

A New Interpretation of the History of America Luis Alberto Sánchez

The Hispanic American Historical Review, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Aug., 1943), pp. 441-456

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE HISTORY OF AMERICA

There was a time, less than a century ago, when the oldest date recognized for the history of America scarcely went beyond the year 1,000 of the Christian era. According to that the Incas founded their government toward the eleventh or twelfth century (A.D.). Pre-historic ages could not then claim much greater antiquity. Today, however, an antiquity which dates at least to the year 3,000 B.C. has been established for American civilizations, and some people speak of a period between 8,000 and 15,000 B.C., that is to say, a pre-Egyptian epoch. How has such a radical change in chronology been produced in less than a hundred years of research? How can one explain that addition of at least five thousand years to the lineage of our aboriginal civilization?

With the beginning of the circulation of Memorias antiguas historiales, in which the writer, the Licentiate Don Fernando de Montesinos of Osuna, speaks of numerous and very ancient dynasties in Peru, the book was branded as fanciful and illusory, and classic criticism censured it as superficial and full of falsehoods. After all, though Montesinos was the author of the documentary Anales del Pirú (exhumed in 1909), from his pen had also come a certain account in which he sought to defend the thesis that earthly paradise and the kingdom of Ophir had their see in America (a fictitious theory which found an adherent in so circumspect and wellinformed a man as Don Antonio de León Pinelo, whose manuscript entitled El Paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo has been preserved) and he even went so far as to maintain that the name of America was not derived from the false patrimony of Vespucci, but from a combination of the phrase "Hec Maria," which would lend a certain touch of holiness to the christening of our continent.

The years have shown that the Licentiate Montesinos

really understood what he did understand, that is, he was correct in his ideas regarding the greater remoteness of Peruvian civilizations, notwithstanding the fact that he was overly credulous in acknowledging as authentic the complicated dynasties which, among recollections and fantasies, he presented to us in his *Memorias*.

Setting back the clock for the aforesaid civilizations was not only a phenomenon of archeological transcendency, but also one which had its social repercussions. The Indo-Americans (I should prefer to say the South Americans, taking the course of the Rio Grande as the boundary line between the two Americas) took pride in their old stock. A long time after Europe vibrated under the goad of its medieval antiquity with the romanticists, we vibrated under the spur of our ancientness, which conferred upon us the title of Oldest World instead of New World, since such newness existed only for the Europeans—an external evaluation—and not for us nor for reality per se (for history per se) into whose dominions we had made our actual entry thousands of years before the Spanish, French, English, and Dutch established their respective communities.

The appearance of that sentiment of autochthonous pride coincided with various corroborating facts: the frustrated attempt of Florentino Ameghino to validate the theory of the homunculos patagonicus or homo pampeanus; the defeat of Spain at Cavite and the subsequent apogee of the United States, a power of the New (or Old) World; the collapse of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz with its foreign influences, and the agitation of the masses which the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (the first of the social revolutions of the twentieth century) signified; the commemoration of the first centenary of independence in many American republics; and, finally, the outburst of the First World War and its social reverberations through the Russian Revolution and the readjustment movements of various political tones in Germany and Italy. In that precise moment in which Europe began to lose the prestige of its sobriety and internal peace, thus looking disdainfully upon our political commotions, our ancient lineage

brought about the reinforcement—perhaps it would be more appropriate to say, the creation—of our historic consciousness.

The consequences of such a stirring spiritual state were not long in appearing, nor were they without repercussion. They reverberated in the strictly historical field as well as in the economic and political fields. In general, every new and profound interpretation of history entails political results, or, inversely, responds to the pressure of political activity. This was true of Bossuet's Discourse on Universal History, Hegel's Lessons on Universal History, and Spengler's Decline of the West. Such was also the case with the South American phenomenon that I am relating.

In short, the new interpretation of history that has been mentioned was fostered by the concurrence of three singular factors: (a) the discovery of new archeological riches and the certainty that the antiquity and the quality of our pre-European culture did not justify the scorn with which they had been regarded; (b) the operation of social problems, including the identity between the question concerning the recovery of the pre-European (indigenous) era, from an historical point of view, and the question concerning the general state of impoverishment and humiliation of the social race that history was revindicating; (c) the European crisis and, above all, the visible decline of Spain and Portugal, the mother countries.

