
EDITOR'S FOREWORD

As the Columbian Quincentenary approaches, it becomes increasingly clear that we again stand on the threshold of discovery. Before us lies a new world—new not in geography but in conceptual terms. The assumptions that shaped past views of the Western Hemisphere in particular and the world order in general have been discredited by emerging realities. Similarly, the preoccupations that dominated intellectual discourse for most of this century have lost relevance. The end of the century brings with it the challenge of discovery, or more precisely, of rediscovery of a world now known to differ from the images that have long shaped our perceptions.

The international press emphasizes certain elements of the new world situation: the loss of faith in the ideologies and institutions governing the socialist bloc nations; the moves toward East-West disengagement, disarmament, and de-emphasis of regional conflict; the growing economic, technological, and financial dominance of Japan; intractable imbalances in trade and currency markets; the rise of an international threat to the legal order from narcotics trafficking.

Additional elements mark the Latin American context, such as the continent-wide economic depression resulting from the failure of the lending countries to reduce the crushing burden of Latin American debt, the threat to national institutions posed by guerrilla and criminal organizations down the Andean spine of South America, and the surprising vitality of Latin America's supposedly "fragile" democracies, which seem to be surviving under the least auspicious conditions imaginable.

At the level of national societies, the paradoxes of change become even more apparent. Recent developments in Latin America would have been inconceivable one or two decades ago. Who could have predicted that General Pinochet's hand-tailored constitution would become the

instrument of his ouster? That a Peronist government would borrow its economic policy from the great Bunge y Born trading firm? That the party that led the Bolivian Revolution would embrace neoliberal policies? That Cuba would be one of the last defenders of communist orthodoxy? That the dictator of Panama would defy the President of the United States with impunity? That the Mexican government would sell the national telephone company?

Processes of social change have been equally iconoclastic. Who would have expected that clean-air and ecology movements would sweep the Hemisphere? That feminism would become respectable? That birth rates would fall? That Protestantism would proliferate? That foreign investment would be welcomed? That Latin Americans would start moving out of their great urban complexes?

Even if things in Latin America are not as they seem now, they certainly are not what they always seemed to be in the past. A sense of change is in the air. The old verities cease to predict and the old jokes cease to amuse. Whether the new consciousness reflects changes at the ideological level, a restructuring of the institutional order, or a more profound but poorly understood shift in the underlying structure of society, the implications for rethinking the significance of Latin America's past, and hence for reinterpreting the present, are nonetheless far-reaching.

"New thinking" and perestroika are as pertinent to the Western Hemisphere as to Eastern Europe. But Gorbachev aside, leaders whose judgment is constrained by occupying high offices of great responsibility are seldom the first to grasp new realities. Academic researchers, however, bear no burdens of state and respond to fewer interests. We thus may expect to find future Columbuses, Balboas, or Hudsons emerging from the scholarly ranks to lead the conceptual exploration of the New World that is emerging. The research that such scholars publish in *LARR* can serve as modern "Chronicles of the Indies," laying new wonders before the court of academic opinion, and eventually, perhaps, helping to reshape again the mental image of the modern world.

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