase of human development governed by a "cosmic race," as the Mexican José Vasconcelos prophesized?

The **particularizing and generalizing narratives** suggest very different valences. But they are not so logically distinct. For Sarmiento, while Latin America may have had unique, indelible features, its pathologies only made sense as part of a comparative framing; that is, Latin America's epic experience was different from that of Anglo America, which was the Argentine writer's

3. The coauthors included myself, Robert Tignor, Stephen Aron, Stephen Kotkin, Susanne Marchand, Gyan Prakash, and Michael Tsing. The book came out in 2001, published by W. W. Norton. Tignor and I are currently working with a different group of authors to write a prequel that will cover world histories up to the year 1300.

implicit and explicit foil. A similar contrasting exercise held true for Vasconcelos. Whether particular or universal, the patterns of the Latin American past, and thus portents of its future, were premised upon the unbounded nature of colonialism—in contrast to, say, the bounded unity of national history writing and myth making in the United States (which is one of the reasons why the challenge of world history appears so new to the academic milieu of the North). The creation of a nativist or “telluric” literary and historical style was, in effect, conjured in opposition to a “Europeanizing” or cosmopolitan one, and vice versa. In Latin America, each acknowledged and needed the other.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, as the historical profession matured, the urge to particularize or generalize Latin American historical narratives proved a vital tension in the region’s historiography. First, consider the broader intellectual developments. If the nineteenth century saw the blossoming of “American,” “French,” and “English” history, it was also a period in which a universal, secular history found its theorists and raconteurs. Along with Bancroft, Michelet, and Macauley, we find Hegel and Marx, who, while hardly aficionados of the narrative voice, were nonetheless more than comfortable writing about historical development in unabashedly universal terms. By the time of the First World War, H. G. Wells, Arnold Toynbee, and Oswald Spengler were advocating a general history of human “civilizations” to accompany (or reinforce) the more familiar and professionalized “national” histories.

The severing of national and universal history was more apparent than real. For Marx, as for Toynbee, a universal history had distinctly European features. As parallel tracks of civilization began to converge and overlap, each acquired similar personalities. There was, of course, much consideration of the world’s multiple civilizations (Christian, Asian, and so forth), but there was still a general drive toward a more synthesized, increasingly isomorphic globe, one that reflected Europe’s ability to use its commercial, cultural, and military resources to make a universal center. Thus, from an early stage, world history was synonymous with the “rise of the West” and therefore fully compatible with European stories of emerging national integration and greatness. To be sure, William McNeill’s foundational opus (not coincidentally entitled *The Rise of the West*) distanced itself from the triumphal language of the making of European peoples, but the organic relationship between a centered world and the privileged place of Europe in it is hard to miss.<sup>5</sup>

4. Octavio Paz, “A Literature of Convergences,” in *Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 220.

5. For a fascinating self-reflection, see William H. McNeill, “The Changing Shape of World History,” in Pomper et al., eds., *World History*, 21–40.

From a Latin American perspective, world history's Eurocentrism made sense, even for those who were struggling to compose new national narratives for emerging countries. Nineteenth-century historians such as José Manuel Restrepo, Bartolomé Mitre, and Lucas Alamán tended to see their own countries (Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico respectively) as enacting epic national variations on the impulse of Europe, and especially Christendom, to bring civilization to distant, "barbarian" outposts, and in so doing to create nation-states. In a sense, there was no incompatibility between national stories and universal ones—though there was plenty of frustration (or celebration) about just how much civilizing efforts penetrated local cultures. Octavio Paz captured the universal aspects of the Latin American past especially elegantly when he observed that "before having our own historical existence, we began by being a European idea. We cannot be understood if it is forgotten that we are a chapter in the history of European utopias. . . . In Europe, reality preceded the name. America, on the other hand, began by being an idea. A victory for nominalism: the name engendered reality." There is an important twist here: that is, that what was so unique or exceptional about Latin American history was the extent to which it was so thoroughly the by-product of universal, and imperial, designs. So, from the get-go, there developed an intellectual heritage in Latin America that refused to separate the region's past from the rest of the world. Indeed, what made it so exceptional was the ways in which efforts to generate more fully sovereign projects, tied to the bounded and realized unity of the nation-state, floundered.<sup>6</sup>

