

## THE SEMANTICS OF ASYMMETRIC COUNTERCONCEPTS: THE CASE OF “LATIN AMERICA” IN THE US

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on a crucial aspect of the history of the concept of Latin America in the United States: the ways in which representations of Spanish Americans and Brazilians are constructed as typically Latin America. The guiding hypothesis here is that the concept of Latin America acquires coherence in North American attributes texts, speeches and images that were not originally meant to convey them. A testimony of a Brazilian rural worker, a painting of a Mexican muralist, the thoughts of a Colombian writer, all these communicative acts, are thus appropriated and become pregnant with other meanings. This work aims at exposing those ascribed meanings as well the ones that were hidden by the synecdochical operation.

**Keywords:** Latin America; Conceptual history; Asymmetric counterconcepts; Latin American Studies.

This article explores the semantic operations involved in the construction of “Latin America” as an asymmetric counterconcept of “America”. According to Reinhart Koselleck, asymmetric counter concepts belong to a particular kind of historico-political conceptual formations used by human groups to define otherness. Their most important characteristic is that one's own position is readily defined by criteria “which make it possible for the resulting counterposition to be only negated”. In this case, conceptualization is acted by one group with the function of denying Others the reciprocity of mutual recognition.

The fact that the concept of Latin America belongs to this category is not obvious. For most users of the English language nowadays, Latin America seems to be a geographical concept that “simply” designates a region in the American continent. Like other geographical terms, Latin America is treated as a quasi-natural entity, as something so stable that its existence is beyond the pale of human agency. As such, Latin America does not seem to be defined in opposition to anything and, thus, it does not seem to be a counterconcept of any sort. The quasi-

natural facade of Latin America also helps to conceal the active asymmetrical operation of naming it. As a result, no particular human group appears to be implicated in this process of naming. Latin America is treated as a concept that is true to the thing it names, and thus, universally accepted. The term's wide acceptance is also a sign that it is not considered to be in violation of the tacit norms of political correctness, which are allegedly sensitive to the issue of mutual recognition. In sum, most English speaking subjects assume the term Latin America is scientifically true and normatively correct.

In section I of this article I will demonstrate that, contrary to the appearance it presently has, Latin America is indeed an asymmetrical counterconcept of "America". First, I will briefly present some current examples where the term is used in a "geographical" manner, that is, with an explicit intent of denoting location. Second, I will show the asymmetry involved in naming Latin America through a semantic experiment that reveals the pragmatic impossibility of symmetry. Third, I will examine the entries "Latin" and "Latin America" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and show that besides its geographical meaning, Latin America is also defined by negative cultural attributes, a fact that indicates its character as a counterconcept. In section II, I will shortly lay out Koselleck's historical types of asymmetrical counterconcepts, which will be used in the third section to analyze some textual samples from the Latin American studies literature. I intend to show that, in that literature, the pair of asymmetrical counterconcepts America/Latin America is structured according to a particular combination of previous types of asymmetrical opposition, a fact that confirms Koselleck insights about the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, i.e., the historical accumulation of human experience through linguistic sedimentation. Finally, I will conclude arguing that the American social sciences have reproduced the asymmetrical conceptualization of Latin America in a way that justifies forms of American intervention in Latin America.

## I.1

Presently, the term Latin America is widely employed in the US. Both in textual and oral communications, it is used to refer to

aspects, peoples and cultures of the roughly twenty countries located to the South of the Rio Grande. In the news media the term is usually used to refer to a geographic space called “Latin America”.

For example:

(1) Conceptualism as a movement that has been happening simultaneously all over the world, as significantly in Japan, Africa and Eastern Europe as in Western Europe, North America and Latin America (Johnson 1999).

(2) By the 1920s his renown in both fields was such that he was in demand in Europe and Latin America (Severo 1999).

(3) Figures offered by the administration reveal the dimensions of the political confrontation at the university, the largest and once one of the most prestigious in Latin America (Preston 1999).

The geographic meaning is also suggested by academic texts on Latin America produced in the US, as the titles of following publications show:

(4) Communism in Latin America” [Alexander, 1957 #2714].

(5) The Hovering Giant; US Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America 1910-1985 (Blasier 1985).

(6) The new Protestantism in Latin America: remembering what we already know, testing what we have learned (Dixon 1995).

In all examples the term is used with the intent of indicating location. Its status as a geographical term is made clear in examples (1) and (2), where Latin America is listed among other continents (i.e. Europe, Africa, Eastern Europe). In examples (1), (2), and (5) it means something like “some place within the limits of Latin America” or just “somewhere in Latin America”. The meaning in example (3) is “the whole region of Latin America”. Finally, in examples (4) and (6), depending on the interpretation, the term may mean either “somewhere in Latin America” or “the whole Latin America”.

