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Benjamin Keen. *A History of Latin America.* Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996. xvi + 622 pp. $37.16 (paper), ISBN 978-0-395-74455-0.

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Latin American History: The Whole Story

Benjamin Keen may have influenced more students of Latin American history than any other figure since Herbert Eugene Bolton. A 1941 Yale Ph.D., Keen comes from a generation of historians of Latin America who helped define the field for two decades before the great "boom" in Latin American Studies beginning in the 1960s (along with others such as Lewis Hanke and John Tate Lanning, who were slightly older, as well as Richard Morse and Stanley Stein, who are a bit younger). Keen's classic reader, *Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present*, first appeared in 1955, and is now available in a sixth edition.[1] It is surely one of the most (if not the most) widely used readers in Latin American history.

Now in his eighties, Keen continues to influence new generations of students with the publication of an updated fifth edition of his classic *A History of Latin America.* First appearing as *A Short History of Latin America* in 1980, the text was co-authored by Mark Wasserman, a specialist on twentieth-century Mexico with a 1975 Ph.D. from the University of Chicago who taught briefly with Keen at Northern Illinois University in the mid-seventies. (Wasserman has been teaching at Rutgers since then.) A second edition followed in 1984 and a third in 1988. The fourth edition (1992) dropped both Wasserman and the adjective "short" from the title page. Both the fourth and fifth editions were published in a single volume, or as two volumes, increasing their utility for those teaching courses on just the colonial era or the national period.

Arguably, this is the most successful comprehensive text in Latin American history over the past twenty-five years. It certainly offers the best coverage of both the colonial and the national periods in a single text. Keen's strongest competition must be the late E. Bradford Burns' *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*, which has gone through six editions since 1972.[2] (Burns, however, devotes just one-sixth of his text to the colonial period.) With the prominent exceptions of Burns and Edwin Williamson's *The Penguin History of Latin America*, the textbook market has moved toward smaller segments of the sweep of Latin American history.[3]

Oxford University Press appears to have achieved the most success in publishing texts that deal with shorter time periods. Burkholder and Johnson's *Colonial Latin America*, Bushnell and Macaulay's *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century*, and Skidmore and Smith's *Modern Latin America* form a trilogy of extremely successful co-authored texts.[4] All have gone through at least two editions, and *Modern Latin America* has sold upwards of 35,000 copies, an academic bestseller by any professor's standard!

Prior to the 1970s, Latin American history textbooks (e.g., Hubert Herring or John Fagg) often took an encyclopedic approach, covering the traditional twenty republics country by country and usually emphasizing political and institutional history.[5] Although great as reference sources, these volumes are guaranteed to bore students and faculty alike. Another common genre has been the interpretive synthesis. Rather than documenting the parade of generals and presidents in every country, these textbooks select major themes and a small group of "representative" nations. They sacrifice detail and encyclopedic range for patterns and processes (Burns is a good example).[6]

Keen combines some of the strengths of both the comprehensive and the interpretive approaches. He includes a large number of countries as case studies, and he ranges widely tracing patterns in economics, politics, and society. Keen has also crafted a history of Latin American "civilization," not surprising for someone who has spent decades writing about colonial Spanish American culture. (It is nice to see someone finish a historical survey with a chapter on Latin American literature!) With the possible exception of Williamson's *History*, no other textbook is as strong on cultural history.

The single-volume version of the fifth edition is divided into three parts, each with an introductory summary. In Part 1, Keen offers a masterful synthesis in eight chapters of Native American and Hispanic societies, the conquest, the social, political, and economic institutions of colonial society, colonial Brazil, the Bourbon Reforms, and the wars for independence. Part 2 surveys the nineteenth century in three chapters, two tracing key political and economic themes in selected countries (Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil) and one on society and culture. Part 3 (the twentieth century) moves to separate chapters on Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, with additional chapters on the cases of the Andes (mainly Peru), Cuba, Central America, and Venezuela/Colombia. Two thematic chapters conclude the survey, one on U.S.-Latin American relations and one on "Latin American Society in Transition." (In the two-volume edition, volume I contains Parts 1 and 2, and volume II consists of Parts 2 and 3.) Roughly 30 percent of the text is devoted to the period up through the wars for independence, 15 percent to the nineteenth century, and 55 percent to the twentieth century.