Such stories about how Latin Americans matured into modern nations as reflections of more universal processes echoed through the twentieth century. What became known as a "modernization" approach to history, which tended to look at the clashing of "traditional" (status-bound and ascriptive) social norms with modern (rational and prescriptive) ones, flourished from the 1950s. This approach often showed how Latin America's past could be synthesized as a tale of the enduring powers of its traditional properties. A long list of distinguished historians wrote, and continue to write, in this vein. A recent collection of essays poses the legitimate question, "Why did Latin America fall behind?"—necessarily a more global and comparative query—but frames most of the answers in terms of local, particularized personalities and institutions anchored in the region's past (obstacles to free-flowing markets, persis-

6. For more on the foundational histories, see Adelman, "The Independence of Latin America," *Latin American Historiography*, ed. José Moya (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, forthcoming). Octavio Paz, "A Literature of Foundations," *Triquarterly* 13–14 (Fall–Winter 1968–69): 8.

tent rent-seeking, etc.). One might object to what is called “fundamental attribution errors”: when observers attribute behaviors to characteristics that are internal to their “traits” or “essences.” But what should be clear is that these kinds of approaches never separated Latin America’s history from the rest of the world, even if there was a normative expectation that Latin America was “failing” because local residues were holding it back from joining the forward flow of universal history.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, a countercurrent also flourished. By the time a more revisionist, antiliberal historiography took root in the 1930s and 1940s, the uplifting narratives about civilization’s diffusion to the Atlantic peripheries had given way to a more critical view. Increasingly, Latin America was seen as being made by Europe, but as the victim of European material ambitions rather than as the repository of Europe’s civilizing aspirations. By the time that Caio Prado Junior wrote about the history of colonial Brazil, conquest and exploitation replaced conversion and uplift, and Latin America was made into Europe’s first and finest periphery—enabling Europe to position itself as the center of the world. It was not, therefore, that European conquest created modern societies abroad, but that imperialism created the conditions for European modernity. This was a foundational text for what burgeoned into a historical approach that Latin Americanists passed on to world historians: dependency theory. What characterized Latin America was not so much the binary clash of civilization and barbarism, tradition and modernity, but modernity’s “darker” side. Without this historical reckoning, narratives of the making of the modern world are more than just partial; they enable world history to be cast as the spread of Europe’s agentic mission over the rest, as if only the West had the capacity to rise of its own, endogenous accord.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense, revisionists inverted what liberals celebrated, but they did not necessarily transcend it. It was still Europe that was the agentic history maker and Latin America a reactive place whose history only made sense as part of a logic governed by a whole, a whole that had a distinctly centered European makeup. The fundamental attribution errors were gone in favor of narratives and explanations of differences across the world that stressed situational and

7. Stephen Haber, ed., *How Latin America Fell Behind: Essays on the Economic Histories of Brazil and Mexico, 1800–1914* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997).

8. Caio Prado Jr., *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo: Colônia* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, 1942). For a reflection on this work, see Stuart B. Schwartz, “The Colonial Past: Conceptualizing Post-Dependentista Brazil,” in *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History*, ed. Jeremy Adelman (New York: Routledge, 1999), 175–92.

structural causes. What Walter Rodney once said of Africa—that Europe “underdeveloped” it—also transpired in Latin America. Instead of internal, endogenous attributes shaping Latin American behaviors that get in the way of a more universal development of modern life, now it was the reverse: what was universal was modernity’s need to shape Latin America in its mind’s eye.

These two were dominant strains in Latin American history—both of which had obvious relationships with world history. Wherever one stands in relationship to these broad positions (with all their internal variations), it cannot be denied that **Latin American history was never especially idiographic or severed from world history.** So, what might be said about traditions in American history—to take one example, that the bounded unity of the nation-state threw up barriers to a more open, international perspective and thus had American historians running in circular debates about “exceptionalism”—cannot be said about Latin American historians. In a sense, the opposite was true. **Latin America was the way it was because of world historical forces.**