The characteristics of the new interpretation of our his tory were, then: (1) the indigenous or autochthonous element on the one hand, and the creole or the mestizo element on the other; (2) an anti-European trend; (3) an agrarian and socializing influence. To these three essential features was added, after 1924, a fourth very important one: an anti-imperialistic outlook, that is, a tendency to recover economic autonomy. Until that time the economic factor, except in some of Alberdi's pages, had had almost no importance for our historians. Thereafter it was to be fundamental. As the primacy or significance of the economic factor involved the validation of historic materialism, the new interpretation,

among the so-called "rightist" as well as the "leftist" historians, accepted this point, although some followed Marxian theories while others rejected them.

The most concrete expression of such a criterion, the most authentic revisionist movement of our history—despite the fact that it did not originate in historic theory, strictly speaking, but in political and economic events—is represented by Aprismo, whose first definite theoretical statement came in 1924, and whose organic character is still in the process of development, notwithstanding the copious bibliography produced by its mentors and intellectual adherents.

II

Paradoxically, no anti-imperialist movement or party was organized in South America until 1924. A league of this type, which censured President McKinley for his conduct with respect to Cuba and Puerto Rico, had been founded in Chicago as early as 1898. The Mexican Revolution had as one of its main objectives the economic liberation of that country; but that was an action, not a doctrine, not an historical interpretation in accord with general principles. The postulation of the five basic aims of the Apra made by V. R. Haya de la Torre finally coördinated all those anxieties and tendencies in a single declaration of principles. Its five fundamental propositions were: anti-imperialism, the nationalization of land and industries, the internationalization of the Panama Canal, the economic and political unity of Latin America, and solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the earth. Of these five points, the one regarding imperialism was then limited to the North American or "Yankee" imperialism, which was the greatest problem in the years 1924 to 1927, the epoch when the "Big Stick" and "Dollar Diplomacy" were at their height; today it has broadened in meaning. In the point regarding the Panama Canal the term "inter-Americanization" has been substituted for "internationalization." Such are the essential modifications that the program of the Apra (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) has undergone with respect to foreign policy.

Furthermore, to offset the appearance of the Nazi movement and the aggressive, world-wide development of Fascism, the Apra resolved, from the beginning of the present war, to favor the adversaries of the aforesaid totalitarian tendencies and to promote, on the basis of equality (that is, equality of Latin America and Saxon America), an understanding within the whole continent. F. D. Roosevelt's declaration and his "Good Neighbor Policy" had already inclined the Apra in this direction before the Pan-American Congress at Lima in 1938, although this did not signify any renunciation of the organization's postulates concerning anti-imperialism or continental nationalism. As both political conditions in the world and Washington's denouncements were different, the Apra could not remain in a stationary situation, as if nothing had changed. In a logical way it confronted the moment which since 1936—and more acutely since 1939—the world has been living.

All this implied, and still implies, a fundamentally different concept of the rôle of our continent in contemporary history. If for the sake of world equilibrium America must exert upon the scale a weight in accordance with its importance and size, in order to fulfill this mission it must find the exact definition of its contribution to culture (considered as the total expression of life in one, in several, or in all American countries). As the continent is divided into two large economic and racial blocks, it is urgent that each of these acquire solidity and homogeneity. Thence comes the thesis that the United States must reach an understanding with Latin America as a whole, and must favor and accept its unity instead of fostering internal divisions and quarrels, as the difficulties between one country and another may be termed in this part of the New World. Consequently, this new entity, this homogeneous whole requires a name different from all those previously used. The old names lacked force: Hispanic America, because it was linked with the idea of viceroyalty; Latin America, because it reëchoed the early nineteenth-century intellectual concept of a Europeanizing "elite"; Pan-America, because it was intimately dependent

on "Dollar Diplomacy" and included the continent as a whole without distinguishing its two essential parts. The Apra advocated the use of the name Indo-America, not as an exclusive revindication of the Indian, but, on the contrary, as a kind of effective integration of all the demographic components of this part of the globe: Indian and indigenous signify everywhere autochthonous, primitive, aboriginal; and American meant, and still means, European, the discovery for Europe and by Europe—that is, for and by Spain, Portugal, France, Holland, and England. If such a name is not applicable to the United States and Canada, it is because the autochthonous, aboriginal, or indigenous element has not had the same strength, extension, or hybridism as in this other part of the hemisphere. Let us not forget that the Negro cannot be compared with the Indian, for the very simple reason that he too was imported and is posterior to the arrival of the Europeans, who brought him here to fortify their system (1502).