The organization and structure of the text has changed only slightly since the first edition, and even less since the fourth edition. The chapter on Central America first appeared in the second edition (1984), and the chapter on Venezuela/Colombia in the fourth edition (1992). One of the best changes to appear is the brief opening section on the geography of Latin America (appearing for the first time in the third edition). Most of the changes since the last edition appear to be material bringing each country chapter up to date and additions to the bibliographies for each chapter.

Keen's *History of Latin America* has a number of strengths. It is very comprehensive, yet still under 600 pages. The two different versions provide instructors with flexibility in assigning either all or part of the text. Well organized and clearly written, students find it easy to read and follow (and this is based on personal experience using the book this past semester and in years past). Although more traditional in his approach and choice of topics than a authors like Burkholder and Johnson, Keen does place a good deal of emphasis on the social history of the past thirty years (topics such as gender, race, class). While focusing primarily on Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, the book includes chapters on Cuba, Central America, Venezuela/Colombia, and the Andes (Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador), providing some coverage of fifteen of the twenty traditional Latin American nations. With bibliographies of recommended readings for each chapter, and ample illustrations, Keen's *History of Latin America* is a very attractive textbook.

Nevertheless, the book has its weaknesses, some stemming from the very nature of survey texts, and others that are specific to this textbook. As someone who for a number of years completely gave up on using a textbook, I sympathize with those who find fault with any textbook. We all have our own approach to teaching, and, unless we write our own textbook, the fit with someone else's survey is often awkward, if not impossible. This problem is generally most acute for the twentieth century, as Latin American history, and Latin American history textbooks, fragment into national histories. Generally, this means finding a textbook that covers as many of the same countries/case studies as the professor plans to cover in the survey course.

Keen's book is no exception. Some will, no doubt, see his emphasis (especially pre-twentieth century) on Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile as frustrating. The book is weakest on the Caribbean islands. More important, restricting the coverage to the traditional eighteen Spanish-speaking nations, plus Brazil and Haiti, will frustrate those who seek more coverage of the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean basin as well as those with a more expansive view of the region.

A more serious problem with Keen is his use of "dependency theory" as the framework for analyzing Latin American history. In the stampede to embrace neo-liberalism and declare capitalism victorious in the aftermath of the Cold War, many instructors may shy away from Keen simply because of his declared allegiance to dependency theory. This would be a mistake. Although I am not that happy with Keen's use of dependency theory, the analysis has little impact on the overall structure and flow of the text. With the prominent exception of the preface, and some occasional introductory material (especially in the latter portion of the book), dependency scarcely intrudes on the reader. One could, in fact, skip those brief sections and scarcely notice the impact of dependency theory on the text. (In fact, the introductory student could skip those sections and never notice dependency at all.)

I should note that this edition has become a bit more defensive about dependency theory, and more strident in its condemnation of neo-liberalism and capitalism. (On page 267, for example, Keen stresses the "staggering economic and social costs of the neoliberal or structural adjusment programs for Latin America." On page 553, his anti-NAFTA sentiments surface.) In the few places where the text has been amplified since the fourth edition, this defensiveness and stridency are pronounced.

Despite these flaws, I think this is still the best general Latin American history survey textbook available. For those who do use textbooks, but want Latin American history in pieces, go to Burkholder and Johnson, Bushnell and Macaulay, or Skidmore and Smith. If you want the sweep of Latin American history and civilization, Benjamin Keen is still the best available textbook.

1. Benjamin Keen, ed., *Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present*, 6th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

2. E. Bradford Burns, *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).

3. Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Penguin, 1992).

4. Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Bushnell and Neill Macaulay, *The Emergence of Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America* (New York: Knopf, 1955; 3rd ed., 1968), John Edwin Fagg, *Latin America: A General History* (New York: Macmillan, 1963; 3rd ed., 1977).

6. An early example of this approach is Donald E. Worcester and Wendell G. Schaeffer, *The Growth and Culture of Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

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