

PROLOGUE TO THE  
FIRST EDITION



TO WRITE A HISTORY of independent Latin America is problematical indeed. The contrasts of the land itself and the motley variety of Latin American experiences are among the first impressions of outside observers. With understandable caution, Lucien Febvre chose a plural form in his title of the *Annales* volume dedicated to Latin America, *À travers les Amériques latines*. Are there, then, as many different histories of Latin America as there are independent republics? Such a solution has the charm of simplicity, and one finds a score of parallel histories neatly arrayed in many textbooks. However, none of the twenty independent nations provide a unified object of study, as Leslie Byrd Simpson indicated in his synthesis of decades of sagacious research, *Many Mexicos*. From pre-Columbian empires to twentieth-century revolution, multiplicitous Mexicos emerge in the course of time, but owing to the tortured geography of the country, many Mexicos have also always existed simultaneously in the tropical coast, the northern desert, and the central highlands. Similar regional contrasts impose a plural history even on much smaller countries such as Ecuador and Guatemala.

Another obstacle to the creation of a unified history of Latin America lies in the way most scholars have approached the past. Traditional historians have lost themselves in accounts of presidential administrations, partisan politics, and wars. Geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists have emphasized continuities that span centuries of the Latin American past, and Fernand Braudel has shown that history can be the study of continuity as well as change. Such approaches often have created a simple dichotomy between enduring structures and the ephemeral events, be they colorful anecdotes or patriotic narratives, that have absorbed the energies of so many historians. There exists an important middle ground, however, between the clutter of anecdotal narrative and the apparent rigidity of unchanging

structures. This is the realm of historical process—coherent, gradual social and economic change—a more problematic historical dimension than either of the other two. Only at the level of social process can a unified interpretation give due attention to enduring patterns without abandoning the problem of historical change.

In the history of modern Latin America, the themes of unity and transformation converge in the region's incorporation into an international economic system with its center in Europe. We will begin with the end of Latin America's original colonial compact with the crowns of Spain and Portugal and follow the process of transformation brought by a new compact with burgeoning industrial powers like Great Britain in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, we will observe how this arrangement, too, enters a period of protracted crisis, a search for a new equilibrium in the relationship between Latin America and the international system. As we will see, the tensions of the mid-twentieth century reveal the failure of that search.

In order to provide a coherent picture of this complex process, the field of view must necessarily be carefully limited. No attempt is made here to provide a total history of contemporary Latin America. The reader will not find a profusion of red-letter dates, vignettes on the lives of famous persons, or synoptic treatments of literary and ideological trends. Nor are these the only omissions to which the author has resigned himself. Nevertheless, this *Contemporary History* will not be without some value if it provides historical perspective on the problems of Latin America today—cruel dilemmas that have escaped effective solutions for centuries and that now suddenly attract the alarmed attention of the world.

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Buenos Aires, 1966