The use of this term (Indo-America) by the Apristas and a considerable number of the young scholars and politicians within the "leftist" faction of our continent, along with the use of the new dimension—"imperialism"—to pass judgment on historical phenomena (including economic phenomena, which were proscribed), gave rise to a common error: the denunciation of their type of work as an attempt to "regress" to political and social forms of the pre-colonial period, and as a resolve to fight the white people, unleashing a racial war that would be a reversal of the European strife. Both conclusions were mistaken. What is happening is this: with the discovery of two new factors—new, to the extent that they had not previously been evaluated, although they had always existed—that is, with the revaluation of the indigenous and economic factors, interest has been diverted to these two elements for the purpose of restoring to them the significance which had been condemned to a precarious, despised, and inferior existence because of the misconception of our culture as European only and our history as political and military only.

III

As the new concept of South American history is predominantly mestizo (with respect to art, one might refer to what has been said by Angel Guido, an Argentinian professor of the Universidad del Litoral), it is natural that an equilibrium should be established between the basic elements of the hybridism which has been pointed out. This explains the activity that new workers in sociology, literature, and the history of South America have centered on studies of the Indian and the Negro. In regard to the latter element, the mention of three illustrious contemporary names would be enough to make one realize that this is not a matter of political or literary whim, but one of profound and genuine necessity: I refer to Professor Fernando Ortiz of Cuba and to the Brazilian sociologists, Arthur Ramos and Gilberto Freyre.¹ The Indian has even greater importance than the Negro in the total picture of South American life.

From the demographic point of view, no one would deny that seventy per cent of the South Americans, who number almost one hundred and thirty million, are either Indians or mestizos with a marked Indian strain. European travelers estimate the white population in the majority of South American countries between ten and twenty per cent. Actually there are many "theoretical" whites among whose grandfathers and grandmothers Indian blood appears.

From the psychological point of view, the matter has even greater significance. If the characteristics of the indigene (Spengler says "the oriental") are patience, silence, a certain air of indifference to physical pain, an admirable retentiveness, love for the earth—and, in physical make-up, dark and slanting eyes, prominent cheek bones, low stature, large thoracic capacity, and coarse black hair—it will follow that South America is even more Indian than demographic data permit one to suspect. In the very midst of Buenos Aires, Montevideo, or Santiago, to mention cities whose populations are predominantly white, such features are frequently seen.

¹ A good study on Freyre has been published by Dr. Lewis Hanke in the United States (through Columbia University).

From the economic point of view, the adjective, Indian, is often synonymous with exploited. Thus it was defined by Don Manuel González-Prada in his article, "Nuestros Indios," published in 1907 and included in the volume, Horas de lucha (Lima in 1908). So it has also been defined, in exact chronological order, by V. R. Haya de la Torre in 1927 and by José Carlos Mariátegui the following year. In Bolivia one frequently hears people say "more cholo [Indian or mestizo] than . . . " in referring to someone who is poorer or less refined than another. An Indian who is wealthy ceases to be an Indian in all ordinary, common opinion through almost all South America. On the other hand, for the aristocracy everyone who does not belong to its stock, its class, is an "Indian even if he be mestizo. The socio-economic concept is mixed with, and overpowers, the ethnographic and historical criterion. And, as new generations since 1918 have lived under the domination of social-economic ideals and preoccupations, it is logical that these matters should have greater significance for them than purely ethnographical questions. Moreover, the problem of the Indian is intimately related to that of "the land," which is fundamental throughout South America, where the latifundium continues to exist with oppressive features. The "blanquista" (whites) theory of our history has always been subordinated to latifundium and oligarchy. It is therefore logical that in times more favorable to the masses, to socialistic and democratic tendencies, the reaction against oligarchies, plutocracies, and aristocracies should be founded on a revindication of the antipodes of these three regimes, that is, on a resolute campaign against the latifundium (in favor of small property or of the communal property which is still in existence) and against the oligarchy of colonial and plutocratic origin.