Despite the explicit function of denoting geographical location in all examples, one cannot help but notice the unspecific and generic tone in which “Latin America” is employed. In (2) it is clear that “he was in demand” in some places in Latin America, even though we are not told exactly where. The same can be

said of (1) in which we are not informed of the actual places in Latin America where “conceptualism is happening”, or of (4) and (6) which do not tell us what exact place in Latin America is being affected by communism and Protestantism. The lack of specificity of (4) and (6) is also coupled with the expectation that Latin America might have responded in a coherent way to the spread of communism or Protestantism, in other words, that Latin America is a coherent whole.

As in the case of the terms “Eastern” and “Western” used to divide Europe in two parts, the qualifier “Latin” in Latin America distinguishes one portion of the American continent from the other. From the perspective of English speaking America, thus, “Latin America” names the American Other. The use of the word “America” in English to refer exclusively to the United States throws a bit of confusion in this terminology. Nonetheless, the fact that US citizens refer to their own country as America only corroborates the perception that the rest of the continent, which is named Latin America, is an insignificant Other.

## 1.2

In support of the asymmetric nature of the conceptual pair America/Latin America, one could simply adduce the fact that the term “Latin America” has very little use for the peoples who inhabit the countries of “Latin America”. In fact, all 20 countries that fall under the denomination are formally independent states with their own constitutions and political communities. There is no overarching arrangement that provides a unified political nexus to Latin America, no Latin American state, no Latin American society, no common body of laws, and no institutions that support a common Latin American citizenship. A recent survey shows that even “Latin American” immigrants in the US, who are offered institutional incentives to assume a Latino identity, tend to identify themselves primarily by their nation of origin and not by a common Latin heritage (de la Garza, DeSipio et al. 1992). Differently from Benedict Anderson’s definition of nation, Latin America is not an imagined community (Anderson 1991). That does not entail arguing that “Latin America” is not “imagined”. For, as I intend to show, Latin

America is mainly imagined by the ones who define themselves as not pertaining to it: North Americans or Anglo-Americans.

The basic asymmetry involved in naming Latin America in English can also be demonstrated through a semantic thought experiment. The experiment starts with the search for semantic symmetrical matches for the concept of Latin America. After they are found, the matches are submitted to a pragmatic test in which the political and historical consequences of their usage in current English is examined. This experiment identifies a basic asymmetry at the foundations of the actual naming of Latin America and hints at the political load with which this operation is invested.

What would the exact symmetrical correlative of “Latin America” be? The term usually employed in this case is North America. Nevertheless, since “North” and “Latin” do not name the same category of things, paring Latin American with North America would be semantically imprecise. The semantic correlatives of North America are South and Central America but not Latin America. We must find a word that would be symmetrical to Latin, i.e., that would fit the English speaking population of America as well as Latin fits the Spanish and Portuguese speaking populations of the same continent. The most obvious candidate is “Anglo-Saxon”, but this qualifier is not totally symmetrical to Latin either. Even though separately Angle and Saxon name the German tribes that invaded the British Isles in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the hyphenated form “Anglo-Saxon” usually refers to English itself. Since English is the language of the European power that colonized the USA, the symmetric form for Anglo-Saxon America would be Portuguese America and Spanish America, but not Latin America. The qualifier “Latin” refers to the people that invaded and colonized the Iberian peninsula, the Romans. Symmetrically, the qualifiers “German” or “Teutonic” better represent the peoples that invaded England. This solution would also be linguistically symmetrical since Portuguese and Spanish are said to be Latin languages in the same way that English is said to be a Germanic language. Consequently, the symmetrical match for Latin America is Teutonic America.

Now, lets place the term found against the English language presently spoken in the US and assess the political overtones

of their use. Nowadays, the terms Germanic America or Teutonic America are not used at all to describe the English speaking regions of the continent. Nonetheless, pan-Germanism was a current ideology among the American intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Farr and Seidelman 1993; Park 1995; Smith 1997). The advent of the two World Wars, in which the US fought against Germany, helped to undermine the pan-Germanic sentiment. This is particularly true in regard to World War II, when the glorification of things Germanic became identified with Nazi totalitarianism, terror, and genocide. In sum, for historical and political reasons the symmetric correlative of Latin America, Teutonic America, is no longer used.

Still, despite the argument presented above, a case can be made that the term Anglo-Saxon America is roughly symmetrical to Latin America. Consequently, we should also examine the political implications of its usage. The idea of an Anglo-Saxon heritage has been a strong component of American national identity (Smith 1997). Despite its close association with pan-Germanism - both stress the racial superiority of Northern Europeans -, the term enjoyed a much broader reception in the racially charged language of 19<sup>th</sup> century US (Pike 1992; Park 1995; Smith 1997; Schoultz 1998). Contrary to pan-Germanism, the praise of things Anglo-Saxon has survived up to this day. Traces of it can be found in texts of the news media (Samuelson 2001), academic publications (Martin 1990), and political discourses (Schoultz 1998). Nonetheless, as a consequence of the successive waves of political correctness that have swept the US, particularly since the Civil Rights Movement, the overt glorification of American Anglo-Saxon heritage has become identified with the white supremacist right wing. In the context of mainstream American society, the praise of ethnic identities and traditions of minorities is encouraged, while overt Anglo-Saxonism is seen as inadequate, mainly because this ideology can be explicitly associated with the continuation of exclusionary and segregationist attitudes towards minorities - a type of conflict that has plagued the American society throughout its history.

