Visions and Reality of a Common Culture

José C. Moya

This is a book that fully delivers on its title. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, a professor of history at the University of Chicago, provides a history of the idea of Latin America, rather than of the place itself, and he does so with plenty of wit and brio.

He locates the genesis of the idea in the writings of South American intellectuals in the early 1850s, particularly the Chilean Francisco Bilbao, a Freemason and liberal republican who spent most of his adult life in exile in Peru, France, and Argentina. In an 1856 speech to fellow Spanish American expatriates in Paris, Bilbao denounced "Yankee" aggression in Mexico and Central America, which he compared to the expansionism of Russian Pan-Slavism. He then called for unity in the defense of the "Latin race," which, in contrast to the "Anglo-Saxon" one, preferred "the social over the individual, beauty over wealth, justice over power, art over commerce, poetry over industry . . . absolute spirit over calculations, duty over interest." Tenorio-Trillo labels these dualities the "Bilbao Law" and maintains that they would serve as some of the most enduring components in the idea of Latin America.

Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea
by Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo
University of Chicago Press, 2017

The next influential promotion of the "idea" emanated from France and reached a peak during that country's intervention in Mexico (1861–67). This version was monarchical and conservative, in contrast to the liberal republicanism of Bilbao's vision. Indeed, some of its proponents also supported the Confederacy during the US Civil War. It drew more from Old World notions of a clash of civilizations between the Latin and Germanic peoples, Catholics and Protestants, Mediterranean and Northern Europe. But it shared the view of the United States as soulless, materialistic, uncouth, and aggressive—the opposite of, and a threat to, *latinité*. In this version, however, France would act as the core and the imperial savior of a transatlantic Latin civilization.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Latin American idea had lost its French connotation as *latinité* gave way to *hispanidad*, a defense and affirmation of the Hispano-Creole "essence" of the region. For much of the nineteenth century, most liberals in Latin America had viewed the Spanish colonial legacy as the source of all the supposed ills (authoritarianism, obscurantism, backwardness) that afflicted the region. However, the end of Spain's colonialism in the Americas and an upsurge of US imperialism during and after the Spanish-American War saw a concomitant decline of Hispanophobia and rise of Yankeephobia among the region's intelligentsia, which coincided with a partial ideological shift within that group from positivism to neoromantic notions of peoplehood. Some of the same traits that liberals had identified as Hispanic vices were rehabilitated as Hispanic virtues: authoritarianism morphed into a sense of noblesse oblige and social order, obscurantism into spirituality, backwardness into tradition—and all were set in opposition to the individualist, materialist, nouveau riche North.

Manichean opposites

According to Tenorio-Trillo, the post–World War II period witnessed similar continuities despite apparent disruptions. During the 1950s heyday of modernization theory, economists and political scientists, based mainly in the United States, articulated an idea of Latin America resembling that of nineteenth-century liberals: a region burdened by semi-feudal economies, dictatorships, and social traditionalism that needed to become more capitalist (though in a Keynesian manner), democratic, and modern—in other words, more like the United States.

In the next decades the Cuban Revolution, dependency theory, and liberation theology forged a

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seemingly opposite idea of Latin America as anti-imperialist (that is, anti-Yankee), revolutionary, a force of redemptive violence, and a spearhead of Third World (or third-way) socialism. The idealistic euphoria lured many Brazilians into thinking of themselves as Latin Americans for the first time. But the end of the Cold War, the ruin of the Soviet-subsidized Cuban model, the exhaustion of the welfare state, the global spread of neoliberalism, the diminishing importance of the United States in Latin America, and the almost universal spread of democracy, with all its inherent warts, undermined that "idea" of the region. Indeed, to some it seems to have waned into little more than generational nostalgia and Che Guevara T-shirts.

Tenorio-Trillo, however, identifies another turn of the cycle, with the "idea" reappearing like old wine in new bottles, this time within US academia. Over the past three decades, Latin American studies, a field increasingly occupied by the poststructuralist humanities rather than economics and political science, has attempted to find a progressive ethno-cultural replacement for the faded, class-based revolutionary idea of Latin America. The new "idea" has retained the Marxist version's Manichean dichotomy between masses and elites, but has translated the definition into cultural concepts drawn from US identity politics. Indigenous people and racial and gender groups have now replaced the proletariat as the protagonists of the struggle and as the embodiment of the "real" Latin America; the supposedly Westernized urban middle classes substitute for oligarchs and generals in the role of the "inauthentic" elites.