From the political point of view one understands still better the reasons for a tendency that, perhaps, sprang originally from purely sentimental motives. In almost all our countries the great mass of voters and electors must be literate. The system ruling in most nations restricts or corrupts elections because of two factors: (a) negligence with regard

to the education or simply the minimum elementary instruction of rural workers, generally Indians or Indian-like mestizos; (b) maintenance of the system of servitude or "peonage" which converts the peon, tenant, Indian, or servant into a "thing" in the hand of his "patrón" (landlord), his "hacendado" (hacienda owner), or, briefly, the "latifundista" (the proprietor of the latifundium). That is why the people's vote in a great part of South America has been, and continues to be, of no consequence. New trends, in which large nuclear groups of students and young members of the professional class are particularly active, are compelling these peons or Indians to become a real part of the nation, by means of the vote as well as by culture (literacy) and their most rightful participation in the fruits of their labor.

This accounts for the diverse attitudes toward the Indian which one notices in some countries. So, while in Mexico—where there is a movement of a socio-economic nature in progress—being an Indian is almost a cause for pride, in places where the state of vassalage is scarcely any different from that of the eighteenth century, being an Indian amounts practically to disrespect, if not insult. In some places, where the number of immigrants is considerable, being an Indian is synonymous with barbarism. In Argentina a base act is called an "indiada" (act of an Indian) despite the fact that the famous "indiadas" or riots which occurred in Buenos Aires at the turn of the last century were generally committed by whites and people of high society.

Considering the matter from another angle, we find that the colonial period has left certain prejudices which have not been removed by scholars but have been aggravated by the political events of recent times, particularly by those that have taken place since 1923 with the rise of Primo de Rivera to the dictatorship of Spain and the development of the Spanish Phalanx (since 1935 and especially after 1938).

Every day something new is discovered about the Spanish colonial system in South America. The archives of the Indies and of Vienna, and those in America itself, avariciously keep unpublished material which would serve not only to attenuate

the "black legend" of the colonial period, but also to temper the "red legend" which is being opposed to it. In short, the colonial history of South America has yet to be written, and meanwhile it is paying tribute to the sentimentalism or to the material interests of its exponents. To clarify this point it would suffice to show how the recent works of Irving A. Leonard and José Torre Revello have dispelled fictitious notions about the commerce of books—and, consequently, of ideas—between the mother country and the colony, how the works of Lewis Hanke and the notes of E. O'Gorman are shedding new light on the personality and transcendency of Bartolomé de las Casas, how the works of Altamira are affecting law, how those of Zavala are changing concepts of labor, etc. Now, then, until this stage is definitely lighted, what is tangible is the subsistence of the Spanish feudal régime in the hands of creoles in both the mountain and coast regions of South America. The system of work in the sugar mills, mining-engineering projects, etc., is still the same as it was during the colonial period. Therefore the epoch and the system identify each other. This is also the case with rural holdings, and even with city property. The greatest South American writers of the nineteenth century (who continue to be the teachers of the new generation), the greatest statesmen (for instance: Juárez, Sarmiento, Lastarria, González-Prada, Alberdi, even Rodó) openly declared their opposition to Spain—partly, because some were too close to the period when independence was achieved or to the time when the former colonial empire was seeking to reinstate itself, or because they were dazzled by the brilliancy of French culture, of English democracy, or of North American democracy, as the case may have been. What is certain is that an anti-Spanish atmosphere has developed from the anti-colonial movement or the drive for autonomy, and this atmosphere has often been so expanded as to become anti-European, notwithstanding the fact that the writers mentioned seldom considered Spain in their European picture.

America's reëncounter with Spain—and I mean to discuss this subject at length in a future work—occurred romantically

in 1898, when Spain lost her last bulwark in America. It was accompanied by a violent outburst against the United States.

IV

This new event and contemporary happenings evolving around the Caribbean orbit presented the South Americans with a problem hitherto overlooked or scarcely touched: that of "imperialism." Although the question had definitely arisen in the West Indies and in Mexico at the beginning of the century, anti-imperialism assumed no organization or system until 1924 with the appearance of the Apra, whose fundamental points have already been stated.

