SUMMARY - CHAPTER 4

The Export Boom as Modernity

In the wake of independence, with the regressive and backwards tendencies from the Latin American past firmly behind them, most of these nations were now ready to take advantage of the continent’s massive caches of natural resources to enter into global trade.

Because of Latin America’s uncommonly rich stock of natural resources, other developed countries began to show interest in building railroads in order to harvest those resources for the global trade market. Furthermore, these railroads facilitated the consolidation of central government control.

The story of the export boom in Latin America can be viewed as either exploitative of local economies or as an optimistic time of economic expansion that exposed the provincial populations of Latin America to the global economy and that therefore thrust them onto the world stage.

Order, Then Progress

The notion of "order and progress" was vital to the functioning of Latin American states, whose elites viewed democracy with suspicion due to their skepticism with regards to the judgment of the masses. Generally, they preferred a strong-armed order that ensured stability. But a stability administered at the national level and in the service of a national project of modernization meant that a central governing authority could dictate the fate of the more marginalized elements of the state.

Many factors contributed to this notion of "order and progress" as the central mediating factor for governance:

1. The culture of repressive politics inherent to colonial regimes
2. The cultural openness of Latin American peoples to authoritarian regimes
3. The desire to restore order to an entire region made volatile by a continent-wide wave of independence conflicts
4. The attracting and retention of foreign capital

Out of a desire to put Latin America on a promising path of modernization, the elites of the region began to adopt enlightened values, such as scientific positivism, to make wholesale changes in the lifestyles and trends of their people, ranging from political changes all the way down to dietary changes.

Technology and the incentives of global economy raised the stakes to maintain order. And with that increased measure of order achieved, there was more foreign investment pumped into the Latin American economy. More order also meant a higher degree of demarcation in the ownership of capital in Latin American societies.

Measuring a Golden Age

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During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and up until the time of the Great Depression, Latin America marked a trend in which its countries used the export of local commodities in the global market to develop and promote national economic growth. Some Latin American economists argued that the export of local commodities in essence replaced one colonial power with another one, as national economies became heavily dependent on the business they did exclusively with one or two nations. However, other economists argue that the economic setup of Latin American countries during the latter decades of the nineteenth century was inevitable, as these countries needed the capital to build, grow, and maintain the infrastructure of a rapidly developing economy.

With the economic productivity generated by the railroad networks, the middle class expanded, and a new industrial working class came to the forefront. And while this new class’ increased purchasing power helped to energize the growth of domestic economies, it did not significantly contribute in reducing the level of poverty and increasing national GDPs.

**Signs of Civilization**

By the early twentieth century, Argentina had become one of the world’s ten richest countries and was attracting European immigrants, thus contributing to its image as an increasingly *civilized* nation. Latin Americans began to record the progress of their societies, mostly modeling this progress on the progress they gleaned from traditionally progressive nations in Europe and also from the US.

Latin Americans often used photography to document this emergent new identity. The photograph, with its ability to freeze-frame a living human being into a set of static conventions of appearance and its complete novelty, succeeded in setting up categories of racial and cultural identity for consumption by the uninitiated. Portrait photography also allowed the sitter to define themselves according to the categories that they chose to fit in. Urban photography was also used to document the emergence of Latin American cities as urban economic centers fit for the world stage. Often, photography was also used as a culturally inscriptive force, working to redefine once backwards elements of society and to integrate them into a narrative of modernity.

**The Document: On the Eve of Revolution**

1. A 1908 interview conducted by American journalist James Creelman with Mexican president Porfirio Díaz: this interview reveals more about the present in which it was conducted than about the future it sought to forecast. Its interest lies in its perspective as a historical document made in 1908, as a snapshot of the seemingly optimistic times of the post-Independence era.