

Common Themes in Culture & Power: Class, Race & Gender

INTRODUCTION

From the numerous texts analyzed in this class, and the papers and presentations of participants, one arrives at an important generalization about Latin America: *one should not make generalizations about this region*. Although the countries of Latin America share similar historical roots and face similar political and economic challenges, the diversity within each country makes it difficult to arrive at conclusions that apply to all or even most Latin Americans. What the countries of the region share, however, is this diversity, and the tensions that come with it. These tensions involve primarily issues of class, race and gender. Tensions in these three areas both influence, and are influenced by, culture and power. These intersections can be seen in many texts. The texts used to illustrate this argument for the purposes of this paper are only a small sample chosen to represent a variety of Latin American countries, as well as a variety of genre, to show the relevance of these texts throughout the region and the different ways used to express these tensions.

CLASS TENSIONS

The first area of tension found throughout Latin America, though to differing degrees, involves the issue of class. Examples to be used to examine this tension include Emily Geraffie's essay "Diego Rivera: Giving Mexico a National Identity," "Peace on High," by Venezuelan

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Romulo Gallegos, and “How the Flamingoes got Their Stockings”, by Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga.

In Emily Geraffie’s description of Diego Rivera’s mural “The History of Mexico” in the Mexican National Palace, she describes the class struggles portrayed in the three main components, covering class struggles within the indigenous societies prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the conflict during the conquest and the Inquisition, up to the modern era and the class conflicts between workers and bourgeoisie. He even addresses the class issue within the Catholic Church through his inclusion in the mural of the *Sacerdote obeso* as a symbol of the wealth of the Church. Finally Rivera portrayed the future as a Marxist utopia through the triumph of the proletariat. The long history of class tensions seen in Rivera’s mural could also be representative of other regions in Latin America. This is particularly true of the Andean region, where class tension dates back before the conquest to the Inca Empire and its domination and subjugation of other peoples.

Two short stories examined in the class that deal with the issue of class tension are “Peace on High,” by Romulo Gallegos, and “How the Flamingoes Got Their Stockings.” by Horacio Quiroga. What are interesting are the different approaches each author takes. Gallegos’ story describes a poor child’s physical and emotional misery and the cruelty of his mother and the mother’s lover. The only civilized and loyal character in the story is the dog, which dies a slow and painful death for his loyalty. This story presents the tension between classes in Latin America as one of civilization vs. barbarism, and in the process he portrays the poor and marginalized as being morally corrupt. The story by Quiroga, on the other hand, describes how the vanity of the flamingoes led them to make foolish decisions that they eventually had to pay

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for. The flamingos in this story are symbolic of the class of nouveau riche, and the story is aimed at mocking them and their fancy airs. The snakes and other creatures in the story can be seen as representative of other classes who are able to use the vanity of the flamingos (the nouveau riche) as a tool of manipulation.

Within the class struggles cultural domination has been a strategy for consolidating power: the Aztecs absorbed the gods of conquered tribes into their pantheon, the Incas imposed their language on conquered tribes, and the Spanish imposed their language, religion and system of governance and social organization on the conquered peoples. Today there are still open tensions involving class that shape power relations and culture, such as the Marxist movement and the art it has inspired, but there are also more subtle aspects to this tension, often expressed through high culture as can be seen in the stories by Gallegos and Quiroga.

RACIAL TENSIONS

Race is also an area of tension throughout Latin America. Two different themes are common within this field of tension: denial of racial issues and race as identity. Both are linked closely to culture and power. The texts to be used to illustrate this point are Johanna Merejo's paper, "A Racial Deception: Social Exclusion and Race as a Cumulative Process in Cuba and Brazil," and the short story "It's the Fault of the Tlaxcaltecas," by Mexican author Elena Garro.

Merejo's paper exposes the tensions surrounding racial issues in both Cuba and Brazil throughout their histories up until today. Both countries have significant black populations that have been discriminated against ever since their ancestors were forcibly brought over from Africa as slaves. Even after slavery was abolished, white Cubans viewed the Afro-Cubans as

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being physically, morally and culturally inferior. This was used to justify discrimination against blacks and kept whites in a position of power. In efforts to create inclusive national identities, various forms of denial have appeared as national policy. For example, after the Cuban liberation, white leaders insisted there were no racial problems in Cuba and therefore nothing needed to be done to prevent or stop discrimination against blacks. Then the revolutionaries promised to end discrimination, and according to Merejo significant improvements were made, but today there is still strong evidence of discrimination seen in the fact that whites are given preference over blacks for high paying jobs in the tourist industry, even though previously, when these same jobs were not so lucrative, they were dominated by blacks.

Brazil's tensions involving race have taken a similar path. As in Cuba, the abolition of slavery did little to change the belief held by white elites that non-whites were inferior. This belief was the basis of the Brazilian national eugenics projects aimed at "whitening" non-whites by changing their hygiene and behavior, yet another expression of whites attempting to dominate non-whites through cultural imposition. Although this program was eventually abandoned, Brazil has long pursued a national identity centered on the idea of racial democracy where any problems or discrimination on the basis of race were denied by insisting that most of the population was of mixed races.

Merejo described the serious implications of Cuban and Brazilian denial of racial tensions:

Brazilians pride themselves in the belief that they live in a 'racial democracy,' while the Cuban Socialist ideal promotes a racially egalitarian republic. Here is where the racial deception and the danger lie. If there is a belief that race does not matter and it is not an issue, then it will not be recognized as a social impediment

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for non-whites. Social injustice, marginalization, discrimination and social exclusion are bound to run rampant in countries where race is technically ignored or extraneous.” (Merejo, 2004).

