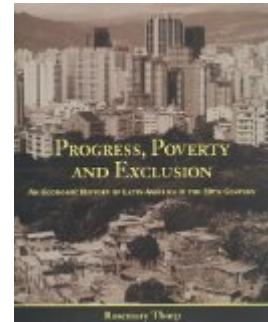


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rosemary Thorp. *Progress, Poverty and Exclusion: An Economic History of Latin America in the 20th Century*. Washington D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 1998. xiii + 369 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-886938-35-9.

Reviewed by Alan M. Taylor (Department of Economics, University of California at Davis)  
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A book that aims to survey the entire twentieth-century economic history of Latin America is indeed a massive endeavor. In pursuing such a goal Rosemary Thorp wisely assembled a large and talented team to help her. As her acknowledgements make clear, without this team approach the book would not have happened, since such an undertaking would be an almost prohibitively time consuming effort for a scholar working alone, requiring many years of work to cover the several countries, varieties of experience, and the range of economic analysis—from macro to micro, internal and external, short and long run, and so on. Thorp was fortunate to secure considerable logistical and resource support from the Inter-American Development Bank for this worthy project. From that starting point she was able to commission a group of scholar-consultants, each expert in different topics or knowledgeable about particular countries, and from their background papers and supporting work she sought to weave an overarching narrative. In this aspect, the project's design is reminiscent of, say, the annual World Bank reports, where commissioned background work is blended into the final product.

Beyond their acknowledgement in this book, some of the supporting actors also get an opportunity to have their full say in a series of three “companion volumes” published by Macmillan Press and St. Antony's College, Oxford, the latter being Thorp's home base. It seems unfair to review the main book that builds so heavily on this supporting material without giving a brief plug for the entire cast. The titles of the three supporting volumes are: *The Export Age: Latin American Economies in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (edited by Cardenas, Ocampo and Thorp); *Latin America in the 1930s*

(edited by Thorp, a second edition of her 1984 volume); and *Industrialization and the State in Latin America: The Black Legend of the Post War Years* (edited by Cardenas, Ocampo and Thorp). All three will also appear in Spanish translation published by Fondo de Cultura Economica.

These three background volumes—which were unfortunately not available to this reviewer—provide the foundations for the main text. This design should prove helpful in expanding access to the subject. Those new to the subject or those seeking a quick overview can peruse the main volume. The very curious, the specialists, and the pedants can delve in the background studies. Bundling the background papers together in this way follows another design style that has been applied to the history of the region—I am thinking here of the *Cambridge History of Latin America*, edited by Bethell (who is also an author in this project.)

Thus, by careful design and packaging, Thorp, the IDB, and the supporting cast have delivered a set of diverse and complementary products that arrive in what can only be described as a gaping hole in the marketplace. The project might, even then, be somewhat ahead of its time. A thorough economic history of Latin America in the twentieth century is a major task whose completion will depend on the complete assessment of the empirical record of development in each country. In turn, that task will require basic data and archival work in each country to actually construct the empirical record itself, since in many places the holes in our knowledge are deep and the fragmentary and frail nature of the data sources still troubling. Finally, once good data are in hand, the evaluation of the historical record will call for the application of modern quantitative econometric methods, insights from

economic theory, and cutting-edge institutional analysis.

Those working in Latin American economic history know that progress in all these dimensions is uneven, varying by country, time period, and the particular area of study. Such caveats should be borne in mind, especially since current research on the New Economic History of Latin America is being produced at a fast rate by an ever-growing group of scholars and their findings are challenging many interpretations.

A serious criticism I have concerns access to the data for the study. This is the first such long-run database of its kind, and its construction was overseen by someone with impeccable credentials: Andre Hofman of ECLA (CEPAL), formerly of the Groningen group, who is personally responsible for recent pioneering estimates of GDP and capital stocks in the major economies of the region. Notwithstanding the preceding caveats about the quality and comprehensiveness of historical data in the region, the data specialists for this project distinguished themselves and did us all a great service by piecing together so many series and benchmarks in a series of comparative data tables for so many countries. The statistical appendix is massive and will be the kind of data mine that future researchers will want to dig around in. Too bad, then, that the proposed fourth companion volume which would have presented the full database and sources has been abandoned. Still worse, an even more efficient and simple solution to the problem of how to disseminate this data and facilitate its use has also been ignored thus far—namely, putting it all up on a website. I think this is a great shame. At a cost of only a small fraction of the resources devoted to this project by the IDB (and the European Union and others) I guess that it would take competent web specialists only a few hours to clean and upload these files onto a server. Then we could all enjoy the use of the data and the project would deliver even greater benefits to the academic community. I hope Thorp, Hofman, the IDB, or some other folks can work out a way to do this soon.

If I have any other quibbles, they are more minor. Of course, a survey volume can only scratch the surface and at certain points one would wish for more. Yet I cannot help but feel that in certain places the book gets a little off track and the use of space might have been more productive. The problem is evident to me even in the title. Why not just *Progress and Poverty*? The final tag “exclusion” is hinted at in various places, but I am still not sure that the topic was either as fully worked out as it should be, nor whether it is a topic best left to other

studies, being too far outside the scope of the present work. The issue is methodological. The introduction concludes on an almost apologetic note that statistical categorization and analysis might obfuscate the importance of “ordinary people” for the nonspecialist reader, but then stoutly defends our turf in noting that economic history cannot be told via “individual cases.” Still, having made the argument for *economic* historical methodology, the author thinks it necessary to switch at times to a historian’s methodology and include a handful of two-page narrative “boxes” where stories of particular people are told (a poor woman from rural Peru, an Argentine scientist—a range of experience). I don’t question the importance of historical methodology in general, nor case-study history in particular, but I do wonder what it adds here to what, on most every other page, is by and large a macroeconomic history. The conjunction of the two methodologies adds another layer of complexity to the study. There is already so much else for the reader to follow in dimensions temporal, spatial, in economic categories and concepts, and so on. In other places, there are brief paragraphs or sections touching on the “exclusion” theme—the power of elites or the position of women—but these also appear to be an appendage, and do not fit in smoothly with the analytic content of the narrative and its main thrust. I do not mean to say that “exclusion” isn’t an important issue in Latin America—in history or today—but only to question how well it fits into the scheme of this book.

Having quibbled with some aspects of the project, let me still affirm that it is a welcome addition to the bookshelf. As a reference work, this book and its companion volumes will be some of the first places many of us go to seek an answer to a question outside our particular specialization or country of interest. If one needs to get the basic facts straight concerning rates of economic growth, investment, the pattern of trade, and other macroeconomic features of development, the many statistical tables and (very-elegantly executed) figures will prove invaluable. For an introductory account that signposts events during pivotal episodes—such as the Great Depression, the import-substitution era, the debt crisis, and the recent reform phase—the main text will serve as a good guide. For some in-depth accounts by leading scholars on what they think is the state-of-the-art in the field, the companion volumes—though I have not yet seen them—have the potential to be very useful. In short, an ambitious project, a productive outcome.

Alan M. Taylor is co-editor (with John H. Coatsworth) of *Latin America and the World Economy Since 1800* (Cam-

bridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). His latest published article (with Gerardo della Paolera) is "Economic Recovery from the Argentine Great Depression: Institutions, Expectations, and the Change of Macroeconomic Regime" (*Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 3, September 1999, forthcoming).

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