

SUMMARY - CHAPTER 6

Commerce, Coercion, and America's Empire

In Latin America, the image of the US is often associated with its role as an ill-intentioned meddler in Latin American affairs, or conversely as the provider of commercial goods and financial aid.

While the empires of Old Europe had consolidated their power and exercised domination over their colonial subjects through a system of brutal inequality, the US defined itself as a nation *against* the hegemonic ethos of the empire-forging nations of Europe. However, it may be argued that the US itself has adopted the same hegemonic ethos in its dealings with other nations.

Two military conflicts in particular betrayed something of the US's colonial aspirations in Latin America. The first instance takes place after the defeat of Spain in the Spanish–American War, when the US demanded control in the internal affairs of the Spanish colonies in Latin America. The second instance occurs in Panama, where American president Roosevelt supported a group of conservative landowners in their cause for independence from Colombia, after Colombian president Bogota refused to let the US build a canal in Panama. Eventually, Panamanian independence was won and the Panama Canal was built.

Bananas Are Our Business

The example of the United Fruit Company is also revealing of the US's expansionist and imperialistic tendencies in Latin America. The United Fruit Company (UFCO) handled the business of harvesting bananas, which had become immensely popular in the US, and transporting them from the Caribbean via a company-owned 41-ship fleet to warehouses in the US. Because banana plantations are highly prone to disease, the UFCO required that new lands always be at hand in case plantations were suddenly lost to disease. Workers in this line of work were constantly exposed to malaria and tropical illnesses, and were constantly required to be clearing land. A culture of alcohol abuse, prostitution, and violence emerged around the banana industry run by the UFCO, which was accused of conducting its business in a callous, imperialistic fashion. But the interests of the UFCO coincided with the interests of the Guatemalan government, and this government granted the UFCO a complete monopoly over the country's banana business in exchange for economic prosperity and a certain measure of control in the country's internal affairs. When this measure of control began to grow untenably, Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán passed Plan 900, a law that allowed the government to expropriate unused land from large estates and redistribute it to peasants. The US propaganda machine quickly labeled Arbenz as a communist, stigmatizing him as an enemy to the American way of life. Out of fear that Arbenz' reforms would not only energize the Guatemalan economy and empower the natives but also that his proactive resistance to American economic infiltration would spread to neighboring nations (The Domino Theory), the US government successfully employed a CIA-trained rebel force to push Arbenz out of power. Arbenz, though popular and well-loved as president, did not have the power to face the US.

Cultures of Consumption

The US exercised a powerful but ambivalent influence over its southern neighbors. While its people were regarded as very different from Latin Americans, the image that it projected of itself as an industrial and cultural power was extremely seductive. Moreover the products that were exported from the US to Latin American countries entered into dialogue with regional tastes.

Cartoon Figures

The Brazilian icon, Carmen Miranda, drew on the aesthetic conventions of the *favela* (slum), wearing a fruit-hat to invoke the Brazilian spirit of samba. This image was appropriated by Hollywood as a stand-in for sensuous and nubile Latin American female beauty. Brazilians felt both proud of Miranda's success and betrayed by her selling out to the American entertainment establishment.

When Walt Disney was invited by the US government to go on a goodwill tour of Latin America, the animated cartoons that came out of his experiences on this visit confirmed the stereotypes already held about Latin America in the American psyche. What is interesting is that both US audiences and Latin American audiences enjoyed those cartoons. This is because both audiences walked away with different messages from the films. While the cartoons reinforced the typical stereotypes Americans held, it is also arguable that they invested those stereotypes, the Latin American characters, with autonomy from the visiting US characters, who were foreign in the eyes of the Latin American viewers.

The Documents: Contesting Hegemony

1. Augusto Sandino's manifesto: in the background of local conflicts between liberals and conservatives, Sandino came to see the US as the real fomenter of civil unrest in Nicaragua. He pushed an anti-imperialist agenda that framed the US as a hegemon that had to be combated.
2. *Silent War*: a documentary that suggests the US can use its power to help modernize Latin American societies.
3. *Journey to Banana Land*: a propagandistic film about the positive impact that UFCO had on Guatemalan society.
4. Donald Duck: Ariel Dorfman rereads Donald Duck cartoons as instruments of imperialist propaganda.