A TURBULENT DECADE REMEMBERED

Scenes from the Latin American Sixties

Diana Sorensen

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Introduction

IMMINENT TIMES: STRUCTURES OF FEELING
FROM A TURBULENT DECADE

The term *Latin America*, coined in the nineteenth century, did not represent a fully continental set of relations until the 1960s. Only then did a transnational cultural identity become rooted in the hemispheric imagination; only then was Latin America able to find its own space in the international republic of letters. This book charts some of the material and symbolic conditions of possibility of this continental moment, and the forms of representation in which they were expressed.

"The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living." Here is the challenge of this book, as it sets out to articulate and interpret some key scenes in a Latin American decade that we have inherited and transformed in unanticipated ways. Well over forty years later, we look back on this formative period with a sense of surprise at its outcomes, as if we were reading a plot with an unexpected denouement. Utopia and revolution have lost their charge; the dramatic changes and resolutions the sixties expected to usher in often turned out to be the horrors of repression and violence of the seventies and eighties. How, then, can we recapture a sense of the lived experience of that inaugural moment, as well as the underlying conditions of its mostly grim conclusion?

This cultural history of the Latin American sixties eschews linearity and a totalizing sweep so as to study moments of intense interaction between culture and society, in different forms, but always trying to pry open
the workings of the intersections, as Walter Benjamin would have it, “only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” The moments I have chosen as the story for each chapter were experienced as the “time of the now,” echoing Benjamin again, but a “now” whose fullness conveyed a sense of imminence, as an expectation that Latin America’s time was about to arrive.

Imminence as possibility is entwined with the spirit of utopia, which is central to the cultural and political imagination of the sixties. In the vision of a possible world not yet realized but about to come lived the belief that the fulfillment of a future long waited and postponed was on its way, almost there, making its signs visible, and hence ushering in a spirit of celebration. The transitional stage was sustained by the conviction that the new was to be constructed, that a “new man” would emerge from a veritable change of skin. Liberation was one of the key words of the day: its field of meanings was political but broadly cultural as well: it reached styles of dress, sexual mores, intergenerational relationships, religious belief, and educational forms. In politics, the old rigidities of Marxism no longer held sway: in the wake of Stalinism, the New Left sought renewed articulations of the critique of capitalism; this was the time when Althusser revised Marx and read him with Freud and Lacan, offering cross-fertilizations between material practice and the unconscious. In Latin America, Raúl Prebisch’s Dependency Theory, first developed in the 1950s, offered a material explanation for the profound economic disparity between the subcontinent and the advanced industrialized economies of the North, showing how the growth of the latter was the result of the capitalist exploitation of the former. A revisionary critique of capitalism seemed to be particularly urgent for the economic future of the region.

Sexual liberation and the women’s movement came on the scene partially aided by the development of the contraceptive pill; they were impelled by the prevalent questioning of established social roles and the drive to redress alienating regimes of power. The Catholic Church underwent its own revisionary process in the sixties: “Liberation Theology” was energized by a redemptive critical consciousness that included politics. Revolution and Christianity took on a Latin American and Third World inflexion in dialogue with Marxism, with a commitment to embrace action and to change the plight of the poor. The 1968 Medellín Conference of Bishops ended with a manifesto that proclaimed the hour of action in Latin America, of
total emancipation, of liberation from subjection. Liberation was given a
theological valence and placed at the center of the Church’s mission.

This spirit of liberation went hand in hand with a critique of what
existed: old forms were to be superseded and even destroyed in order to in-
augurate the new. There was, therefore, an oscillating rhythm between an-
nihilation and construction, between visions that led to destruction and
those that adumbrated liberation on the personal and the collective levels.
These general claims voiced in North America and Europe took on a par-
ticularly intense form in Latin America, largely on account of the Cuban
Revolution. The success of the young revolutionaries who made their way
from Sierra Maestra to Havana between 1956 and 1959 surprised the world
and betokened culmination and possibility. For the young and those on
the left, Cuba became a sign of things to come, a force that might sweep
the southern part of the continent. This helps to explain the intensity of
the decade in Latin America, but in no way does it exhaust the complex
causality that obtained in the transnational order.

