SUMMARY - CHAPTER 5

Signs of Crisis in a Gilded Age

The example of Porfirio Díaz, lauded by some as a man who will be remembered as “hero of the Americas” and hounded by others for his increasingly authoritarian rule, signals the ambiguity that many Latin Americans feel in assessing their past histories.

The figure of José Martí represented the fear that many Latin Americans had about the high price paid for progress; a price that came in the form of increasing influence from outside the continent on the economic and cultural affairs of Latin American life.

Crises in the Countryside

The export boom and the national economies it was supported by spelled only more oppression for the rural population, who often had to fight in the face of industrial expansion into rural regions. These rural peoples could either accept the status quo and work under its conditions, or they could fight back. While fighting back was, for a short-lived time, a useful tool of negotiation, with the increased technological capabilities of the central governing authority violent repression became the norm.

The rural populations began to adopt different tactics to combat the oppression and disrupt the conditions of the status quo: guerilla tactics and sabotage. A representative example of this can be seen in the Mexican Revolution, whose popular image is of the iconic takeover by the peasant armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata of the cosmopolitan Mexico City.

Alongside the general discontent among rural Latin America, an industrial working-class emerged with the industrial growth of Latin American cities. It shared with the rural class in that it aired its grievances vocally and forcefully. But it differed from its rural counterpart in that it had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The industrial workers were, after all, content and proud to be part of the industrial growth of their nation.

With the new-found prosperity of the export boom, this class began to be fed by immigrant populations from outside the continent.

The Documents: Questioning a Golden Age

1. “Our America,” a literary piece by Latin American intellectual José Martí arguing for Cuban independence in the wider context of united Latin America.
2. Emiliano Zapata’s Plan de Ayala, an essay that speaks to the right of peasants to rebel in light of a failing system that exploits and oppresses them.
3. Taken from Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui’s book Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality, this essay gives a Marxist reading of the rural problems in Peru—a reading also grounded in an organic narrative of the Andean people’s historical plights.

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