While this may be the historiographic landscape against which we, as Latin American historians, operate, we might consider some thorny problems. The first is almost self-evident, and that is the persistent habit of reducing Latin America’s historical uniqueness to its (or Iberia’s) idiosyncracies and thus yielding to the rather circular argument that what made Latin America’s history distinctive was Latin America’s distinctiveness. The second is perhaps less clear, and it may well reflect a natural bias of regional or national histories: that is, the frequent assumption that world, transnational, or general civilizational developments follow internally consistent logics—whether it was the expansion of capitalism (in the singular), liberalism (ditto), or modernity (the same). **The heterogeneity of the *unum* and the uniqueness of the *pluribus* reflected the incomplete or truncated ways in which these universal processes fanned out to the corners of the world from their centers of origin.** This sometimes made it hard to see that the heterogeneous parts were so different *not* because they were incompletely part of a whole, but because **creating the whole was itself a heteronomous process and thus could not help but yield to diverse parts.**

Recent alternative approaches, however, enable the historian to escape circularity. These possibilities derive from insights that have come from Latin American historians as well as from world historians (self-described as “new” world historians) who have found the conventional “rise of the West” narrative neither particularly interesting nor particularly compelling. In effect, there has been a convergence, or perhaps more precisely a reconvergence, of Latin American and world historians who treat **heterogeneous integration** as what makes up part of world history, and which enables Latin Americanists to see

the region and its own parts as shaped by external forces without being determined unilaterally by them.

Consider two recent alternative formulations to the “big” picture. In an important critique of world systems (and, to some extent, its cousin, dependency theory), Steve Stern argued that the unum may exist but that its logic doesn’t explain life in the pluribus. Instead, a world system requires independent local histories that cannot be reduced to a monolithic model. Particular and variegated local developments do not reflect the absence of a working model or its incomplete penetration of its fringes. For example, while coerced labor—which is critical to understanding the extractive nature of capitalism and which enabled the reproduction of the system of a whole—was a fact of life for many, many Latin Americans, its history cannot be abstracted from local bargaining and contestation (and their contingent effects); without the resolution of these local conflicts, the system of exploitation would be unsustainable. To tell the story about the world requires local histories. So, in a sense, world history was not about dissolving the pluribus into the unum, but almost the reverse.<sup>9</sup>

The second issue is related and has since become a more developed position through the effect of poststructuralist thought on world and regional historiography. That is, the world may have a center or a core, but its existence is itself a contingent effect of other structural forces that are at work, without being at the command of agents located at the core. This is a little abstract, so let me offer an example. Janet Abu-Lughod’s 1989 publication, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350*, had a formative effect of those historians who liked to think “big.” In showing that there was a world system that predated the “rise of the West,” she showed that centers come and go. Furthermore, they can be many or few; center needn’t be singular. They are themselves, therefore—like the bargaining that transpires on the periphery that feeds the center—also contingent. The underlying forces that integrated and differentiated the world involved the many ways in which cultures or societies (there remains an open issue about how to group collectivities) interacted: commerce (which still tends to be the dominant model of transaction), conquest (a traditional one), and conversion (a field of research in which Latin American historians have, perforce, a distinctively comparative advantage, given the scale of the evangelizing aspirations of Iberian rulers). There are plenty of

9. Steve J. Stern, “Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean,” reprinted in *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, ed. Frederick Copper et al. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 23–82.

monographs and even big books from authors such as Sidney Mintz, Philip Curtin, and Eric Wolf that cast Latin America in world settings without assuming that power over the exchanges between Latin America and the world was concentrated in one eternal and monolithic center.<sup>10</sup>

Inspired by this spirit, as we were laboring on *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, we often referred to ourselves as “decenterers.” That is, we were aiming to “decenter” Europe, the by-now hackneyed “West” that even “Western” historians were busy unpacking, destabilizing, and deconstructing (to use the *gerunds du jour*). Originally we thought this meant that we were going to offer a master narrative of the world without a center. Before long we discovered that it was hard to avoid the fact that the world had centers. (What is more, other civilizations—Aztec and Asian as well as European—saw themselves as epicentral in their respective cosmologies.) Our history thus became one that tried to contextualize the making and unmaking of historic world centers. What animated our text was a concern to tell the history of the concentration of power in particular places without divesting the world’s peripheries of agentic capacities. We also wished to emphasize that this concentration was not necessarily self-reinforcing but instead required a constant two-way mediation between the component parts of the whole. The exchanges that made the centers what they were also ensured that such centers were as unstable as the “world systems” they ruled. The making of colonial societies was therefore internal to, and not the afterthoughts of, the rise of sacred civilizations or the development of great powers. In this respect, while acknowledging the importance of commerce, conquest, and conversion, we wanted to inject the contingencies of politics into the big picture.