Anglo-Saxon America may be said to be a symmetric correlative of Latin America, but the political overtones of each concept's usage are widely different, i.e., whereas Latin America is apparently used as a value-free descriptive

geographical concept, Anglo-Saxon America is explicitly loaded with political connotations associated with white supremacist ideology. In other words, when considered from the pragmatic perspective of usage the concepts are not symmetric. The following example is a good illustration of this point. While some white Americans might define themselves as Anglo-Saxon, most African Americans would certainly deny this identification. The same is true in relation to Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos or even groups such as Italians and Jews, which are now considered white. Nonetheless, this freedom of identification is not allowed for the peoples of Latin America. Even though most of the populations that are tagged as Latin American are extremely diverse, from the American perspective, all of them are equally Latin American. A black person from Brazil is a Latin American as well as a Guarany Indian from Paraguay or a white person from Colombia. In other words, despite the fact that the processes of colonization promoted by Spain, England, and Portugal were roughly similar, at least to the extent of producing diverse populations in the colonies, people in the US have the freedom to "choose" their identity whereas people from the Other part of the continent are indelibly marked by the Latin character.

The symmetrical terms found by the semantic exercise failed the pragmatic test. Their failure might be attributed to the fact that the racially loaded categories of Germanic and Anglo-Saxon are identified with the dominant sectors of the American society. The overt use of those categories would contradict the self-image of the US as the land of tolerance, liberalism, and freedom. Nonetheless, "Latin", which is also recognized by Americans as the dominant cultural heritage in Latin American societies, is accepted as a "political correct" way of referring to the whole set of countries and societies south of the US border - a case of cultural double standards. In sum, the asymmetric nature of the construction of the concept of Latin America in American English is shown by the lack of any symmetrical correlatives to the term in the language. Furthermore, this asymmetry is associated with blatant lack of recognition, where diversity in other societies is reduced to the common denominator of Latinism.

### 1.3

The term Latin America is a reasonably recent acquisition of the English language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* did not have an entry entitled “Latin American” until the publication of the third volume of its *Addition Series* in 1997. Before that date, the term was subsumed under the entry “Latin”. The entry “Latin” of the third volume of the *Oxford English Dictionary Addition Series* presents five meanings for the word. The first is indicated by “sense A”, which refers to the classical language spoken by the populations of ancient Latium – a meaning that is covered by the original entry in the main edition of the dictionary. The second meaning is solely “Latin American”. The third is the linguistic-geographic definition of Latin America, “of or pertaining to those countries of Central, North, and South America in which Spanish or Portuguese is the dominant language”. After the definition the reader is showed a series of historical examples where the term was used in a geographic sense, much like some of the examples analyzed above. The following sense of Latin, the fourth, has a cultural slant, “designating the characteristics of temperament or behaviour popularly attributed to European or American peoples speaking languages developed from Latin.” After the definition, the reader is presented with a short list of those characteristics: “proud, passionate, impetuous, showy in appearance ..., sometimes somewhat dismissive.” The fifth usage of Latin is as an elliptic form of “Latin American”. Finally, the word still is used to designate a series of musical styles associated with the countries of “Latin America”.

The cultural elements that define the Latin character, as the fourth meaning indicates, are all negative even though some may not appear to be so at first glance. Proud is a dubious term that can be used in a positive sense but also in a negative one, meaning the display of excessive self-esteem. Since, as we will see below, from the American perspective, the Latin American condition provides little justification for pride, the act of being proud in such context amounts for a sort of irrational behavior. “Passionate” and “impetuous” are also qualifiers that can be easily associated with irrationality. Both are used to describe and evaluate types of action that are raptured in emotions and



feelings, and thus, not controlled by reason. “Showy in appearance” is obviously negative. Appearance is opposed to substance, thus a person who is “showy in appearance” lacks actual content, she is vain, conceited. Finally, “dismissive” requires little interpretation. This word can be easily associated with lack of respect and responsibility.

The quotations used in the OED to exemplify the fourth usage of the word “Latin” confirm the negative depiction of the “Latin” character.

**1914** Wyndham Lewis in *New Weekly* 20 June 13/2 For everything that is *rubbishy puerile* in the Latin temperament machinery has come as an *immense toy*. **1956** A. Wilson *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* II.ii. 278 Sensual and elegant though Gerald was, he detested the *flashy smartness* of such Latin *womanizers*. **1970** *Times* 19 Aug. 6/4 The *weakness* of every Yorkshireman is his Latin temperament, *doubly dangerous* when it has so often to be suppressed, as in (...) cricket. **1981** V. Glendinning *Edith Sitwell* iv. 61 He was *extrovert, physical, unstable, and very Latin*. **1989** Sunday Tel. 8 Jan. 17/1 His first language was Spanish and, not surprisingly, he describes his temperament as Latin. A *proud* man, he likes to be seen to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

The “Latin” characteristics given by the OED’s “Latin” entry are negative and in clear opposition to the Anglo-Saxon protestant self-image of rational behavior, discipline, and restraint.

