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Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange

By Richard Cándida Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 342 pp.)

Beginning in the 1910s, both the U.S. federal government and various private associations began to organize and sponsor projects that brought Latin American "cultural ambassadors" to the United States to lecture about Latin American cultures and societies. Various intellectuals promoted Pan-American feelings in the United States and back in their home countries disseminated information on their positive experiences in the North.

Richard Cándida Smith's *Improvised Continent* succeeds admirably in bringing to life a vast number of diverse characters in this cultural and intellectual history. He also provides new insights on the more general development of U.S.-Latin American relations during the twentieth century. Focusing on cultural exchange in the United States and Latin America, the book analyzes how the work of Latin American artists, intellectuals and writers was received, reproduced and understood in North America. The book studies official cultural exchange programs and the activities of philanthropic and cultural associations and institutions. The author moves between biographies, the history of ideas, politics and international relations, and art history.

Various chapters of the book analyze the Second World War period from a new fresh angle. The possibility of a German victory seemed great in the 1940s after France had been so quickly defeated and occupied. In all of the Latin American countries, there were various intellectuals, businessmen and politicians who had strong German sympathies. On the other hand, for both U.S. and Latin American liberals and leftists the idea of a world organized on German principles was a nightmare. The author shows how the Pan-Americanist movement was also an anti-Nazi movement, emphasizing Western democratic values shared by all the old American republics. On the other hand, various intellectuals also criticized U.S. neo-imperialist politics, urging that "cultural pan-Americanism was needed to create a hemispheric public able to insist on civic rights, social justice, and democratic government in all American nations."

The Latin American intellectuals visiting the U.S. through Pan-American cultural programs mostly asserted that the wealth of the United States was due to the highly developed spiritual qualities of U.S. culture. This idea had its origin in the famous Latin American *arielist* intellectual dilemma: Was the United States a materialistic, utilitarian and spiritually bankrupt consumerist society, lost in a world of machines? Or, was it a globally leading, wealthy nation, which had developed a high-quality cultural life that was the envy of other nations?

Cándida Smith's most valuable new sources are the personal papers of Brazilian novelist Érico Veríssimo from the Instituto Moreira Salle in Rio de Janeiro. Veríssimo's person and his changing attitudes towards U.S.-Latin American cultural relations offers an excellent viewpoint on pan-Americanism's long history. The list of other intellectuals is impressive, but, obviously, since the scope of the book is so expansive, many topics and persons do not fit in to his narrative, such as Peruvian "Pan-Americanist" Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and his rejection of both U.S. imperialism and Soviet communism.

Improvised Continent should be required reading for every researcher of U.S.-Latin American relations. It also includes valuable statistics on Pan-American cultural exchange. As Cándida Smith defines the key theme of his book, the irony of the Pan-American movement was that the vision of a fuller, intersubjective

means of communication collided with the necessity of resorting to formulas and even stereotypes to present understandable social messages.

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