

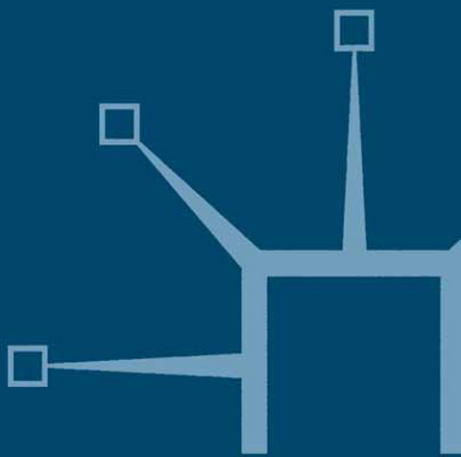
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# Latin America between Colony and Nation

Selected Essays

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John Lynch



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*Institute of Latin American Studies*

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## Selected Essays

John Lynch

*Emeritus Professor of Latin American History  
University of London*



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# Preface

The essays published here focus mainly on the late colonial and early national periods of Latin American history, a time of transition when colony yielded slowly to nation and the nation retained much of the colony. The years between 1750 and 1850 have long appealed to me as a useful chronological framework, either to incorporate the traditional sequence of the origins, course and consequences of Independence or to accommodate significant features of imperial history, state formation and religious policy during the age of democratic revolution. Beyond these confines the book opens and closes with examples of subjection and response in the American world. An early chapter looks again at the subject of conquest and conquerors, in a search for answers to the perennial question, how did so few overcome so many? And the book ends with an essay on the concept of popular religion and its manifestation in millenarian cults.

The essays have their origins in those moments and motives common to the experience of most historians: occasional lectures, conference papers, articles in journals, chapters in composite works and portions of books waiting to be written. The initiative to assemble them in book form came from others. I am grateful to James Dunkerley for his timely invitation to publish them in the series edited by the Institute of Latin American Studies in association with Macmillan, and to John Maher and Melanie Jones, who have skilfully seen the book through its various editorial stages. I am indebted also to Gonzalo Pontón and Carmen Esteban of Editorial Crítica, who have expertly organised the publication of the Spanish edition.

# 1

## Passage to America

A desire for novelty, a moral concern or mere chance? The foreign historian of Latin America is often asked the question: Why do you study Latin American history? What made you become a Latin Americanist? The questions contain hidden assumptions. Why study the exotic, the remote, or even – in the minds of some – the less important? There is a lurking belief that Latin American history lacks the intellectual content of European history, that it is more important to know what was being decided in the courts of the Enlightenment than what was happening on the banks of the Orinoco.

I have long shared the conviction of the young Arnold Toynbee who, when asked why he spent his time in Oxford teaching the history of Greece and Rome, replied, 'My job in teaching history is to make people know a different life and civilisation from ours, from the bottom and with different openings for good.'<sup>1</sup> Latin America was unknown territory to me, and I began to study this other life and civilisation out of ignorance and curiosity. It was enough that Latin Americans had a different history to ours and that it could be discovered. Who were the people of Latin America? What public policies had first ruled their lives? How had they reacted to imperial control? When did they gain their independence? How did they identify their nations and organise their states? Historians in the United States had already begun to explore the archives of the subcontinent and they had also introduced the researches of Latin America's own scholars to a wider world. In Britain too there was a thin line of interest going back to Sir Clements Markham, Cunninghame Graham and F.A. Kirkpatrick. But it was a minority interest, and the obvious questions which students asked of the British and North American past were still waiting to be asked of Latin America. The same could be said, of course, for Africa and Asia, though in these

cases knowledge filtered through to the British consciousness by way of the imperial connection. Latin America, on the other hand, was the British blind spot, the last frontier for the historian. The lure lay in the mystery.