The entry “Latin American” in the *Oxford English Dictionary Addition Series*, right after “Latin”, provides evidence that this composite expression carries most of the connotations already associated with the qualifier “Latin”. According to the second definition, “Latin American” is “a native or inhabitant of Latin America; a person of Latin American origin or descent.” This definition is illustrated by the following quotations:

**1912** *Chambers's Jnl.* Nov. 720/2 An Englishman (...) soon wishes himself well rid of the (...) Latin-American. **1960** *Business Week* 3 Dec. 87 'Fidelism', or 'Fidelismo', as the Latin Americans call it (...) is the Castro-style revolution that's followed by a left-wing, Communist-influenced, perhaps Communist-controlled, government. **1973** A. MANN *Tiara* i. 4 In the Philippines, some *crazy* Latin American got near enough to Paul VI to attack him with a knife.

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<sup>1</sup> I chose to reproduce the quotations from the OED preserving their original format and style. Underlines were added to indicate the use of pejorative qualifiers.

The first quote denotes the utterly contempt that an Englishman feels for Latin Americans. The second hints at the general involvement of Latin Americans with Cuban-style communism, a political doctrine that was probably not popular among the readers of *Business Week*, particularly in 1960, when the hostilities that lead to the invasion of the Bay of Pigs were escalating. The third example associates Latin Americans with craziness, that is, irrationality. The vague tone of the phrasing, “some crazy Latin American”, indicates that craziness is a common characteristic of Latin Americans.

The choice of such culturally charged quotations to exemplify the definition of “Latin American” as “a person of Latin American origin or descent” might seem a little surprising due to the strict geographical sense in which the term is sometimes employed. Nevertheless, that is exactly what makes this passage so telling. The authors of the dictionary could have carefully avoided the use of such pejorative images to illustrate a definition that apparently does not call for them. But they didn’t. This is evidence that the negative characterization of the “Latin American” cannot be easily dissociated from the geographical meaning of the concept. After all, what demarks that geographical meaning, what separates Latin America from the rest of America, is the fact that people are seen as Latin. Therefore, the expression can never totally rid itself from the anthropological contents associated with the Latin character in English.

## II

In “The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts” Koselleck examines conceptual pairs that claim to cover the whole of humanity: Hellene and Barbarian, Christian and Heathen, human and nonhuman, and superhuman and subhuman (Koselleck 1985). That is not the case of Latin America and America, which form a conceptual pair that covers only part of humanity: the inhabitants of the New World. Nonetheless, even though the continent’s population is only part of the whole humanity, it also is in itself a very meaningful whole. The ideological construction of America is crucial for the definition of the American self-image and its

positioning in relation to the more universal ideas such as humanity or the international community. Defining an American America, and, thus, defining its opposite-in-America, Latin America, has been an important element of the symbolic construction of US nationalism and also a guide for action in the international arena (Weinberg 1935; Merk 1963; Horsman 1981; Allman 1984).

A preliminary analysis indicates that the conceptual pair America/Latin America display structural features that are similar to the types examined by Koselleck. There is an active group that defines the Other negatively, according to its self-understanding of a totality and of its universal claim to fully represent that totality. On the other hand, beyond this common structure, each case has its particular characteristics. Koselleck argues that due to the historical accumulation of human experience in language, newer asymmetrical pairs are usually more complex than previous ones.

The accumulation of temporalities finally makes it possible for the structure of all these counterconcepts to appear together. Today we have both antithetical linguistic figures appearing alongside each other, and the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous which is contained within a single pair of concepts, thanks to the historical diversity of the zones of experience that this pair comprehends (Koselleck 1985).

Would the pair Latin America/America also contain the accumulation of experiences of previous counterconcepts? Before answering this question, we should first sketch the main features of the asymmetric conceptual pairs examined by Koselleck. Once these features are exposed we will employ them as analytical tools to exam texts produced by the Latin America studies, a task that will be done in the next section.

According to the chronological sequence followed by Koselleck, first comes the pair Hellene/Barbarian.

The Barbarians not only were formally non-Greek, or aliens, but also, as aliens, were defined negatively. They were cowardly, unskillful, gluttonous, brutish, and so on. For every definition there was empirical evidence: contact with overseas traders, the mass of foreign slaves, devastation of the homeland by invading Persians, and similar experiences could easily be generalized without seeming to need revision (...) The name of one people -the Hellenes- became the counterconcept for all the rest, who were assembled under a collective name which was simply the negative of Hellene. Asymmetry was thus

semantically based on this conscious contrast of a specific name with a generic classification (Koselleck 1985).