In this way denial of racial tension has become a factor in continued white domination and black subjugation in these countries.

The second issue is that of identity. Throughout Latin America there is tension involved in creating national identities that are inclusive of the diversity of races and racial mixtures found in Latin American countries. Varying degrees of acceptance and rejection of indigenous and African influence on Latin American culture can be seen at the national level, as was seen in Merejo’s paper, and at the level of the individual. Garro’s story illustrates the tension within the individual over racial identity through Laura’s feelings of disloyalty and guilt. Through this story the reader is made aware of how much of Laura’s modern world was built on top of (both literally and figuratively) the civilizations conquered and dominated by the Spanish, showing total cultural domination as a form of establishing power. Laura feels torn between two cultural identities from different time periods that have intersected: in one she is an upper class woman in the modern world, in the other she is an Indian at a time of war and devastation. Garro’s story plays with the theme of betrayal that dates back to Malinche’s assistance to the conquistadors in subjugating the indigenous population. This story provides the inverse scenario: a white or mestizo woman who chooses her Indian husband over the modern world. This story brings to life the difficulty faced by an individual seeking a cultural identity, knowing on one level that the current world was created at the expense of a previous world, while living in an atmosphere of denial as described by Merejo. The internal awareness of cultural influences coupled with the

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external denial and disdain for those same cultural influences and sacrifices of Latin America's indigenous and African populations creates a tension shared throughout Latin America.

GENDER TENSIONS

Tension involving gender issues has also played a significant role throughout Latin America in terms of both culture and power. The texts used to examine this tension are a speech given by Eva Peron on May 4th, 1950, to the Peronist Feminist Party and Annie Wickman's paper, "Feminism in Sendero Luminoso."

Eva Peron's speech highlights some of the gender issues faced throughout Latin America. In spite of gender inequality throughout the region, women as a group are not united, largely due to divisions along the lines of class and race, the two issues already examined in this paper. Eva Peron faced the difficulty of creating a common identity as "women" in order to attract women in the Peronist Feminist Party. In so doing she was challenging the traditional lack of participation by women in politics, but her choice of words in this speech demonstrates that she was trying to do so in a way that retained a sense of femininity and minimized the extent to which it challenges the gender status quo. For example, she highlights the fact that she is a woman as well as her feelings as a woman when she says "Ustedes me colman de felicidad en mis sentimientos de mujer, al saber que aqui se ha tendido una mesa de amor, de camaraderia, de solidaridad." Throughout her speech she emphasizes the fact that the Feminist Peronist Party's efforts are all aimed at supporting her husband, General Peron. She does not portray this relationship as a partnership, as could be expected between a party and a leader. Instead the role Eva Peron encourages women to take in

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supporting General Peron is more subordinate, comparable to the traditional division of responsibilities within the household where the wife cooks and cleans behind the scenes and the husband works outside the house and received public credit for his work. One example of language that implies this relationship between the Feminist Party and their leader is when she explains that the women need to “trabajar y sacrificarse porque nada se consigue sino por el camino del sacrificio, de la comprensión y del amor.” Finally, the relationship is made clearer when Eva Peron emphasizes that the woman who works hardest and sacrifices the most could some day become the leader of the Peronist Feminist Party. What she is portraying as the highest goal for those women is to arrive at a position where they would still be beneath the status of the leader. The very existence of the Peronist Feminist Party demonstrated that women’s participation, though desirable and necessary in order to consolidate Peron’s power, was not considered to be equal to men’s participation. The Peronist party was serving its own interest by offering women their own party, creating the illusion of giving them power in order to attract the support of women, while not really changing women’s power within the party structure.

Wickman’s analysis of the role women played in the Peruvian Marxist party/terrorist organization, Sendero Luminoso, provides a glimpse into how gender inequality has affected power relationships throughout Latin America in a way very different from the one seen through Eva Peron’s speech. Wickman’s paper describes the discrimination women faced in terms of employment and in terms of returns on education. When compared to the salaries of men with similar education levels, women consistently earn less in Peru. Although she mentions that this inequality is even more pronounced in Peru than in other countries, it is a problem found

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throughout Latin America. This inequality produced frustration, especially amongst more educated women who saw their opportunities limited based on their gender. This frustration created an interest in an alternative to the status quo. Some found this alternative in the Sendero Luminoso movement.

The Sendero Luminoso movement ties together the different themes discussed in this paper. Abimael Guzman successfully manipulated the tensions caused by inequality in all three areas considered here, class, race and gender, in order to gain support for his movement. He increased his power by attracting both the support and active participation of women by granting them equal status with men within his organization. According to Wickman, Guzman, emphasized within his recruiting process and the indoctrination process that women's involvement in his revolution was the only way for them to improve their situation. His promises that the organization's struggle included fighting for equality for women, Indians and peasants further increased his appeal across different underprivileged groups. By offering these groups a strategy for contesting domination and discrimination he offered them power and in the cases of the Indians he offered them cultural legitimization. This strategy successfully increased Guzman's own power.

CONCLUSION

Common tensions found throughout Latin America involve three main issues examined here: class, race and gender. While these tensions divide the region along these lines, they unite the countries of the region in that they share the challenges presented by these divisions. Issues

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of class, race and gender are influenced by culture and power, but also in turn shape power dynamics and influence culture. The various texts considered for this paper provide a small sample of the broad issues and the variety of ways they are expressed or manifest themselves in Latin America. Until Latin American countries can resolve these issues, social and economic development in the region will be affected. It is necessary, therefore, to design real and lasting solutions with the goal that Latin America can become an example of development, growth and progress for the world.

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