The history departments of British universities in those years, around 1950, taught the history of America, but this meant North America, and courses on the expansion of Europe tended not to venture too far into the interior of other continents. Yet the history I learnt at the University of Edinburgh was an apt preparation for my subsequent studies in that it was based on high standards of historical literature. I graduated with a knowledge of medieval history, modern British history, modern Europe and political ideas; and the Scottish system of subsidiary subjects enabled me to add philosophy and political economy. Already in the school classroom my young Jesuit teachers, James O'Higgins and Deryck Hanshell, had introduced me to historians and scholars – Namier, Feiling, Butterfield, Leavis – whose influence remained pervasive and whose methods were applicable to wider fields than their authors perhaps envisaged. At university a number of historians made a lasting impression. My favourite medievalists were J.E.A. Jolliffe, whose *Constitutional History of Medieval England* would challenge any reader to find a meaning among its rare scholarship and refined prose, and G. Mollat, whose *Les Papes D'Avignon* proved that there was life in French historians before *Annales*. Modern British history already generated a large and growing bibliography, but for me the star was G.M. Young, and I regarded his *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* as a peak of historical writing and a model to be envied by all students of history who sought to unite style and learning. In economic history I became an admirer of John U. Nef, whose *War and Human Progress* remained an object lesson in bringing together research and generalisation and in building bridges between the past and the present.

The standards of scholarship and style among British and American historians of the mid-twentieth century were enduring influences and valuable points of contrast with the works on Latin America which I was now beginning to read. I was struck by a number of differences. The Latin Americanists were inferior not so much in quality of scholarship as in idiom and argument. This was not a field which had been cultivated by generations of historians who had acquired a corporate identity and a tradition of judgement and style. There was, too, an imbalance of interest and achievement: the historiography of colonial Latin America was superior to that of the modern period. Indeed for Spanish historians 'Historia de América' meant *only* colonial history. I found, moreover,

that Latin American historians were reluctant to study the history of countries other than their own: a Mexican rarely wrote on Venezuela, or a Chilean on Argentina. And few, if any, wrote general histories of the whole continent. Outsiders did not observe these rules: North Americans and a few Europeans boldly thrust their way where native Latin Americans hesitated to tread.

My own entry to the subject was through the colonial period and was self-directed. Could a world empire be unworthy of study or resistant to research? A young member of the History Department, Donald Nicholl, drew my attention to C.H. Haring's *The Spanish Empire in America*, equal in scholarship to anything I had read in other fields and an excellent guide to the work of Spain in America. Haring soon pointed me towards Lewis Hanke, Hanke towards Charles Boxer and John Parry, and I was on my way. So a young Latin Americanist was not lost in Edinburgh in 1952. Books and counsel were at hand. The next advice I received was decisive.

The head of the History Department was Richard Pares, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished historians, admired by his students not only for the brilliance of his lectures but also for his spirit and his courage. His formidable books on the Anglo-Spanish colonial wars and other aspects of West Indian history were stepping stones for me, as was his sympathy for my plans. When I explained to him my interest in Latin American history, desire to embark on research, and hope of an academic career, he gave me three pieces of advice. First, be prepared for adversity: there are about 40 applicants, most of them equally qualified for every job advertised in history. 'However,' he added, 'if you are not prepared to take risks for what you want to achieve, life is not worth living.' Second, begin your research by going through the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, which will give you an idea of the field. You will find it in the National Library of Scotland. Finally, it is always advisable to seek out the most appropriate supervisor for your particular subject. For Latin American history this is Professor R.A. Humphreys at University College London. 'Don't worry, I think he will accept you. He is my brother-in-law.' After finals I resumed my reading in Spanish colonial history and prepared to go to London.

Robin Humphreys held the first, and at that time the only, chair of Latin American history in the United Kingdom, in a college whose founders had been closely concerned with the foundation of modern Latin America, and in a History Department which was distinguished not only for its quality but also for its initiative in promoting specialist subjects and areas.<sup>2</sup> A long way from Latin America, I felt I was at the

centre of things in discipline and resources, and the departmental culture was such that even Latin America appeared normal. Robin Humphreys was exceptional not only as a historian of Latin America and a modern pioneer in the subject since the 1930s, but also as a supervisor of students and director of theses. At a time when supervision of PhD students in British universities was perfunctory, to say the least, he gave time and care to his students beyond the call of duty. He held a regular seminar in Latin American history, in which visiting scholars gave papers, students read their chapters and research essays, and future teachers of the subject learnt their trade. He insisted on regular writing of papers and reports, which he carefully read and annotated and returned to the student in individual session.