The Greek characterization of the barbarian was usually phrased in terms of a condemnation of their alleged way of life, which represented the exact opposite of everything the Greeks deemed praiseworthy in their own self-image. The barbarians' wretched condition could be attributed to both natural and cultural causes. A sharp sense of difference between Greeks and barbarians can be found in passages of Plato's and Aristotle's works. Plato argued that Hellenes and barbarians were different species.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle claims that since (1) barbarians are by nature inferior to Greeks, and, (2) by nature, the superior should always rule the inferior, then Greeks should be the barbarians' natural masters.<sup>3</sup> A conclusion that can also be phrased as "barbarians are slaves by nature". In practical terms, this argument was used to justify enslavement of non-Greeks and Greek despotic rule over barbarian populations (Richter 1990). The text of the *Politics* provides evidence that, in the classical Greek world, Aristotle was not alone in defending the idea that barbarians were natural slaves<sup>4</sup>. Whatever the correct interpretation of Aristotle's concept of nature (*physis*), it should be noted that the distinction between Hellene and barbarian is marked by a sharp perception of spatial differentiation. Hellenes lived a political life in autonomous *poleis*, whereas barbarians lived either as slaves in Greek *poleis* or as subjects of despotic states. That is, the opposition between the two poles could always be phrased in terms of "we here" versus "they there".

In temporal terms, Aristotle's argument does not leave any open possibility for the barbarians' future redemption. The alleged aim of dominating the barbarians is not their eventual

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Meno* 245 C.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's conception of barbarism is not beyond contention. Some authors argue that he saw barbarism as a product of the way of life of non-Greeks (Pagden 1982; Hannaford 1996), others interpret Aristotle's teleologic conception of nature as something that encompasses innateness (Koselleck 1985). This latter position renders the difference between barbarian and Hellene irreducible to a simple question of lifestyle.

<sup>4</sup> See the reference to Euripides in the *Politics* (1252 b) and the arguments that supported both the natural and conventional theories of slavery in Aristotle's time (1255 a).

emancipation from their wretched condition. In the Hellene/barbarian type of asymmetric opposition difference is irreducible and indelible. In fact, its irreducibility is a condition for the justification of the inferior element's subjection to the superior one.

The advent of Christianity allowed for the appearance of new distinctions that could not be expressed by the pair Hellene/barbarian. The most important is the opposition between believer and unbeliever, which crystallized in the form of the asymmetrical conceptual duo Christian/heathen. Koselleck argues that the root of that distinction is already in Saint Paul. Paul's gospel universal appeal to all men left only two courses of conduct: accepting the Christian doctrine and living according to the scripture, or rejecting it entirely. But, differently from the pair Hellene/barbarian, this division was not spatially fixed. On the contrary, Christians could live anywhere and their "Christianity" was not attached to any particular territorial unit. On the contrary, in this world Christian and heathen lived side by side. Furthermore, the Christian doctrine created a horizon of expectations open to the future conversion of the heathen to Christianity. That is, even though in a given moment, humanity was asymmetrically divided between Christians and heathen, a possibility was always open for a future elimination of this distinction through the consolidation of an entirely Christian humanity.

The Pauline negation is no longer organized spatially, but is predominantly temporal. (...) All the existing peoples -Hellenes, ethnai, gentes, and so forth who became defined in a Christian perspective as "Heathens," gentiles, or pagani, belong as such to the past. By virtue of the death of Christ, the future belongs to Christians. The future bears the new world.

The heathen is not just negatively defined. He represents something that is doomed to disappear in the future; a lifestyle that, according to the divine plan, will eventually succumb. The end of the heathen lifestyle is a just outcome of the Christian horizon of expectations. That leads to the conclusion, already reached by Augustine, that whereas the persecution of Christians by Heathens is unjust, the persecution of Heathens by Christians is just. This argument was stretched even further by medieval Christianity, which used the redemption of the heathen as an end to justify forceful conversions, war, plunder,

and massacres. Ultimately, the disappearance of the heathen's lifestyle could also be achieved by the physical elimination of pagan populations.

According to Koselleck, the appearance of the pair Christian/heathen did not represent the total decline of the previous conceptual distinction. On the contrary, it created the possibility for the application of overlapping categories. This allowed for the temporal aspect of the asymmetry Christian/heathen to be imposed over territorial distinctions of the Hellene/barbarian type, generating oppositions where the positive pole was always Christianity but the negative pole could be specifically represented by barbaric Saracens, Avars, Hungarians, Slavs, or Turks.

Finally, Koselleck examines the categories of *Übermensch* and *Untermensch*. In the context of Nazi Germany the duo was equated to the conceptual opposition between Aryan and non-Aryan. Much like the previous pair Christian/heathen, the conceptual duo Aryan/non-Aryan was supported by a horizon of expectations that envisioned the elimination of the negative opposition (non-Aryan) in the future. Nonetheless, differently from Christian ideology, which sustained that faith was a matter of consciousness, and thus supported, at least theoretically, the possibility of conversion of the non-essential heathen into a true Christian, the ideology of Aryanism conceived of the physical elimination of the *Untermensch* as history's only desirable future outcome.

