

# H-Net Reviews

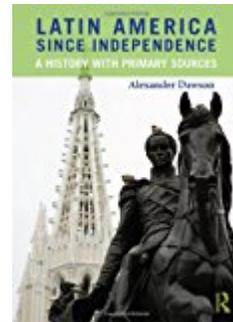
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander Dawson. *Latin America since Independence: A History with Primary Sources*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Illustrations. xiv + 336 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-99195-7; \$42.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-99196-4.

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Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



With the twenty-first century has come a new generation of textbooks for teaching Latin American history. In general, they are less comprehensive than those we used during the second half of the twentieth century, but they reflect a greater variety of pedagogical approaches to the Latin American history classroom and more innovative treatment of the content based on newer methodologies. Alexander Dawson's *Latin America since Independence* is a good example of this twenty-first-century trend. Dawson is an associate professor of history at Simon Fraser University. His previous research and publication has focused on Mexico and indigenous peoples since 1910 and has a particularly modern tone. The textbook mirrors that focus, with only an occasional reference to Latin America's Iberian colonial roots as it describes the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the region in terms reflecting the present more than the past.

Dawson goes at great lengths to emphasize the fragmentary nature of the region's history, suggesting at times that there is not really much common history to Latin America. In his own words, "We begin by acknowledging that experience in this part of the world is fragmentary, as different communities and individuals may live in close proximity to one another, but often do not share a common sense of either the past or the present, let alone the future. Secondly, the concept of the fragment informs the way we approach the past itself. In writing history we take small bits and pieces of experience and

transform them into a narrative. No history can be an exhaustive rendering of the past, so we must decide which fragments we will privilege and which story we will tell. In doing so we also reveal the extent to which history is a story about the past told in order to justify the present or make a claim on the future, and not simply a naïve arrangement of facts, an unvarnished truth" (p. 3).

In eleven essays, more or less chronological in presentation, Dawson discusses major themes in the region's history. He begins with the early nineteenth-century struggles for independence and then follows with an essay on caudillos that illustrates characteristics of the early national period. In the third chapter, "Race and Citizenship in the New Republics," Dawson addresses the question of individual freedom conditioned by the social structure imposed during the colonial period and by the continuing racism and elements of inequality that continue to the present. A fourth essay elaborates the export boom in the late nineteenth century, while a fifth, "Signs of Crisis in a Gilded Age," focuses on how social and economic pressures challenged the stability established by liberal dictatorships. Chapter 6 looks at relations with the United States in the twentieth century. A seventh, entitled "Power to the People," then turns to the rise of mass politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 8 is a fine essay on the Cuban Revolution, followed by one on the "Dirty Wars," with particular attention paid to Peru. His tenth essay examines the rise of new democracies

and human rights across the region toward the end of the twentieth century, with a final essay on the turn to the Left in contemporary Latin America, with particular reference to Bolivia.

These essays make no pretense of being comprehensive. And they assert frequently the individuality of each state and the fragmentary nature of the region's history. Despite these claims, Dawson's essays do a remarkably good job of presenting the common elements of the region's progress in the last two centuries. A common history does not mean an identical history, and Dawson demonstrates substantial similarities in the region's development both in the broad phases of its chronology and in its cultural, social, and economic trajectories. While in most of the essays he focuses on one particular example of the theme, he makes enough references to other examples to develop the broader picture with considerable success. Each essay is preceded by a convenient chronological timeline. He accompanies each essay with one to five primary documents from a wide range of sources, such as political declarations, government documents, advertisements and posters, song lyrics, and other items that help to demonstrate the theme. There are also many photographs, maps, and other visual aids, as well

as a glossary of Hispanic terms that enhance the work. A brief bibliography follows each essay, almost exclusively limited to works of the last two decades. Further, adding much to the book's utility, is a Web site ([www.routledge.com/dawson/textbooks](http://www.routledge.com/dawson/textbooks)) that offers additional materials to supplement the text and help students study. It also offers other features, including an instructor's manual, sample syllabi, a PowerPoint slide presentation, sample short answer questions, and a place to send feedback to the book's publisher or to request a desk copy.

This textbook is especially successful in emphasizing the varieties of history and the importance of understanding the perspective from which specific histories are written. One will find no authoritative interpretation here. Rather, Dawson teaches students to judiciously evaluate historical accounts as a means of understanding the present. It is written in a vigorous and readable style, with only a rare questionable assertion, such as the reference to the "Caste War in the Yucatan in 1712" (p. 12). The work should serve as an excellent basis for classroom discussion as well as for a fundamental understanding of modern Latin American history.

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