The dialogue between the Latin American and the metropolitan
worlds is particularly fertile at this time, both in its points in common and
in its specificities. This book locates Latin America in this transnational di-
alogue, attentive to the forces at work in a larger system that, while not yet
altogether global, was tightly interconnected. It is therefore an intervention
in the field of “world literature,” inasmuch as it traces the circulation of
Latin American works out of their hemispheric locations and into the
reading publics of Europe and North America, where they were received
with interest and curiosity.4

I would submit that the Latin American difference is one of inten-
sity, and that it is framed by the twin rhythms of euphoria and despair. For
even as the Cuban Revolution surprised the world, the stark realities of the
Cold War worked as the ultimate limit of the field of possibilities.5 In other
words, Latin America in the sixties encapsulates its predicament: a moment
of hope and celebration produced a sense of multiple possibilities, only to
reach closure and despair in its culmination. At the time of the present writ-
ing, well into the twenty-first century, it is hard to avoid a melancholic sense
of loss as one contemplates the aftermath of this utopian decade, as if one
had reached the end of a plot with a cheerless outcome. For the sixties were
followed by brutal regimes and economic crises whose impact has been pro-
found and long lasting.
As I suggested above, it would be misleading to assume that the sixties’ utopian energies galvanized positive impulses only: the very euphoria of creation brought about a certain apocalyptic edge, an impulse to destroy what appeared to be out of step with the times. One can detect this very tension in the philosophical outlook of the Frankfurt School, whose work began to be widely read in the sixties. Deeply marked by World War II, the Frankfurt School philosophers thought in terms of the crisis of capitalism and of the entire project of the Enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, written in 1947, began to circulate in translation in the 1960s; Marcuse’s Reason and Revolution, Eros and Civilization, and One-Dimensional Man, written in the forties, fifties, and sixties, respectively, reached more receptive audiences in the sixties, when the horizon of expectations was receptive to the kind of critical thinking that combined Marxism, psychoanalysis, and traces of surrealism to proclaim the need for new social, political, and cultural forms to be built on the ashes of the old ones. Marcuse’s work called for a total transformation in which the utopian character was psychic, political, and cultural. It rested on the Great Refusal: a radical condemnation of a social reality seen as repressive, and the longing for a true, unalienated eros leading to socially constructive forms.

In France, Sartre’s philosophy dealt with the “unhappy consciousness” of modern man, trapped in a state of alienation. The revolts of 1968 embraced this sense of crisis, and the revolutionaries conceived of themselves as a cleansing force that began the systematic decentering of the West. It is that very combination of crisis and creation that produced the conditions of possibility for the emergence of new kinds of thinking: a case in point is Michel Foucault, whose work (he claimed in a conversation with Duccio Trombadori) was able to find a receptive audience only after the upheavals of the Algerian war and May 1968—until then, Foucault explains, it was met with absolute indifference. Yet before the subject was proclaimed dead, the philosophical outlook of the sixties held out hope for a real break in the continuum of history and for the reconciliation of contradictions produced by disruption, the split between man and nature. Spontaneity and enthusiasm went hand in hand with the longing for transformation: in the condemnation of apathy and alienation, everything pointed to the energy of reinvention. But this energy was both constructive and destructive: it sought the communal celebration of the creative festival and of the abrogation of order. For order and the system were linked to what Horkheimer and Adorno in
their exalted *Dialectic of Enlightenment* called the “nullity” of thought, “as far removed from reflective consideration of its own goal as were other forms of labor under the pressure of the system.”