The new "idea" has retained the anti-capitalism of the old, with "neoliberalism" becoming an all-purpose bête noire. It has also maintained the anti-Yankee rhetoric, while adding a condemnation of "Western modernity" that accentuates the characterization of Latin America as a non- or even anti-West and as somehow unmodern or "alternatively" so—ironically, at time when Latin America has become the most urbanized region in the world. The new version has kept the Marxist disdain for liberal democracy but has also exalted populist movements and regimes with indigenous discourses—such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the governments of Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correas in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

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Connecting threads

Tenorio-Trillo detects a continuous and troubling thread running through all these seemingly different and even antithetical ideas of Latin America. They are all essentialist and ahistorical insofar as they describe a diverse and changing region and people as a homogeneous and permanent entity. As commendation or condemnation, they all define Latin America and Latin Americans as unmodern: illiberal, authentic rather than complex, sensual rather than rational, utopian rather than practical, communal instead of individualist. He concludes, albeit in the first sentence of the book, that although we are stuck with the term, "Latin America" is a fuzzy racial concept that "ought to have vanished with the obsolescence of racial theory."

This assertion is both valid and in need of comparative perspective. Race is a term that can refer to a group of people who share common cultural, and thus malleable, features or to a group of people who share common biological, and thus permanent, traits. Despite the informal racialization of Latinos in the United States (officially Latinos are not a race), Latin America/n is actually a particularly unracial notion in the second sense of the term. This is true compared with other continental ideas such as Europe, Africa, and Asia, which represented the traditional triad of global racial "science" (Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid), had a vernacular version (the white, black, and yellow races), and led to North American hyphenated efforts to transcend racial taxonomies (Euro-, African-, and Asian-Americans).

As Tenorio-Trillo himself shows, "Latin America" was consistently conceived as multiracial and/or mestizo, in contrast with other group ideologies he discusses, such as Pan-Slavism, Pan-Germanism, and Catalan nationalism, which exhibited a stronger assertion of an undiluted common ancestry. Tellingly, all Latin American countries grant citizenship as a birthright (*jus soli*, or the right of the soil, as in the United States), meaning that one can become part of the polity regardless of one's origins, while the vast majority of countries outside the Americas grant citizenship based on ancestry or "blood" (*jus sanguinis*).

As for the imprecision of the term "Latin America," that is inherently true of any rubric or

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category, whether it refers to human groups or inanimate objects. Such terms elide internal diversity and complexity because that is precisely their function, to serve as cognitive shortcuts that allow us to grasp what is otherwise incomprehensible: the infinity of variation. And yet, as continental labels go, what is striking about "Latin America" is not its vagueness or vacuity but its relative meaningfulness. For all its internal disparities, Latin America may well be the most homogeneous multinational region in the world by just about any standard.

Economically, it is true that the region's richest countries (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Panama) are five times wealthier than its poorest ones (Honduras, Nicaragua). But that pales by comparison with just about everywhere else. The GDP per capita of the richest country in Southeast Asia is 25 times higher than that of the poorest one. The equivalent ratio in the Middle East is 52; in sub-Saharan Africa, 76; and in supposedly more balanced Europe, the wealthiest country is a whopping 101 times richer than the poorest. Linguistically, there are fewer major languages (those with half a million or more speakers) in all of Latin America (9) than in many a single country such as the Philippines (15) or the Democratic Republic of Congo (24) or even part of a country, like the Indonesian island of Borneo (14), not to speak of continents.

Latin America shares a series of features that impart meaning to the name and that distinguish the region from the rest of the world. One is its condition as a "New World": two-thirds of the population descends from people who arrived after 1500, compared with four percent outside of the Americas and Australasia. Other features include a common and synchronous history of transformative Iberian colonization, independence movements, nation-state formation, integration into the global economy, economic developmentalism, neoliberalism, populist regimes, dictatorial ones, liberal democracies, monopolistic Catholicism, and evangelical Christianity.

Latin American countries share similar legal systems and legalistic cultures, urban planning, public and domestic architecture, naming patterns, and certain foods. Specific musical genres have become pan-Latin favorites, such as Carlos Gardel's tangos, Mexican rancheras, Cuban boleros, and, most recently, reggaeton—which has Panamanian and Puerto Rican origins and is disseminated mainly through Miami. As Tenorio-Trillo acknowledges, the diffusion of US-based Latino commercial culture has turned Latin American identity into a massive phenomenon.

Latin America as an idea does have a troubling history. It is ironic that the most multiracial population in the world, with Amerindian, African, European, and Asian roots, is named after an extinct tribe in central Italy. But then again, America itself is named after an obscure Italian sailor. Ibero-America would have made a more accurate name than Latin America. Whatever the term, the socio-spatial entity it designates has more in common than any other large transnational space. ■

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