### III

Primary among the cultural obstacles [that hamper democracy] is Latin America's half-millennium old dominant political culture of "monistic corporatism." This political culture is grounded in the pre-Enlightenment, pre-scientific-revolution, pre-capitalist, aristocratic, patrimonialist, monolithically Catholic, and structurally semifeudal world of the Iberian Peninsula of the sixteenth century, which made a deep impression on the Iberian colonies through conquest and colonization (Rossi and Piano 1980; Erickson 1977; Malloy 1977; Stepan 1978; Pike and Stritch 1974; Wiarda 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1981; Wagley 1992).

[In Latin America] particular interests, social diversity, cultural pluralism, religious nonconformity, and disrespect for tradition and authority are all viewed as detrimental to the common good. Rights do exist, but they are conceived as group rights, not individual rights. Societies shaped by

this Iberian-derived monistic corporatism tend to be characterized by authoritarianism, elitism, clientelism, patrimonialism, familism, hierarchy, caudillismo, machismo, minimal socioeconomic mobility, double standards of sexual morals, reverence for military and political authority, and an aristocratic ethos of disdain for manual labor and high regard for formal etiquette (Rossi and Piano 1980; Wiarda 1986, 1992; Dealy 1985; Martz and Myers 1992; Willems 1975).

The monistic-corporatist political tradition represents one of the greatest obstacles to the strengthening of authentic, sustained democracy in Latin America (Rossi and Piano 1980:76). Without overemphasizing cultural factors to the exclusion of social-structural ones, we can, nevertheless, acknowledge that monistic corporatism's tendencies tend to make the establishment of democracy difficult if not impossible (Smith 1994).

The passage reproduced above is made of excerpts from the short introduction of an article called "The spirit of democracy: base communities, Protestantism, and democratization in Latin America", authored by Christian Smith and published in the journal *Sociology of Religion* in 1994. In this piece, Smith intends to provide an informed guess about the future role of religious movements in the consolidation of democracy in Latin America.

Smith uses a startling abundance of negative words to describe "Latin America" (in italics). The words employed by Smith follow two different kinds of structural asymmetries, according to Koselleck's conceptualization. There are the ones used to decry the habits and mores of Latin Americans, such as double standards of sexual morals, reverence for military and political authority, authoritarianism, elitism, clientelism, etc. This type of defamation was also used in the classical characterization of the barbarian, where the difference between the self-perception and the Other is expressed in terms of opposing ways of life spatially separated. Another set of words is used to demonstrate that Latin Americans are primitive, developmentally challenged, and historically retarded: pre-Enlightenment, pre-scientific-revolution, pre-capitalist, and structurally semifeudal. Those words indicate that the subject in question is judged according to a predetermined theory of historical progress. The expression of difference in terms of temporality, as seen in the latter example, is typical of the Christian worldview (Löwith 1949; Koselleck 1985). In other words, the only asymmetrical structural relation that is absent in Smith's text is the racially charged *Übermensch/Untermensch*.

The words used by Smith are negative in a double way: first, and more clearly, because they are plainly pejorative; and second, and more importantly, because they are chosen to represent the negation of something that is in itself positive. In the passage above, Smith does not name the positive pole of his implicit comparison, but he does provide the reader with a list of its positive characteristics: particular interests, social diversity, cultural pluralism, religious nonconformity, and disrespect for tradition and authority - all of them allegedly nonexistent in "Latin America". Despite his refusal to give names, one cannot fail to recognize that this list of assets perfectly fits America's self-image: a liberal society (diversity and pluralism) with Protestant roots (religious nonconformity), and a special vocation for the future (disrespect for tradition and authority). No European nation would match this description.<sup>5</sup>

The coexistence of two types of asymmetries (Hellene/barbarian and Christian/heathen) allows for the possibility of translation. Therefore, characteristics such as patrimonialism, familism, hierarchy, *caudillismo*, *machismo* can also be understood as forms of historical retardation. Conversely, expressions such as pre-Enlightenment, pre-scientific-revolution, pre-capitalist are also read as condemnable habits and social arrangements. Smith first claims that monistic corporatism makes the establishment of democracy in Latin America impossible. Nonetheless, he concludes that, in the long run, the surge of Protestant membership will eventually break the cultural hegemony of monistic corporatism and finally make democracy possible in Latin America. One cannot fail to notice here the echoes of the Christian idea that in the future the infidel might be redeemed, even though the act of redemption would necessarily require the destruction of their previous lifestyle. Nonetheless, this solution also has territorial overtones, which invests it with a colonialist flavor. "Latin America" appears as a space to be conquered by the American Protestant colonizer who will teach "spiritual introspection, methodical self-discipline, application of faith to everyday experience, means-end mentality, and

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, Smith does not include equality among his list of positive assets.



personal responsibility (...), an ethos of rational individualism” (Smith 1994).

Christian Smith’s text was chosen because of its concentrated richness of theories, vocabulary, and bibliographical sources. Smith is, however, no innovator. Much of what he says, as the abundance of citations in his texts indicates, had already been claimed by previous authors. Furthermore, his conclusion that Protestants will eventually democratize Latin America is shared by many other Latin Americanists specialized in the study of religious movements (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990; Droogers, Huitzer et al. 1991; Ireland 1991; Burdick 1993; Garrard-Burnett 1993).