One of the interesting contradictions of the period is the fact that it was the very decried “system” that made the expansive utopian thinking possible. Here is a telling disjunction between the material and the symbolic worlds: it was the economic bonanza of the postwar bourgeois world that produced the social context in which a new culture could flourish. Money and exchange came under suspicion, but they constituted the conditions of possibility for the prevailing sense of experimentation, artistic autonomy, and a generalized teleology of revolution. These were the “golden years” of affluence and economic expansion in the West that witnessed the rise of the transnational economy and multinational corporations, when the industrial capitalist economies did extremely well on the basis of mass consumption, employment, and regularly rising incomes. Yet the economic boom brought about a rise of expectations that could not be fully satisfied: demands were greater than could be met, and a desire to rebel found abundant rhetorical and semantic incentives in the ideology of crisis and liberation. An impatient longing for a transfigured world—stripped of the trammels of consumer society and the established regime of power—drew its energies from the very advanced capitalist economy that produced stunning urban growth, new markets, and new consumers. This is the contradictory logic of the system at this time, and, for about a decade, the contradictions remained productive. Capitalism was to finance its own supersession. A culture of critique and negativity postulated other possible worlds about to rise from the ashes of the existing one—a world of liberated subjects who would saturate politics and culture, sexuality and play, celebration and work, all as utopian avatars that shared a rejection of the established world in a new regime of sociability. In the developed world, some theorists of postindustrial society with connections to the New Left envisioned a future-oriented system of modern living in which aspirations for reform would achieve more communal forms of economic and political organization, beyond work and scarcity.

Who but the young could take on such an ambitious vision of destruction and renewal? As the authority of age was devalued, predecessors were displaced, and youth as a generational category gained ascendancy. Although the early Romantics had given great shift to the figure of the
young man, it was not until the sixties that youth appeared as the carrier of power and innovation, overshadowing the contestatory power of class. The young man or woman of the sixties was located in a detached and privileged space that replaced the protocols of apprenticeship of earlier times. In the urbanized economies of the fifties and sixties, occupations demanded higher education: the modern economies called for planners, administrators, teachers, and technical experts. The university as a site of training was itself the focus of contradictions: it entered a period of unprecedented expansion; it was structured hierarchically as a system for the production and dissemination of knowledge (with faculty not only constructing programs of study, but also determining grades and requirements), but it was also the purveyor of critical thinking that was to shake up existing structures of knowledge. Hence the university provided the very stuff unrest was made of: those who were being taught were set apart from the rest of society, and they used the tools of analysis to launch a critique of the system, to occupy the space in which that knowledge was disseminated, demanding a radical transformation. The scale of the student population explosion exceeded what even the most affluent economies were able to accommodate, and hence unrest had material (often physical, in the sense that existing buildings were unsuited to the numbers they had to house, and the sheer agglomeration of students led to disturbances), as well as intellectual reasons. Demands for emancipation and better conditions went hand in hand with the desire to displace forefathers: youth was conceived as the culmination of human development. In a way, this is inherent to the university structure: the precondition for its critical power is precisely its separation from the “outer” world. Octavio Paz captures the double valence of this situation: “during the long years in which young men and women are isolated in schools of higher education, they live under artificial conditions, half as privileged recluses, half as dangerous irresponsible youths.”

Yet the young, while seemingly detached from the economy, became a segment of brisk consumers identified by notions of style in dress, music, cosmetics, and related tastes. Led horizontally by members of their peer group, they were both optimistic and impatient, like the decade itself. The optimistic strain was ambitious and expansive; the impatient one was expressed as a sense of boredom, alienation, and, in some cases, as the spirit of rebellion. Mythical visions of young rebels like James Dean, Marlon Brando, or Che Guevara could be made to incarnate romantic aspirations
for Messianism that decried a world seen as dehumanized and that longed for the purifying force of revolution. And in the midst of such redemptive longings, a different sense of community to come was being imagined. This mood was often expressed in sympathy and support for Algeria, Congo, Vietnam, and Palestine.

The Latin American inflection of the dominant fiction of this period registered particular intensity: it was experienced as the long-awaited realization of historical struggles. The surprising triumph of the Cuban insurrection furnished regional innovations to the general model of revolution, heightening the sense of emergent regional power. For one thing, it was the achievement of political actors whose class affiliations were heterogeneous and therefore unorthodox: both working and middle class, urban and rural, lettered and illiterate. They worked out a foco theory that, while particularly attuned to the specificities of the Latin American context, pointed to a different way in which radical political change might be generally conceived for future revolutionary endeavors. The young barbudos had triumphed by dint of their energy, their constant mobility, their imaginative reconfiguration of previous revolutionary programs. For a while, it seemed that the Latin American time had come, and that it could affirm itself as a contributor to the innovative drive of the period. The region was impatient and impassioned in its desire for contemporaneity with the metropolitan center: it wanted to be not only up to date but also simultaneous and international. There was also—and even in significant numbers of the middle class—a certain urgency to act upon feelings of compassion and solidarity with the downtrodden. I would claim that many groups in Latin America shared an anxious—at times optimistic—sense of imminence, of arrival about to take place, or to be voluntaristically ushered in.

