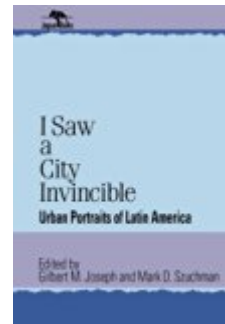


# H-Net Reviews

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Gilbert M. Joseph, Mark D. Szuchman, eds. *I Saw a City Invincible: Urban Portraits of Latin America*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1996. xiii + 213 pp. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2495-2; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2496-9.

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## Urban Poses: The Latin American City from Conquest to Current Day

The essays compiled in this volume present views of the Latin American urban milieu from the time of contact through the twentieth century as seen, for the most part, by the cities' contemporary observers. Despite its ambitious time frame, the eleven essays do not attempt to convey the complexity of urban development in Latin America over time. Rather, they have been selected so that each urban portrait, culled from disparate historic moments, shares much in common with its counterparts in terms of economic, demographic, and political urban themes. While never the focus of the essayists, a vivid portrait of (primarily) elite attitudes toward gender and ethnicity can be gleaned from the majority of these works, as well.

Bookended with Mark Szuchman's concise historical analysis of the development of urban Latin America on one end and a bibliographic essay on suggested readings at the other, the volume is ideal as an introductory text for upper division courses on urban Latin America. Each essay contains an introductory note summarizing the author's background as well as the historic moment in which he is writing which further facilitates a critical reading of the essays for classroom purposes.

Szuchman and Gilbert have selected these essays in an attempt to introduce some of the classic works of Latin American "observers" (such as Peru's Bernabe Cobo and Joaquin Capelo, Argentina's Juan Agustin Garcia and Juan Alvarez, and Colombia's Miguel Samper) to an English-speaking audience. Their essays have

been translated expressly for this compilation. The volume also includes works better known to a U.S. audience, represented by a selection from Charles Gibson's, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*, and excerpts from Carolina Maria de Jesus' published diary, *Child of the Dark*. Rather than attempting to cover the entirety of the geographic scope of Latin America—Central America and the Caribbean, for example, are not represented—the editors have chosen to include portraits of selected cities more than once (Lima, Tenochtitlan/Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo) for comparative value. Additional essays on Bogota and Salvador de Bahia round out the South American primary-city focus of the volume as a whole.

*I Saw a City Invincible* succinctly establishes the importance of the city in Latin America's development. In his introduction, Mark Szuchman provides a well-detailed and concise overview of the Iberian's emphasis on the city, imbuing the urban environment with "an all-encompassing role that included administration, the reproduction of capital, ecclesiastical management, and responsibility for virtually all cultural activities" (p. 1). Szuchman emphasizes the fact that the first point of contact between European and Amerindian worlds centered in densely-populated regions. He then tracks the evolution of the city through the centuries, taking care to contrast eighteenth-century urban "passivity" with the more volatile nature of the countryside. The relationship between urban and rural environments is not emphasized elsewhere in the volume.

Overall, the editors' decision to compile published accounts written by native-born Latin Americans results in a selection of portraits told primarily from the point of view of the male elite. Not surprisingly, these portraits often shed as much light on elite attitudes and perceptions as they do about the physical, social and economic attributes of the cities they describe. In fact, the majority of the essays are critical takes on the urban environment and, as such, the authors often offer remedies to correct urban ills. One could argue that close to half of the essays are more conducive to study as historic prescriptions for urban development than they are as descriptions of political, social and physical spaces.

With relatively few exceptions, the essays critique rather than commend the urban environments of the writers' experience. In fact, Bernabe Cobo, with his observations of seventeenth-century Lima, is the only urban "booster" in the group. He sees only the positive attributes of the city; the city jail, for example, is worth mentioning only for its European architectural value: "with a chapel so large, well decorated and well attended it could really be called a church" (p. 63). Praising the commercial, agricultural and economic wealth of the city, Cobo's portrait of Lima focuses almost exclusively on its European qualities. Only one sentence appears in which he acknowledges the indigenous and African elements of the city: "More than a quarter of the plaza, in front of the main church, is taken up by the market, where all kinds of fruits and other foods are sold by so many blacks and Indians that it looks like an anthill" (p. 64). This slight reference to the majority of the population of Lima at the time conveys volumes about elite colonial perceptions.

The remaining essayists criticize members of their own class for misdirecting urban political, social and economic development. The civil engineer, writer and politician, Joaquin Capelo, for example, in his examination of the social make-up of nineteenth-century Lima, finds that the "scoundrel" exists on all social levels: "In wealthy families, he spends his time squandering his parents' money and corrupting society with his flatteries and the glitter with which he surrounds himself" (p. 125).