All this in the early 1950s. And in my case he encouraged me to attend Professor Gerald Graham's seminar in British imperial history, and the seminar on historical method given by Professor J.G. (later Sir Goronwy) Edwards, then the Director of the Institute of Historical Research. From the latter I have always remembered the session, 'How to write a PhD thesis', which included the tactical advice:

'Do not begin your thesis (or article, or book) with a provocative or radical announcement, for readers are going to examine every page from then onwards to see if you justify your claim, and in the process they will discover all the defects of your work. Instead, begin modestly; readers will not be alerted along the way, and when you slip in your novel conclusion at the end they will say, yes, that's right, the author has proved his point.'

The research training I received in London, particularly the professional approach of Robin Humphreys, remained an inspiration and a model. These years included an amusing encounter with one of the elite. Students in the Institute of Historical Research could use an area for typing just outside the offices of the history of Parliament, and Sir Lewis Namier passed me most days when I was typing up my thesis, without giving any sign. Eventually he stopped and asked what I was working on and I explained that it was a thesis on the viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata in the late eighteenth century. 'Have you come across any of my chaps?' Assuming that he meant British MPs with trading interests in South America, I had to admit that I had not encountered any. 'In that case', he replied, 'we have nothing in common.'

I owed my subject to the advice of Professor Humphreys, who suggested that I should work not on the early colonial period, in which I

had begun my reading, but on the late eighteenth century, in particular the period of Bourbon reforms in America. He explained his reasons as the convenience of focusing on an understudied period and of situating my research at the point where colonial inertia was succeeded by colonial reform, and where imperial control began to give way to national independence. This could be usefully studied in the case of a region which had been previously marginal to Spanish imperial interests and which for the same reason had received little attention from modern historians; in the national period, moreover, it would become one of the major countries of Latin America. These were persuasive arguments. So I began to study the new method of government and political economy in the Río de la Plata: the intendant system. The subject provided me with the opportunity to work in the Archivo Histórico Nacional and the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and above all in the Archivo de Indias in Seville. To speak of Seville in that time is to speak of a world – and an archive – very different from those of today, but this is not the occasion for a sentimental journey. Nevertheless, I cannot mention Seville of 1953 without recalling the kind reception given to me by Don Antonio Muro, subdirector of the Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, and the welcome afforded to an unknown student by Dr de la Peña y de la Cámara, director of the Archivo de Indias. These personal touches meant a lot to a foreign student, the more so as American studies in Seville had not then attained the development characteristic of subsequent decades, and vacant seats in the archive were easier to obtain than they are now. Nevertheless, progress was beginning, and the works of Guillermo Céspedes and Octavio Gil Munilla were indispensable to my own researches.

My stay in Seville, inside and outside the Archivo de Indias, compensated to some degree for the impossibility of consulting the Argentine archives, at least for that project. Thanks to the abundant documentation of the Archivo de Indias it was possible to observe the intendants in action, their economic, municipal and Indian policies, their relations with existing institutions, their place in the impending revolution for independence, and to estimate their importance not only in terms of official intentions but also in the light of practical results. The study situated the intendants within the imperial structure of Spain and in the context of the so-called Bourbon reforms. Institutional history, as a genre, was subsequently disparaged, while economic and social history became more fashionable among younger historians, who forgot perhaps that the creation of institutions is natural to men and women and an aspect of their life in society. But the subject has recovered some of its

credibility in recent years, fed by the growing interest in the state and in power and its bases. Now it is called the study of the *estado colonial*, the 'colonial state', a more exciting nomenclature for the 1990s than the traditional 'institutional history', even though in many parts of Spanish America the colonial state consisted of little more than a local official and a couple of militia men.