This is not, one might add, the only way to put the parts together. There have been other efforts to draw upon Latin American history to make sense of world history that have invoked Latin America’s role to explain (rather than presume) the rise of Europe or the West. The first is the best seller *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, by Jared Diamond, which aimed to look at human evolution

10. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982); Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984). It is worth noting the obvious. All of these books anticipated what Abu-Lughod’s did: that the centeredness of the world is a relative and contingent thing. For a more recent effort in this tradition, see Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).

and why some societies had expansionist inclinations while others did not.<sup>11</sup> Some of the evidentiary choices leave historians wondering. Why choose the defeat of the Incas and not the rather more complex and contingent war between the Tlaxcalans and Aztecs that the Spaniards stumbled into and benefited from? But what is important to underscore about Diamond is that whatever enabled the Spaniards to conquer Peru, rather than vice versa, had more to do with the evolutionary and geographic forces to which humans adapted than it did with European volition or a self-image as a center that radiated out to “new worlds.” This is a kind of decentering that contextualizes the center, even if many object to what Roberto Mangabeira Unger has called “necessitarian” explanations.

Another one is Kenneth Pomeranz’s very influential *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*.<sup>12</sup> Pomeranz took a classic question—why didn’t the Industrial Revolution happen in China?—and turned it on its head. Instead of identifying Europe’s economic breakthrough with its own internal devices (though coal deposits do play a role), he argues that Europe was the beneficiary of the windfall of the conquest of the Americas. What Latin America did was provide “ecological relief” to Europe’s Malthusian problems and enable people to migrate to cities, join wage labor forces, and for capital to accumulate in urban hubs. The book has stirred an important debate, and Latin America has a central role to play in the global way of things.

But does this count as *Latin American* history? Not quite. Nor does Pomeranz, to his credit, ever claim that this kind of world history is Latin American history. But here is where we need to recall Steve Stern’s earlier observations about Immanuel Wallerstein: for the logic of the system to operate, local negotiations, settlements, and transactions may have transpired on the periphery—but this does not make them logically peripheral to the functioning of the whole. If the Americas offered ecological relief, Europe’s extraction of staples and rents was predicated upon the creation of cross-cultural institutions to enforce this order. This is why Lauren Benton’s recent book on legal pluralism in colonial societies is such a breakthrough; it challenges the notion that mono-

11. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). The “clash of civilizations,” with the West coming out on top, appears (not surprisingly) to be something of a rage these days. For quite a different take accenting bellicose cultures, see Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

12. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

lithic legal systems were imposed on equally monolithic legal systems to create yet another one. The kinds of negotiations, compromises, and institutional syncretisms she describes are shot through the fabric of colonial and postcolonial Latin America. Reproducing the extractive machinery of empire required shifting adaptations and mixtures in order for colonialism to endure from one coercive transaction to the next. Certainly Pomeranz's "new" world history challenges, in important ways, the "rise of the West" narrative and means that a new verb will have to preface whatever one might wish to say about the "West." **But as a story about the whole, it is partial.** For a more complete account of *how* Europe was able to reap windfalls, **Latin America's heterogeneous integration into the world still needs its full narrative exploration.**<sup>13</sup>

It may well be that a neat account of the whole, with each part fitting like a piece into the mosaic, is a thing of the past. There are world historians who will resist this, because it denies what has been so alluring about the big picture: the desire to combine social integration and exchange into a synthetic model. There are also some Latin American historians who will object, because making sense of the region's past requires an understanding of the old center's civilizing or greedy aspirations, and thus abandoning the comforting idea that local histories and particularities can explain themselves in their own terms.

What this essay has suggested, and much of what Latin American historians do in any event, is that dispensing with a view of the world made up of carefully fitted pieces enables world historians and Latin American historians to share common ground premised on the contingencies and heterogeneous paths of social exchange and integration. Far from clean narratives of increasing global amalgamation and cultural assimilation, world histories, in which Latin America has been a vital part, can thereby show the ways in which interactions create as many new separations as they do convergences.

13. Lauren A. Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).