Ever since the achievement of independence, historians had called attention to the significance of the steps taken in Europe to obtain loans destined for the rising South American republics. While such measures sometimes sprang up in France, they usually took root in England, for London was the metropolis of capitalism.

Later on, new sources of wealth were discovered in the different countries. Just as colonial mercantilism was giving way to a very new, incipient industrialism, and just as pre-Hispanic agriculture was being restored, continental economy suffered a violent upheaval. The political world followed in its tracks. Among the cases which illustrate this so well, we need cite only those of Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Peru. In this last country the discovery of guano deposits in the coastal islands transferred the political and economic axis to the coast in an even more decisive manner: it created a new directing class on the basis of the exploitation of those deposits which, despite their function for public revenue, favored private individuals connected with the National Treasury; it sharpened the interest of different financial groups in Europe—the Gibbs, the Dreyfus, and other firms—with a consequent repercussion in the entire national organism. In Chile the discovery of minerals in Chañarcillo diverted interest to the north of the republic, and attracted foreign capital. Later—the above events had taken place

² El imperialismo a la luz de la sociología, the study published by Enrique José Varona in 1907, is a good source of information.

between 1840 and 1850—steamship lines and railroad construction promoted British influence in a patent way. Nevertheless, this effect was regarded as an exclusively local matter, and there was a tendency to consider it as something of private origin.

On the other hand, one must face the following facts: the systematic advance of North American capital in the Caribbean region, the defeat of Spain and the annexation of Puerto Rico by the United States, control over Cuba and the Platt Amendment, the creation of the Republic of Panama, and the establishment of the Canal Zone after the ousting of the French who had been engaged in that construction, the intervention of North American and British capital-in obvious concurrence—in Mexican politics during the time of Porfirio Díaz and the Revolution, as well as previous events in connection with the discovery of gold in California. All that, magnified by the proximity of the United States, the episodes related to Dollar Diplomacy and to the Roosevelt Corollary of the Monroe Doctrine, and, finally, President Wilson's contradictory policy during and after the World War, contributed to the formation of a consciousness of alarm which, though it was merely sentimental in the beginning, was always an expression of the people's feelings. Something of an instinctive rejection was evident in this consciousness despite its lack of organization. Ultimately it took shape in the constitution of an anti-imperialist movement whose primary objective was to check the advance of North American capitalism which, notwithstanding its private character, was backed by the Department of State and the Navy Department.

As the essence of the new attitude was economic and inter-continental, subsequent studies were also economic and inter-continental in nature, and were therefore social. Consequently, in opposition to the typical nationalistic and dividing reaction of the ninetenth-century historians who contradicted the initial effort of the independence movement, whose chief exponent was the Liberator Bolívar, there arose this new interpretation which immediately endeavored to efface that dividing nationalism and to reëstablish the con-

sciousness of an American, continental nationalism, emphasizing economic rather than political facts, social rather than military significance in the history of South America during the period of its independence.

Actually the new attitude clashed with established values and precepts. As it implied political and social rectification also, it was naturally combated by all those who represented the old tendency in political as well as social matters. Furthermore, since the new tendency indubitably recognized historic materialism as one of its progenitors, and since historic materialism was an equivalent of communism in the minds of nineteenth-century historians who were untrained in these pursuits, the first and most vigorous attack that the new interpreters suffered came from that flank. They were called communists, they were identified with the Soviets, and they were fought in the name of principles, although in reality they were fought for the sake of material interests.

Toward 1930, when several South American governments fell along with the crash of their creditor, the New York Stock Exchange, the order of the day among the "restorers," that is, the descendents of the colonizers and of the oligarchies which had been supplanted by popular dictatorships during the period from 1920 to 1930, was to deny the existence of imperialism, thus endeavoring to take from the reform groups a standard in which they were seeking a motive of unity for all South America. Today, after sharp controversies, things are beginning to settle down, and people are beginning to realize that the imperialism denied by representatives of the old school in 1930 did exist and does exist; this attitude is inevitable if one wishes to understand how and why the "New Deal" and the "Good Neighbor Policy" represent a wholesome transformation for relations between the two Americas. Within the most elementary logic the dilemma allowed no argument: if the "Good Neighbor Policy" has improved relations between the two Americas, it is because former relations were not so good; if one grants that relations were good, there would be no reason to applaud the "Good Neighbor Policy" as an encouraging and decisive occurrence.