Smith’s text displays a type of contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous where one element, the Christian/heathen type of asymmetry, clearly dominates the other. The text as a whole aims at producing a prognostication. In his quest to guess the probability of a desirable future outcome (democratization), Smith produces a narrative where the future is open to human intervention through action. This action defines (and is defined by) an agent and a patient, that is, the element that acts and the element that is acted upon. Thus, the prospect of a future reconciliation, of a victory of good over evil that ultimately justifies the colonial enterprise, structures the whole argument.

Rhetorically speaking, therefore, the characterization of Latin America as ineluctably different, as would be the case in a purely Hellene/barbarian type of asymmetrical conceptualization, is undermined or subordinated to characterizations that express difference in terms of historical retardation. That is, only by leaving open the possibility of future progress, of an eventual deliverance from backwardness, can this type of discourse produce justifications for action.<sup>6</sup> The translatability from one type of asymmetry to the other, as showed above, is an additional way to secure the possibility that in the future even the most undesirable characteristics can be removed, once the appropriate measures have been taken.

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<sup>6</sup> As Melvin Richter has noted, the Greeks actually used theories of barbarian inferiority to justify their dominion over those peoples and also their enslavement by Greeks (Aristotle) (Richter 1990). Nonetheless, those theories were not based on the open possibility of a future redemption from barbarism.

Moving back in time, from the recently published article of the reasonably unknown Christian Smith to one of the seminal texts of modernization theory on Latin America published in 1967, Seymour Martin Lipset's *Elites in Latin America* (Lipset and Solari 1967), we can perceive that this basic structure of argumentation had already been articulated then. Lipset is concerned with determining possible solutions to the problem of economic underdevelopment in Latin America. Relying on Max Weber's theory about the origin of the spirit of capitalism, Lipset affirms that:

(...) capitalism and industrialization emerged in Western Europe and North America because value elements inherent in or derivative from the "Protestant Ethic" fostered the necessary kinds of behavior by those who had access to capital; while conversely during other periods in other cultures, the social and religious "ethics" inhibited a systematic rational emphasis on growth.

From that he adds that:

The relative failure of Latin American countries to develop on a scale comparable to those of North America or Australasia has been seen as, in some part, a consequence of variations in value systems dominating these two areas. The overseas offspring of Great Britain seemingly had the advantage of values derivative in part from the Protestant Ethic and from the formation of "New Societies" in which feudal ascriptive elements were missing. Since Latin America, on the other hand, is Catholic, it has been dominated for long centuries by ruling elites who created a social structure congruent with feudal social values (...).

Distinctions which seem particularly useful for analyzing the relation between values and the conditions for development are achievement-ascriptio, universalism-particularism, specificity-diffuseness, and equalitarianism-elitism (Lipset and Solari 1967).

The opposition between the society from which the author is speaking from and the Other, which is the object of analysis, is made clear by Lipset. The first part of the excerpt shows a type of characterization that resembles the Hellene/barbarian model. Even though the narrative is already historically infused, we are presented with the contemporaneous existence of two religious systems of thought and the opposing ethics they generate. Spatial differentiation is marked by the naming of the geographic regions in which one of those ethics is practiced: Western Europe and North America. The territories where the Other ethics dominates are not named in the passage.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the author is referring to Catholic Europe, which roughly corresponds to "Latin Europe", and Latin America. Furthermore, the opposition between the two poles of comparison is also expressed by the adoption of Talcott Parson's pairs of pattern-variables: achievement-ascription, universalism-particularism, specificity-diffuseness, and equalitarianism-elitism. For each Protestant virtue there is a catholic vice.

In the following paragraph the terms of comparison slightly change. Now the positive pole becomes Great Britain's colonial offspring, Protestant North America and Australasia, which is opposed to catholic "Latin America". Interestingly enough, Lipset first alludes to the "West" as the positive pole of comparison in the first paragraph, but rapidly shifts to the more restricted set of Anglo-Saxon nations, in the second paragraph. Also in the second paragraph, the Christian/heathen type of asymmetry is introduced. North America and Australasia are said to be "New Societies" where "feudal ascriptive elements" are missing. In other words, differentiation is now also expressed in terms of a temporal scheme where fully "New" Anglo-Saxon societies are compared to Latin societies that are still tied to the past. Lipset employs here the traditional division of "universal" history in stages: antiquity, middle ages, and modernity. Fully "New", thus, stands for modern, whereas feudal obviously refers to medieval. Latin America is thus depicted as historically retarded.

