

**Book Review**

# **Placing Latin America: Contemporary Themes in Human Geography**

Edward L. Jackiewicz and Fernando J. Bosco (editors)  
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STUDYING LATIN AMERICA can seem like a fatalistic endeavor, with the heavy burden of structural legacies weighing down on progress and change. In *Placing Latin America*, Edward Jackiewicz and Fernando Bosco have assembled a volume that not only addresses the stifling effects of these legacies but also, and more importantly, highlights the role of human agency in exploiting the spaces made available to local actors as they stimulate change. As the editors rightfully claim, the underlying themes throughout the work are the seemingly contradictory, and yet related, concepts of continuity and change.

The 14 chapters bring together an impressive collection of submissions from established Latin American geographers and fresh faces as well. Conceived as a thematic textbook, it diverges from the traditional pattern of focusing on general themes with interspersed case studies. Instead, the submissions present more specific topics with general themes developed in the process. While this style takes a little adjusting to, it does provide an exciting way to cover the human geography of Latin America in the classroom. For example, Kent Mathewson's contribution focuses on psychoactive drug production, processing, and trafficking as both a way of exploring this specific issue and covering the historical legacy of Latin American agriculture as a source of luxury crops for the global North. While the same can be done with bananas, I doubt it would be as effective in capturing the attention and imagination of students.

The beginning half of the textbook deals more with continuity than change. In the first chapter, Edward Jackiewicz and Linda Quiquix provide

a clear and concise historical and geographical coverage of Latin America's political economy. From colonial mercantilism to post-independence liberalism, followed by state-sponsored import-substitution and the contemporary shift to neoliberalism, it exhibits the cyclical nature of political economy. While some may concede to the triumph of neoliberalism, they suggest that it, too, will be replaced in due time. And, according to Thomas Klak in the following chapter, this change had better come sooner rather than later. Arguing that neoliberalism has resulted in coerced trade and increased dependency through the application of unequal economic and political power, Klak believes it has hindered sustainable development by supplanting local and national needs with global interests. The few niches left open for Latin American countries (particularly Caribbean and Central American ones) create intraregional competition in the "race to the bottom" of common parlance. The result is service and remittance economies, with the primary export being labor.

John Davenport and Edward Jackiewicz highlight one such example of a resultant service economy in their chapter called "Spaces of Tourism." While summarizing several typologies of tourism, they argue that tourism needs to be better managed in order to increase benefits for local stakeholders, rather than the present situation in which much of the profits leak offshore. In relation, Thomas Klak and Ross Flynn elaborate on ecotourism as a possible avenue for sustainable development, using the case study of Dominica's relative success. Lacking the typical mass tourism characteristics of picture-perfect sandy beaches and direct air service to major markets, and experiencing less sun and more rain due to its physical geography, Dominica has been left to focus on small-scale ecotourism to stimulate sustainable development on the island.

Several chapters deal with urban issues, balancing continuity with change. Larry Ford goes beyond his classic model of urban form with the observation that Latin American cities, once on the avant-garde of architectural design and urban planning, have fallen behind advances in other world regions. Instead of moving forward, urban areas in Latin America are left preserving an imported architectural history and dealing with the problems of unplanned squatter settlements. Adrian Aguilar and Antonio Vieyra's chapter includes the continuity of rural-to-urban migration and urban primacy, but begins to focus on change as neoliberal policies have led to urban deconcentration due to altered labor markets. These arguments are advanced by Altha Cravey's chapter, "U.S.-Mexico Borderlands," in which

urban areas along the border differ from more traditional urban areas in the heartland of Mexico as a consequence of neoliberal policies. The attraction of younger workers with smaller, or absent, families requires fewer state services. Hence, labor costs are lowered while creating “a dependent and relatively quiescent workforce by dismantling, deregulating, and privatizing social provision” (87).

The neoliberal era has definitely reworked the human geographies of the region. One result has been the retrenchment of the state and the opening of spaces for local actors to operate. These changes dominate the second half of the textbook beginning with Christopher Brown’s chapter, “NGOS and Ongoing Changes in Latin American Society.” Not only is Brown’s introduction of NGOs done with clarity, it also illuminates how they operate at multiple scales in their efforts to compete with more powerful actors at the national and global scales. This issue of “scaling up” is raised again in Fernando Bosco’s chapter on social movements. The focus on geographical place for social movements is aptly, and movingly, presented by the description of how the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina interact with workers preparing the plaza for the Madres’ regular demonstration march for their disappeared family members. Tying social movements to environmental struggles is the goal of Sarah Moore’s submission. State and municipal deregulation and decentralization have left marginalized populations to fend for themselves, as expressed in the examples of the Oaxaca garbage crisis and conflict over water in Ecuador and Bolivia. It is argued that the social mobilization by marginalized groups has made them relevant, a positive development—albeit due to neglect and necessity.

An important contribution of the textbook lies in its treatment of the blurring boundaries of Latin America. Susan Mains argues that as the state becomes less relevant in the neoliberal era, nationalism begins to be trumped by transnationalism. This idea is expertly expanded upon through the case of Colombia’s immigration, emigration, and internally displaced context. Joel Jennings continues the theme within the United States through investigating how Latino/a groups in St. Louis have focused political pressure at subnational scales to push for social services that are denied at the national scale due to federal gridlock on the immigration issue.

Ending with an artistic flourish, James Craine and Mirek Lipinski open up the “Cinematic Spaces of Latin America” by juxtaposing the sadistic fear inherent in the Brazilian *Ze do Caixao* (Coffin Joe) with the victimization and social struggle of the Mexican *Lucha Libre* action hero Santo. Beyond

the film recommendations, which I have since added to my movie queue, they make the case for a geographic reading of the Latin American landscape as manifested through cinematic representation. It is a relevant ending for a contemporary textbook addressing both the continuity of structural forces and the role of human agency in creating change. While it may not be a stand-alone textbook, I do see *Placing Latin America* as an exciting addition to any human geography course covering Latin America and the Caribbean.