This event, the "Good Neighbor Policy," has had, does have, and will have an intense resonance in the South American's evaluation of history. It is to be noted that the representatives of anti-imperialism have been the first ones to understand the profound change which has come about, and they have explicitly acknowledged it. Without renouncing any of their basic postulates but rather stressing the antiimperialistic nature of their conduct, and proclaiming—for that very reason—that South America must avoid all totalitarian order because of its incompatibility with the spirit of its people as well as with its tradition of "democratic aspiration" and the objective of autonomy, they have not hesitated to declare that the only means of interpreting history and constructing the future lies in a solid understanding between the two Americas. To achieve this it would be necessary, among other things, to emphasize an aspect of the matter which has always been proscribed in related studies, the analogies (and there are many) between the two American groups, instead of persisting in attaching importance to the discrepancies only. Perhaps in a not very distant future I shall take it upon myself to present these analogies, a subject upon which I have been working for two years and about which, in my opinion, there remains a great deal to be said.

Many of the new contributions to South American history are developing today in the economic field, a phase neglected until recently. It is only just to acknowledge that many of its agents are of North American origin. The names of Scott Nearing, Elmer Barnes, J. Fred Rippy, and Dana G. Munro speak for themselves.

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In general, through all these data one indisputable fact stands out: South America (Indo-America, Latin America, Ibero-America) is attaining its political maturity, although economically it may be far from the end of its adolescence. On the cultural plane, notwithstanding its lack of the necessary instruments which other countries have, it possesses, on the other hand, a highly developed sensitivity and mentality. The average for general learning among the cultured people

in South America is, without doubt, manifestly superior to that of many of the more technically advanced nations of the globe. Social consciousness, in the broadest sense, is much more profound and extensive than in several nations where mechanical progress has attained considerable height. While it is true that South America has been unable to free itself of oligarchical and despotic practices, it is no less true that South America knows that this is a defect and that it must be corrected; and, without having attained a democratic evolution such as that of the United States, it also knows that, despite all the virtues and advantages involved, the democratic evolution is now inadequate for the world to come, and that it must still be perfected before we win our ultimate goal. With respect to mental capacity, the South American has reached a maturity comparable only to his technical infantilism. The knowledge he acquires he gets despite the fact that he has no adequate libraries, nor rich museums, nor efficient laboratories, nor scientific training. On the other hand, every day he realizes more clearly how valuable his land is, not only in potentiality, but in reality; not only for him, but for the rest of the world; not only as a producer of raw materials, but as a refuge for human beings. With the increasing demand for cotton, petroleum, rubber, copper, tin, rice, sugar, coffee, niter, etc., for the United Nations—and all these things must be sought in our territory—South Americans are realizing that, while they are subject to a foreign economy today, they are becoming more and more important in world economy, and are therefore closer to their autonomy. Furthermore, some people have reflected that the theories propagated with regard to the disadvantages in the mixture of races lack The country with the greatest mixed element, Brazil, is the one which has achieved greatest industrial progress in the space of a few years. One of the countries where the Indian element is particularly marked, Mexico, is advancing at a rapid pace. Neither the Indian nor the Negro is hindering the progress of these two nations. Changes in circumstances are sufficient to effect a change in their contribution to national progress. The automobile and the highway, the airplane and the radio have ended by imposing their dynamism everywhere. They are used equally by all races, without special privilege for any of them. And, in addition to the evidence in the above material, there is an ever increasing consciousness of the fact that most of South America's backwardness may be attributed to inadequacy of political patterns and discrimination in international relations, and is dependent upon a profound and indispensable transformation.

All these facts and circumstances, taken together, have brought about a renovation in the criteria, curiosity, aspirations, programs, and prejudices of South America, and the new sentiments and ideas have filtered into the study of its past as well as into its present politics. The New History in South America is, then, nothing but the result of the birth of a new consciousness, a full awareness of autonomy as a need, as an objective, and also as a possibility.

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