The crucial test of a thesis or a book written by a foreigner is its reception in the country studied. When my book on the intendancies in the Río de la Plata was taken seriously in Argentina and reviewed by a leading historian there, this was a mighty relief. My first visit to Argentina coincided with the publication of the Spanish version of the book in Buenos Aires and my election as a Corresponding Member of the Academia Nacional de la Historia; so I spent my first days in Buenos Aires not in the precincts of the Plaza de Mayo or the Calle Florida, but enclosed in my hotel room, writing a lecture for the act of entry to the Academy. Shortly after this, I had an opportunity to meet Jorge Luis Borges as he was giving a tutorial in the Biblioteca Nacional. He was intrigued by the idea of a historian coming from London to study the colonial history of Argentina while in Buenos Aires he was teaching students Anglo-Saxon.

A book can originate not only in pure research but also in routine teaching. After completing my PhD degree I secured an appointment in the University of Liverpool, where my teaching in the History Department was that of a general practitioner, not an Americanist. But, again, it was a relevant apprenticeship. A specialist in Latin American history can learn from the study of other histories, not only of the problems exercising his colleagues – at that time typically in the history of ideas and in social and economic history – but also in the development of new methods and new areas of research. Preparation of courses against the clock concentrates the mind, and I was forced to broaden my reading in the fields of British and European history, and at the same time to mine the rich seams opened by Braudel and Chaunu. Moreover, through the presence of a series of assistants in the Spanish Department, all from the University of Barcelona, my lodgings became a kind of Catalan colony. From these, especially from Josep Fontana, I learnt of a new wave of historical research in Spain, influenced by the French *Annales* school and inspired by the leadership of Jaime Vicens Vives, whose *Aproximación a la historia de España* became in turn an inspiration to me. This was the germ of my interest in Spanish history, which eventually bore fruit in books on Spain under the Habsburgs and later on Bourbon Spain.

One of the objectives of these books was to relate the history of Spain to that of Spanish America, a relationship inherent in Spanish policy and Spanish American experience but not adequately reflected in existing historiography, at least for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Richard Pares has written, 'The most important thing in the history of an empire is the history of its mother-country. Colonial history is made at home: given a free hand, the mother-country will make the kind of empire it needs.'<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Spanish empire, however, the moving force was the interaction between the metropolis and its colonies, and the key to understanding was the response of colonial peoples to imperial policy; there, among other things, the historian will discover the trends of social and racial relations, the reasons for colonial rebellion and the germs of future independence. The second Habsburg volume questioned the existence of an economic depression in seventeenth-century America and introduced the concept of colonial autonomy, ideas that were not the last word on the subject, but entered the field as hypotheses and speculations and remained part of the unfinished debate on crisis and change in the Hispanic world. I wrote the book on Spain in the seventeenth century without once using the word 'decline', much less the concept of *decadencia*, which is rather like writing a history of France in 1789 without mentioning the word 'revolution'. What began as a resolve to avoid received interpretations, and to invoke instead stages of economic recession, became a matter of pride and I lived in the hope that readers would draw attention to this curiosity. Alas, no one did, until 25 years later it was spotted by an observant reviewer of a subsequent edition.

My interest in the Independence of Spanish America arose partly from my previous research into the disintegrating effects of Bourbon reforms and the deeper roots of Independence in the colonial period. But it also derived from experience gained in teaching the subject. By now, at the invitation of Robin Humphreys, I had joined the History Department at University College London and there, from 1961, I shared with him the teaching of Latin American history to undergraduate and postgraduate students. One of our courses, offered in the London history syllabus as a special subject, was 'The Emancipation of Latin America, 1808–1826', studied by means of select documents and available monographs. It was a time when the historiography of the subject was expanding and improving; no longer concerned exclusively with the liberators and their military campaigns – though the singular actions and ideas of Simón Bolívar rightly continued to impress historians – it spoke now of population trends, social and racial structures, the economic life of



the area and other themes of interest to students in the 1960s. When Professor Jack P. Greene asked me to write *The Spanish American Revolutions* for his series 'Revolutions in the Modern World', he handed me a gift for the times. My approach to the subject benefited not only from the new historiography but also from the interest of my students. Throughout the decade I had heard their questions, learnt their priorities and noted their assessment of the existing literature; the course, and the book, sought to respond to these concerns. For me the experience was a happy combination of teaching and research.