It is important to notice that the Hellene/barbarian type is maintained parallel to or enmeshed with the Christian/heathen one. It is the former type of distinction that enables the author to place the Other, together with its habits, beliefs and social structures, in a specific territory, which is markedly distinct from the place of authorial enunciation. Nonetheless, the overarching dominance of the Christian/heathen type of asymmetry is also present in Lipset's text. His alleged project, as the project of modernization theory as a whole, is to deliver Latin America from its inherent underdevelopment; that is, from its incapacity to be fully contemporaneous with American society, as he perceives it. According to Lipset, Latin America will only be able to rid itself from the heavy burden of its Iberian feudal past through the hands of foreign capitalists and European immigrants (Lipset and Solari 1967). In sum, Lipset follows the

same rhetorical steps employed by Smith. First the identification of an apparently intractable difference, second, the translation of this difference in terms of historical retardation, and, third, the conception of an action plan that will redeem Latin America.

Similar structural features can be identified in the passage below by Howard Wiarda.

(...) we need to know the roots and background of Latin America, why the weight of history and the past remains so heavy there ... We must therefore study not just Latin America's recent politics but its origins in medieval Iberia and in the system Spain and Portugal transferred to the New World (Wiarda 1990).

Glen Caudill Dealy adds:

(...) the civic virtues cherished by Latin Americans are essentially those perfections prized by classic Roman civilization...many virtues and values have changed little over the centuries (Dealy 1996).

For Dealy, the stagnation of the Latin spirit is even older than others have imagined, that is, Latin America historical retardation is even more acute. After all, its illnesses date not from the middle ages but from classic Rome itself. In other words, Dealy found that Latin America is coherently Latin, and that Latins have remained stuck in the same historical stage for two millennia. For Dealy, the burden of an unchangeable Latin heritage is so heavy that only an immense power will be able to relieve Latin America from it.

## Conclusion

As the analysis of the textual material produced by Latin America studies shows, Koselleck is correct in identifying the accumulation of temporalities (the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous) in the discursive production of asymmetric counterconcepts. By employing his historical cases as analytical tools to examine the case of Latin America, we were able to identify the superposition of two types of conceptual asymmetry: the dominant Christian/heathen and the subordinate Hellene/barbarian. We also noticed the apparent inexistence of the *Übermensch/Untermensch* type of opposition in the Latin America studies literature. Nonetheless, we should be aware that the overt racial denigration of "Latins" was a

common staple of American culture for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gibson 1971; Malby 1971). If American society at large reproduced a type of *Übermensch/Untermensch* opposition in relation to “Latins”, why did Latin America studies repress it? Is this kind of opposition present in social scientific texts in a hidden manner, behind rhetorical strategies of deflection? Those questions deserve further attention.

The coexistence of arguments that support a Hellene/barbarian type of asymmetric irreducibility with a Christian/heathen type of promise of future redemption allow for the discourses articulated by Latin American specialists to justify the intervention of the positive element over the negative. After all, if left alone by itself, Latin America will continue to hover over its own degenerated state of historical retardation. Due to its incapacity to be fully historical, that is, to be the agent of its own history, Latin America can only be saved by an intervening superior force. The history of Latin American studies can be read as a sequence of such projects of intervention. First, modernization theory aimed at curing Latin America’s underdevelopment. Second, theories of political stabilization aimed at securing Latin America against the threat of communism. Third, Latin Americanists tried to design the best path for Latin American democratization. Fourth, they are now discussing the most appropriate forms of democratic consolidation. This list can be extended to most sub fields of Latin America studies, each one of them with its own recipe for future redemption. Each one of them supported by discourses that are enunciated from a “point” that defines itself as spatially and temporally distinct from Latin America. In fact, the condition of spatial and temporal differentiation is crucial for investing those discourses with authority. It is only by speaking from the US, from a society that, according to the same discourses, is culturally distinct and has achieved full historical development, that Latin Americanists are able to “understand” the illnesses of Latin America and prescribe the appropriate curing measures.

All those projects of intervention follow a rhetorical structure similar to Smith’s. First, Latin America is presented as a pathological case. Second, this pathology is diagnosed as a form of historical retardation, which opens the possibility for future redemption. Finally, a bitter remedy is prescribed, which

usually involves some form of subjection to American supervision or intervention.

The language used by the American social sciences to negatively describe Latin America is drenched with traces of ideologies such as Manifest Destiny and Anglo-Saxon superiority, both of them products of the racially obsessed intellectual milieu of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From a pragmatic point of view, it is interesting to notice that Latin Americanists are able to employ generous amounts of derogatory remarks to “explain” Latin America without jeopardizing the alleged objectivity and value-freedom of the discourses they produce. The quotations above by Christian Smith are a good example of this practice.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, due to space constraints, I will not be able to examine the historical roots of the images of Latin America articulated by the American social sciences. The task of analyzing the projects and theories of each subfield of Latin America studies in a more detailed manner has also to be left for another occasion. For now, I hope to have exposed some basic structural elements that support this intellectual project.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith is, however, neither alone nor the most radical defamer. Mark Falcoff has said that “Latin Americans are not great readers of books: instead they consume huge quantities of newsprint, café gossip, and conspiracy theories” (Falcoff, 1998). David Martin, who wrote a widely cited and quoted book about Protestantism in Latin America, has declared that Brazilians think that “whoring and gambling are the natural attributes of the proper male”. Other examples abound.

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