In fact, many of the selections seemed to have been chosen in an attempt to off-set the more widely-read works of the nineteenth-century Argentine, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who extolled the "civilizing" influence of the city over the "barbarism" of the countryside. The essays chosen to represent views of Buenos Aires are especially critical in nature. It should be noted that they do not herald the countryside but rather criticize the

ways in which the Buenos Aires' elite detracted growth away from Argentina's provincial cities. Juan Alvarez' essay, "Buenos Aires in the Early Twentieth Century," criticizes the government officials and industrialists who focused national development almost solely on the capital city, systematically siphoning wealth and political power from the provinces. Alvarez' account is not so much a description of Buenos Aires as it is a condemnation of the city's economic dominance over the entire country. Likewise, Juan Agustin Garcia, in his historical account of colonial Buenos Aires, published in 1900, condemns the seventeenth and eighteenth-century amassing of fortunes in the vice-royalty as the result of smuggling, exploitation of human labor, and the collusion of public officials in fraudulent and monopolistic business practices. For both of these authors, Buenos Aires does not foster "civilization" but rather foments the monopolization of economic and political power by providing an environment in which laws are easily over-ridden or re-written by the elite classes.

Amidst the educated historians, politicians, and sociologists who contribute the majority of the essays herein, the 1950s diary entries offered by the literate but under-educated Sao Paulo favela-dweller, Carolina Maria de Jesus, stands out greatly. In this selection, her diary entries are interspersed with interviews taken of her adult children from 1991 and 1992. Both the interviews and diary entries have been selected with great care. Not only do they highlight the difficulty of daily life of the "favelados," but also shed light on the complexity of attitudes toward gender and ethnic relations amongst the disenfranchised classes of industrial Sao Paulo. Carolina Maria may esteem her own blackness (p. 176) but her daughter describes her mother's racial attitudes differently: "Her preferences [for boyfriends] were odd: she didn't like to be involved with [native-born] Brazilians, especially Bahians. And if he was black, get out! She wouldn't go near Bahians or blacks, even as friends" (p. 168). This selection is the only account in the volume written by a woman and by a member of the non-elite sectors of society and, as such, serves as an intriguing point of contrast and comparison to the other works.

As an entirety, the volume lends itself well to explorations of changes and continuity over time in urban Latin America. The lives of the urban marginal dwellers which we are only too expectant to find in contemporary accounts (here represented by Carolina Maria's diary and Jonathan Kandell's account of Mexico City's "garbage czar" of the 1980s) can be traced back to Spanish attempts to segregate the city in the sixteenth century as

described by Charles Gibson. Luis dos Santos Vilhena, in his account "Bahia in the Late Colonial Period," observes a number of "beggars" who live in the city streets, often former slaves but also "whites" who have been turned out by hospitals before they are able to care for themselves (p. 92). The primary importance which the marketplace and public squares contributed to the social life of non-elites can be traced through a number of these essays as well. While the most obvious themes which recur throughout the volume center on political, economic, and administrative issues, references to the non-elite classes are relatively abundant.

The physical layout of the city is another theme which is traceable through most of the essays. The urban sprawl of Luis dos Santos' Brazilian coastal city, Bahia, lends itself well to a contrast with the more grid-oriented concerns of the Spanish-influenced cities, for example. The essayists also clearly exhibit the philosophies of their respective historic eras, hence, one can easily compare the positivistic-influenced views of the nineteenth-century city in the works of Miguel Samper on Bogota and Joaquin Capelo's on Lima. Taken as a whole, then, this volume of essays provides a seemingly endless array of thematic concerns with which to view the development of urban Latin America. As a teaching tool, it also provides students with unique primary source documents from which they can assess the portraits of urban Latin America as painted by Latin Americans themselves.

Finally, it should be noted that the editors' decision to provide portraits of Latin American cities "by [contemporary] commentators who, far from being detached observers, were themselves formed in this urban milieu" (see pp. xi-xii) falls somewhat short of its mark. The selections on Tenochtitlan, for example, are synthetic views of the city provided by French anthropologist Jacques Soustelle and North American historian Charles Gibson, rather than first-hand descriptions. Furthermore, the volume contains two historical treatments of cities written by native-born Latin Americans (Gilberto Leite de Barros' "The Transformation of Sao Paulo and Juan Agustin's "Colonial Buenos Aires"). Jonathan Kandell, who contributes a highly accessible and provocative excerpt from his *La Capital: The Biography of Mexico City*, is not Latin American but a journalist who grew up in Mexico City. The chronicler of Bahia, Luis dos Santos Vilhena, is a native of Portugal. These points are minor, perhaps, but should be emphasized more adequately in terms of the overall thematic conception of the volume. In terms of the classroom, these "exceptions" can be used to elicit debate over native versus non-native views of the city; the historians approach to primary versus secondary sources, etc.

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