The study of the Spanish American revolutions led me to cultivate the caudillos, the regional leaders who first raised their heads during the Wars of Independence. The phenomenon of caudillism presents the historian with one of the enduring problems of Latin America, the origins and meaning of dictatorship, and invites the scholar to identify the various modes of leadership since Independence and the successive stages of their development. A basic object of my research into Juan Manuel de Rosas, described by W.H. Hudson as 'one of the bloodiest as well as the most original-minded of the Caudillos and Dictators', was to clarify the meaning of authority and the nature of the dictator's power. In Argentina reviewers and others called attention to the special treatment which the book accorded to the function of terror in the Rosas regime and I was asked if, working on Rosas during the years of an infamous military dictatorship, I was influenced in my research on the past by observation of the present. It is true that I researched and wrote the chapter on *rosista* terror during the years 1977 and 1978, a time when the use of state terror as an instrument of government was more evident than in previous periods of Argentine history. I believe one learns from these experiences, if indirectly, and that in turn consciousness of past history enriches knowledge of the present. But it is only part of the story.

The Rosas terror, as seen by the dictator himself, responded to two dangers: the threat of external attack and internal dissent, a conjuncture and a pretext that were not so evident in the 1970s as they had been in the 1840s. Another influence on my interpretation was the example of the French Revolution, where the use of terror also corresponded to the relation between external threat to the revolutionary state and the internal threat posed by enemies of the regime. The French case was useful as a point of comparison and reflection. Nevertheless *rosista* terrorism seemed to be a special case which could only be explained in its own terms and by the mentality of its author, and underlined the element of singularity in Latin American history.

The study of Rosas led me into research on the comparative history of caudillos in Spanish America in the first half of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to identify these rulers, seek their origins, establish their character and roles and explain the differences between them. And the study of caudillism directed my attention towards Venezuela, a country generous in its reception of foreign scholars, whose history together with that of Argentina became one of the two poles of my research interests. For me the political theory of dictatorship in Latin America, if it had one, would conform closely to that of Thomas Hobbes, who conceived his *Leviathan* as a study of human nature rather than of contemporary events and expounded principles rather than politics. 'During the time that men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man against every man.' Assertion of individual or group rights becomes anarchy, and this reaches a point where no man or his property is secure from the attacks of enemies. The only way to defend themselves from the injuries of one another and the invasion of outsiders is to give up their rights of government and to confer all their power upon one man. 'For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he has the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad.'<sup>4</sup> These ideas were pointers to an interpretation of the government of Rosas, its absolutism, and its ultimate sanction of terror. And in examining the origins and development of caudillism in Spanish America, and the social forces that sustained it, the ideas of Thomas Hobbes seemed to me to be more relevant as an explanatory device than those of more recent times.

In an age of postmodernism it is not superfluous to affirm that history is a process of discovery, that truth is a matter to be ascertained, not invented, discovered rather than constructed, observed as well as imagined. In the last decades of the twentieth century historical method and content underwent profound changes, which also affected Latin Americanists. As techniques of measurement improved and new areas of study were incorporated, as demographic, economic, urban, Indian, family and women's history increased our understanding of the past, those of us brought up in traditional narrative and conventional themes could only stand and acclaim the skills and virtuosity of our colleagues as they pushed back the frontiers of the discipline. And the efforts of colonial specialists to perfect the measurement of trade and treasure had to be seen to be believed, as numbers spilled out like newsprint from a

press. But all was not progress: quantification is one thing, conceptualisation another. From about the 1960s reviewers began to admonish authors: their books might contain good research but they 'lacked conceptual structure'. Young historians submitting articles strong in argument and evidence were advised by editors to take them back and place them in a kind of conceptual sandwich. It was dubious advice.

