

# Resource reviews

## WHY IT'S TIME TO LOOK TO LATIN AMERICA

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Peadar Kirby, in his article 'Latin America: the region that Ireland forgot' bemoans the 'astonishing neglect of the region by the Irish state, by Irish civil society and by the Irish private sector right down to the present day'. 'This disinterest', he said, 'is mirrored throughout education and in the Irish media, further reinforcing the marginalisation of Latin America in the Irish consciousness' (Kirby, 2008). According to Kirby, evidence of this institutional neglect includes Irish Aid directing a 'miserly part of its resources to the region' and the government opening just three embassies south of the Rio Grande compared to programmes in Africa and Asia. A major incentive in addressing these disconnects between Ireland and Latin America, suggests Kirby, is that 'there is arguably no region of the world whose development has so paralleled that of Ireland and from which we have so much to learn'. There has hardly been a better time for bridging that gap given the depth of crisis besieging the Irish economy and the collapse of public trust in the model of development that underpinned the so-called Celtic Tiger. For many development practitioners in Ireland and the global North, Latin America has become a focus of serious analysis and a source of inspiration given its effective experimentation with and implementation of new paradigms of development that reject the failed orthodoxy of the neo-liberal ethos which arguably spawned the global recession in 2008.

Latin America is shedding its role as history's perennial loser. In his book *What if Latin America Ruled the World? How the South will take the North into the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century*, Guardiola-Rivera offers a fascinating, if at times frustrating, reflection on the region's history and contemporary social movements. He speculates on a future 'United States of Latin America' when it is predicted that Latinos will be the largest ethnic group in the United States. This is not a conventional history of the region but rather a challenge of the revisionist version of the origins of globalisation and Latin America's part in that process.

From the book's reflections on pre-Colombian Amerindian societies to its outline of the popular social movements of today there emerges a clear sense

of the value of common ownership and sustainable stewardship of the natural environment. It also questions the accepted wisdom of political theorists and commentators that the purpose of governments is ostensibly to provide security and protection. Drawing upon evidence found in Peru and elsewhere in Latin America, it appears that in their earliest forms, governments in the region operated on the basis of an 'exchange that seems to have arisen from collective and spiritual good, made concrete in society-wide efforts to create and sustain the commons rather than to defend ourselves from others and from one another'.

What really propels the text are historical vignettes employed to contextualise and deepen our understanding of key episodes in the various stages of globalisation. These vignettes often revolve around central figures in each period from both sides of the historical coin: the agents of trade and conquest and those who resisted and envisaged another world. We are thus introduced to the Inca ruler Atahualpa who tried to satiate the Spanish appetite for gold and realised it was bottomless; there was also a look at his nemesis Francisco Pizarro, the 'founder of Lima'.

What emerges from this period of conquest is a definition of societies by commodity: Peru, Mexico and Bolivia were silver; Brazil and Colombia were gold; for Venezuela it was cacao; Chile was identified with copper; and the Caribbean with sugar. Thus 'the story of globalisation was invented in Latin America during the sixteenth century, on the back of the appearance of the "first world money": the silver peso'. As 'rivers of silver' were mined by 'a massive influx and sacrifice of labour', the currency that propelled the global market in commodities, the silver peso, was supplied by Latin America. A staggering 150,000 tons of silver was sourced to 'Spanish America' between 1500 and 1800.

Indigenous labour was quickly consumed by the global trade in commodities which necessitated the 'forced migration of Africans to the New World'. Between the late 15<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries an estimated 12.4 million slaves were transported across the Atlantic to hundreds of delivery points. As the continent's towering military and political leader, Simón Bolívar suggested, Latin America has been left 'in a sort of permanent infancy' deprived even of 'active tyranny because we are prohibited from serving it as functionaries'. While the continent was rich in resources, its people were at best 'simple consumers, clogged with repressive restrictions' and unable to engage in its own commerce, forced to remain as a commodity reserve for European avarice.

Bolívar's successful military struggle for independence and liberation of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela is largely ignored by the author who in this study is more interested in *El Libertador's* political vision as articulated in his *Letter from Jamaica* (1815), described as 'one of most important foundational documents in Latin American history'. In the letter, Bolívar presents his rationale for revolution and a 'call for regional and global unity against all empires, present or still in the future'. The author curiously ignores Bolívar's legacy to the continent, particularly as embraced by Hugo Chávez's Bolívarian revolution and its mission of helping to unite Latin America and create an independent identity free from the hegemony and influence of the empire to the North. In fact, Chávez warrants just three references (and others like Fidel Castro just six) with the author's contemporary gaze fixed more upon recent events in Bolivia and Brazil.

Guardiola-Rivera devotes most of the second-half of the book to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's 'dark night of neo-liberalism' resulting from Washington's direct and in-direct intervention in the continent both in militaristic and economic forms. The United States' (US) Cold War position to Latin America was summed up by Henry Kissinger when he said of Chile after Allende's election in 1970: 'I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people'.

