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 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-clothes are made of plastic, not linen. Children play in largely neglected parks, many of them decades old, where instead of falling to rubberized mat the unlucky toddler hits the pavement with a thud when they fall 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 if they come from Mexico City, but do these designations really tell us much about a person or the place from which they came? Do they even tell us if a person identifies with a common community, or what that community might be? Residents of Polanco and Ecatepec may all be Mexicans to the wider world, and chilangos 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 even more 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 also invented in the process, although to somewhat different ends. 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. Others adopted the term soon thereafter, sometimes in an effort to simplify a collection of nearly 30 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 almost 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 Indian 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 a vast number of 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, 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*. 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.

It may be that the very project of trying to tell the story of the Latin American past forces these types of short-hand, as efforts to keep this vast region (Figure I.1) 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 experience in this part of the world is fragmentary, as different communities and individuals may live in close proximity to one another, but often do not share a common sense of either the past or the present, let alone the future. Secondly, 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 highly particularized 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 region 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. They do not offer authoritative ways of understanding an episode from the Latin American past so much as they suggest that each 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 linkages.

We begin by confronting the difficulties we face 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 even 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 on very specific terms.

Chapter 3 again 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 avidly 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 have an unsettled relationship with the United States. The United States is easily the most commonly mentioned enemy of the Latin American people, and the destination of choice for the vast majority of migrants from the region.
Our other episodes from the twentieth-century history of Latin America consider the rise of mass politics 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 at the end of the century (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-government organizations (NGOs) beginning in the 1980s were all global phenomena. This might in turn lead us to propose a common Latin American (or even larger) experience. And then again, it is also possible that the connections we see are imposed from the outside, that it is more important that we understand the specific local ways that each of these developments played out.

We conclude with an eye to the future in present day Bolivia (Chapter 11). Contemporary Bolivia lies at the center of many storms. The political left, reborn after decades of repression, has one of its most colorful representatives in Bolivia’s current president, Evo Morales. Like other twenty-first-century socialists, Morales must contend both with a demand that he improve the lot of the poor, and with the expectation on the part of indigenous and other groups that their right to self-determination be respected. He also faces a vocal and mobilized opposition, and a regional movement that intends to secede from the country. It is altogether possible that his regime will not knit together a fragmented society, but preside over its dissolution.

It is easy to make sense of these sorts of dissonances by making them into stories of good versus evil. Today this is common in Bolivia, as opposing groups demonize one another in order to justify their demands for reform or autonomy. 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 the subject of 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 Ecatepec, 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

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 present.

The chapters and the documents are complementary, though imperfectly so. Both the documents and the essays provide information, though they are not intended primarily as that. 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
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.

Some of the documents 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 less well known, familiar to regional specialists and not widely read. Drawn from letters, short stories, speeches, manifestos, personal memoirs, newspaper editorials, newsreels, and films, the documents introduce readers to a multitude of ways to understand 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.

Some years ago, my students became increasingly interested in the concept of *bias*. Driven by a larger public debate on objectivity in journalism, they came into the classroom with a desire to distinguish the unvarnished truth from what 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 about the past are influenced by the perspective 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.