Traditional historiography does not in general place much emphasis on the *marco teórico*, the conceptual framework favoured by many historians in recent decades. The methods that I learnt and followed were strongly empirical, and did not encourage historians to enclose their work, whether book or article, in a conceptual structure. As I see it, theoretical concepts and models, far from clarifying history, distort it. They deform reality by pressing it into a mould created prior to the evidence. Dependency historians, for example, first state the theory then look for the proof. Psychobiography devalues the story of a life by forcing it into a structure determined in advance of its actual course. In history events count and the historian has to follow the evidence, not precede it. Why should there be a problem with *l'histoire événementielle*, or a conflict between study of facts and analysis of structures? History without facts is unimaginable, while facts without analysis and interpretation are meaningless; each on its own is a partial form of history, and total history needs both. Every research project, of course, has to employ a methodology and ask questions appropriate to its subject. But these are specific to that particular research. Each article, each study, each book needs its own concept, its own interpretative strategy and not conformity with pre-existing models.

The Marxist interpretation of history, pervasive among Latin Americanists and dominant in much of Latin America itself outside the academies, was not an influence on my research. This was not from want of study. Political theory is, or was, a compulsory course in history degrees and I read avidly in the subject, 'from Moses to Lenin', to quote an Edinburgh economist. I found that Marxism led only to textual exegesis, false prophecy and calls to action, none of which was helpful in reconstructing the past. It was flawed, moreover, by its insistence on historical inevitability *and* moral choice, a contradiction fatal to historical analysis. If ever there was a theory that rewrote the past and anticipated the future that theory was Marxism. The Marxist interpretation of historical change in terms of economic determinism and dialectic materialism was a blind alley for many scholars. As Evan Durbin argued, to accept the existence of a class struggle is not to see the course of history dominated only by class and conflict. People are social animals;

societies and economies, in Latin America no less than in Europe, have developed as much by cooperation as by conflict. To argue that transition from feudal to bourgeois to proletarian power was the inevitable course of history, achieved at each stage by violent revolution, was to place a theoretical construct before hard evidence. Applied to Latin America the theory made a bourgeois revolution out of Independence before a bourgeoisie actually existed. Marx knew little of Latin America and his works are marginal to its history. When I notice that theses or books on Latin American subjects place works of Marx in their bibliographies I see it as a triumph of faith over reason. Religionists tend to be more reticent.

Derivatives of Marxism have appeared in recent decades. The most popular among Latin Americanists has been 'dependency theory', designed by sociologists, manufactured by political scientists and bought by historians. A whole school of *dependentistas* came into being, numerous enough to organise conferences among themselves and to harangue history seminars for two decades. There is, of course, a sense in which we are all dependent on each other; and it is part of the human condition, in nations as well as in individuals, to rely on others, to divide labour, to collaborate with neighbours, even to borrow money and lend goods. But the dependency theorists went beyond common sense. For them 'dependency' became the key to unlock the history of Latin America's underdevelopment. The superior capital, industrial and commercial resources of the metropolitan powers, it was argued, enabled them to exploit their inferior trading partners and to control the local elites in the periphery; thus they were able to siphon off the surplus produced in Latin American economies and remit the profits to London or other economic centres. The growth of underdevelopment, therefore, followed inherently from the advance of capitalism. National obstacles to change – existing social structures, political corruption, weak internal markets for local industries – were ignored or discounted. Dependency theory had a short run, though it seemed an eternity. Now it has little influence on academic disciplines and is no more than a museum piece.

One of the flaws of dependency theory was to confuse moral reproach with historical analysis and to allow indignation to overcome investigation. Anyone studying the history of Latin America will experience shock and anger: poverty and injustice have increased with the passage of time rather than diminished, and historians would not be human were they to evade the issues of cruelty and oppression as they unfold before their eyes. In making value judgements it is all the more