But in the post-Cold War era we have seen a re-awakening of the Bolívarian vision for Latin America that has been robust enough to rebuff a seemingly 'business-as-usual' approach to hemispheric relations from the United States. The book points to the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico and to the struggles against water privatisation in Bolivia in 2000 as examples of new social 'liberationist' movements based on community needs and part of an historical lineage of resistance. These examples underscore the author's view that 'for all the conventional wisdom about "global solutions for global problems", actually where you live is where you take a stand'.

But what of the continent's always problematic relations with Washington? Guardiola-Rivera gives due attention to the thorny issue of the rights of migrants in the US and their struggle for recognition and decriminalisation against the political forces of the right. However, he finds comfort in the growing number of Americans describing themselves as Hispanic; 35.3 million in the 2000 census, a rise of nearly 60 per cent. The author argues that the 'steady rise in the Latino population, coupled with a slow

but steady increase in the Latino vote, will have dramatic consequences for the political future of America’.

The question though is whether a projected Latino majority in the US by 2040 is likely to be translated into an improvement in living conditions and access to political decision-making. The author argues that more Latino members of the Democrats will radicalise the party and strengthen the call for more socialised housing, healthcare and education. However, one is bound to speculate if African-Americans have become more empowered and feel less politically marginalised under Barack Obama. Would a Latino president or more Latino votes bring the kind of political and economic change needed to reach what remains a largely marginalised social group? Given the big claims made for a ‘Latino States of America’, these questions need to be more thoroughly considered.

The author is right, however, to point to the impact of globalisation on Latin America in the last century when it was the experiment laboratory of the neo-liberal programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Many of the leading economies in Latin America have consequently rejected neo-liberalism and are faring better than the global North in the current recession. The rest of the world needs to heed the warnings from Latin America about curbing international capital and rejecting the dogmas of the free market. The rejection of the old economic order has enabled many Latin American countries to take charge of their own destinies and resources and chart their own course for development. This is a timely message which the world, and particularly Ireland, should take note.

Guardiola-Rivera has offered us a very accessible, reflective, challenging and encouraging text which performs an important service in challenging stereotypes originating in the global North on the true nature and capacity of Latin America’s pre-Colombian origins and the continent’s role in the history of globalisation. However, while not short in ambition, the book’s structure is too loose and its content too uneven to represent a completely convincing and holistic story of the region’s economic development. The role of the church as an abetter of colonialism is largely absent here together with an examination of gender and the impact of globalisation on women in particular. The contemporary picture outside Bolivia and Brazil is largely ignored, most especially the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the revolution in Cuba now in its sixth decade.

The book is a series of light snacks rather than an appetising meal and is not likely to get a reader from one side of an exam to another, or to textually lead a course. However, it is warmly recommended to those who want to locate contemporary change in Latin America in an historical context and to open their minds to a vital continent still largely ignored in mainstream Irish society.

While Hugo Chávez is very much on the margins of *What if Latin America Ruled the World?*, he is centre stage in Oliver Stone's documentary *South of the Border*. This is Agitprop film-making designed to counter the brazen, irresponsible and highly damaging coverage of Latin America by networks like Fox and CNN which have undisguised conservative agendas and interests. Stone's film begins with examples of reportage from both networks that resort to the personal and ludicrous to question Chávez's fitness for office. These attacks point to concerns in Washington at the emerging influence of Chávez as the hub of a new progressive, leftist hegemony in the continent that refuses to bend to Washington's influence. Evidence of this new hegemony is found in ALBA (*Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas*), a socially-oriented trading block alternative to the US-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Another new structure, Banco del Sur (Bank of the South) is a monetary fund and lending institution that aims to challenge the insidious influence of the IMF and World Bank, the architects of Third World debt.

Stone's film does not explore the ideological underpinnings of Bolívarianism or the history of Washington's engagement with the region in any depth.. His movie settles into a succession of interviews with the leaders of the seven countries most associated with the Bolívarian project - Bolivia's Evo Morales; Argentina's Cristina Kirchner (along with her late husband, former president Néstor Kirchner); Brazil's former President Lula da Silva; Cuba's Raúl Castro; Ecuador's Rafael Correa; and Paraguay's Fernando Lugo. Stone's questioning is light and his analysis shallow although some weightier observations are made by the film's co-writer Tariq Ali who appears as a witness. But the overall tone eschews the more methodical interrogating style of, say, John Pilger and aims for a more casual and often highly engaging form of conversation.

If the teacher or learner is looking for a resource that will provide a rounded history of the US' involvement in Latin America, then seek out Pilger's excellent *The War on Democracy*, his 2007 award-winning documentary; or Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) based on her book of the same title. However, one suspects that Stone's less studied, off-hand approach filled with

engaging personal cameos of heads of state may find a larger audience than the works of Pilger and Klein.

The movie was made during the transition between the Bush and Obama administrations so it does not present any views on how US-Latin America relations have changed under the latter. However, ex-President Lula ends the film by suggesting that Obama should do three things upon taking office: end the US blockade of Cuba; invite President Chávez to the White House; and work toward peace in the Middle East. On the basis of these criteria, Obama's presidency has thus far been a disappointment and very much in tandem with the positions of previous administrations to the region.

## References

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