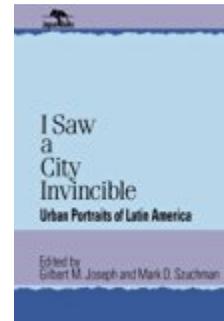


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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## Avatars of Modernization: The Latin American City

The European colonization of Latin America, as Mark Szuchman points out in his introductory essay, is coincident with the continent's urbanization. That has been a decidedly mixed blessing, because "The positive nature assigned to the city in historical Latin America was derived as much from what the city contained as from what the countryside lacked. By denying so much of its assets to the rural areas over the centuries, the Latin American city has pulled in millions of people who found little choice in the matter" (p. 25). But whatever the bad effects, "No other people have paid more attention over the ages to their urban dimensions than the Latin Americans. This preoccupation crosses nearly every genre of discourse, ranging from the self-conscious styles of academic scholars to the more freely expressed and popular forms of minstrels, street poets, folklorists, and essayists" (p. 1).

The idea of a collection of writings about urban Latin America is a good one and the volume can be recommended heartily to teachers. Gilbert Joseph and Mark Szuchman have seen that the contributions, taken from writers of several centuries, all fit the theme. There are chapters about Aztec cities, Lima, Buenos Aires, Bahia, Bogota, Lima, Sao Paulo, and Mexico City. The editors have achieved a remarkable balance within a limited number of pages. The colonial period and nineteenth centuries are effectively represented.

Perhaps a claim that Latin America is the urban continent *par excellence* would be overblown, but there is no

denying the prominence of urban life there. Latin Americanists will need little reminder of the grandeur of many colonial cities. Describing Buenos Aires, Juan Agustín Gracia in his essay of 1900 entitled "Colonial Buenos Aires" (pp. 71-84, translated by Sharon Kellum) quotes one eighteenth-century poet who exclaimed (p.80):

Calle Esparta su virtud. Su grandeza calle Roma. Silencio! Que al mundo asoma La gran Capital del Sud.

Let Sparta speak not of its virtue, Let Rome speak not of its grandeur. Silence! For the great Capital of the South is beginning to appear.

Gracia makes the interesting observation which rings true that for many Latin Americans, the *patria* has been their city. The city-state of antiquity reemerged in Latin America partly because of the short history of the countries. The cities had a sense of identity when the identity of the countries was still only partly formed. Moreover, these cities were ones displaying abundance and wealth, albeit as Gracia points out, it was a display achieved by smuggling, by exploitation of labor, and by monopolies and privileges.

However, never out of sight, as Miguel Samper recorded in an 1867 description, *Miseria en Bogota*, reproduced as "Bogota in the Nineteenth Century" (translated by Sharon Kellum) there were pick-pockets, drunks, lepers, loafers, and the plainly crazy. Moreover, "The material decay goes hand in hand with the moral decay. The state of the streets, with their piles of filth, is suitable

only for guaranteeing unsanitary conditions. The water service or supply is such that the houses that should get water will quickly depreciate after being burdened with a tax favoring the bricklayers and plumbers. Street lighting, except on a few commercial streets, comes to us from the moon” (p. 106). Hopes nevertheless were high that industrialization would solve the problems, and Samper could dream: “Often, I let my imagination travel forward in time ... [to the] twentieth century, when ... all may be dedicated by the hand and genius of mankind to fostering industry, that magic wand given to the viceroy of creation instead of a scepter” (p. 112).

Bogota seemed destined then for important things, as did Bucaramanga, Cucuta, and Pasto. Samper looked at the “rich deposits of salt, rubber, iron, coal, limestone, sulfur, and other raw materials” and thought they were an invitation to greatness. He bemoaned that workers were starving and half-naked. There was, he complained, “a basic flaw in the political regime” (p. 117). Ah, alas, how little was going to change in the decades to come.

The last chapter of the book is *La Capital*, an extract from Jonathan Kandell’s “biography of Mexico City.” Whether Mexico City is the world’s largest city or second to Tokyo, it is certainly the world’s largest urban catastrophe. It does not have enough water or air, and the smog which envelops it has turned recently from gray to a frightening yellow-gray. The lack of sewage disposal means that the dust which blows includes myriad small particles of human offal. Added to the daily problems is the fact that the megapolis sits on an earthquake fault, one which produced the quake of 1985 and which will produce an even more devastating quake in the future. The Aztec book *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* predicted that there would be an ultimate “shaking of the earth, and there will be famine, and thus we shall perish.” Kandell is unwilling to conclude on such a bleak note and adds that Mexico City (and he might include other Latin American cities), though scourged by war and plague and earthquake, “... has always reemerged, sometimes diminished by its ordeals, and sometimes catapulted to greater splendor” (p. 201). One hopes, but the glass seems far

more than half empty.

This is unquestionably a fine book and the list of suggested further readings is extremely well done and alone justifies purchase. This makes all the more noticeable the absence of an index, which is a serious deficiency in a title targeted at the scholarly market. The publisher has also fallen down in the remarkably dreary and unappetizing design of the jacket, which we are told is by one Ellen C. Dawson. She should wish for anonymity. Aspirin bottles have more appeal. The Jaguar imprint, a series of which *I Saw a City Invisible* is part, is marked by an impressive indifference to type and design. Scholarly Resources has not taken advantage of what is an imaginative series as far as subjects to demonstrate that it is a real publisher and not just a photocopy shop. The series editors, William Beezley and Colin Maclachlan, should have a talk with the SR production department, which has not served them well.

Although Latin American history includes its share of histories of individual cities, often of the antiquarian variety, and also has a growing literature of sociological works dealing with urban poverty, this new title must be regarded as something of a harbinger of things to come—comparative urban studies, cutting across time lines, have not been a significant part of the literature. The interest in the subject and desire to collate and evaluate the material that has already appeared is displayed not only by this volume, but in another book just published, and reviewed on H-LatAm: *Riots in the Cities: Popular Politics and the Urban Poor in Latin America, 1765-1910* (Scholarly Resources, Wilmington, 1996. Silvia M. Arrom and Servando Ortoll, eds.) When one considers that urban history as a discipline with its own associations and periodicals is relatively new in the United States, the Latin American situation is understandable. Might one think that a Latin American association for urban history would fulfill a need?

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