Such stirrings had their counterparts in the theoretical ferment of the day, which might be characterized by various alterations of intellectual focus. In Latin America and in the Third World some books added to the impatience for change: such was the case of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (bearing Sartre’s exalted preface, suffused in a sense of impending violence), and Eduardo Galeano’s *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*, which came out in 1971. Even more tempered interventions in the intellectual arena were characterized by the rumblings of a shift from an established paradigm to an emergent one: Sartre’s hegemony was beginning to lose ground to structuralist transformations of the field such as Althusserian
antihumanist Marxism, or Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology, which attacked Sartre's historicism and proclaimed the goal of "dissolving man." The linguistic model was on its way to becoming the general paradigm in the human sciences, from Lacan to the study of textuality. Marxism had to face the needs of a new revolutionary libido: in Europe the focus became less strategic than analytic; in the Third World it was channeled into clandestine movements that appropriated Marxist theory in versions of their own. It was as if the last flaring up of Marxism as a theory of society and of revolutionary action produced an outburst of intense energy. Yet even in the heat of the emancipatory rhetoric of the student movements of 1968, one can detect the power of a cultural politics moving away from the strictly political projects of earlier decades. Such an investment in innovation contained not only exceptional creativity, but also the seeds of its own supersession, which is one of a number of reasons why the decade's utopian verve came to an end in the early seventies. While the ferment lasted, it was characterized by an intense investment in the future, and in the cultural dimensions of the political.

The temporality of the sixties is therefore profoundly different from ours today in the early twenty-first century: rather than being drawn to the melancholic work of memory—often stalled in a sense of exhaustion—it was utopian, and still engaged in the struggle to find ways in which culture would play a role in social and political transformation. This is particularly clear in the novels of the "boom," whose ambitious sweep culminated in apocalyptic endings that meant to annihilate defunct social and political worlds—from the bourgeois family to the neocolonial nation-state, all in the sweep of an aesthetics of explosion. Witness the ending of One Hundred Years of Solitude, which is merely an exacerbated version of the endings of The Death of Artemio Cruz, Pedro Páramo, La casa verde, or El osceno pájaro de la noche. The dominant fiction of the decade subverts novels in which the family—the most fundamental image of unity in the social formation—is in crisis: it is invoked as an organizing principle, but it works its way through the plot as failure. What clearer example than One Hundred Years of Solitude, built on the structural support of genealogy and relentlessly making its way to its anticipated destruction? Most of the other major novels work on variants of the same impossibility. Patriarchy and the Law of the Father are still in place, but in the decades that elapsed between, say, Doña Bárbara (1929) and The Death of Artemio Cruz (1962), or even
the earlier Pedro Páramo (1955), it became impossible to continue to consider the family as the stable core around which national and international communities cohered. Instead, powerful men like Artemio Cruz or Pedro Páramo opted for the material enticements of the capitalist system at the price of love and family. I would contend that this is the beginning of a crisis that the twenty-first century has inherited in a magnified fashion, with the addition of further instability in the patriarchal gender system. In Male Subjectivity at the Margins, Kaja Silverman reads Freud, Lacan, Leclaire, and Lévi-Strauss together to contend that our dominant fiction bridges the contradiction between the Law of Kinship Structure (which upholds the Law of the Father), and the Law of Language (built on the recognition of the inevitability of castration) through an imaginary resolution that disavows male castration. Silverman locates the crisis in Hollywood films made as early as the 1940s, in the post–World War II scene; my reading of the Latin American novels of the boom suggests that such an imaginary resolution is wearing thin at the edges in the sixties. It is, indeed, frayed by its commerce with the critique of capitalism, with the logic of liberation, and with a generalized unease with the very expansive, modernized world in which Latin American writing finally finds its place. Virile alienation and disenchantment are part of the very same structure of feeling that subsumes utopian longings. The pervasive sense of imminence anticipates crisis, destruction, and the rumblings of different beginnings. While patriarchy still rules the gender system, its anxieties and méconnaissances call for special attention to the question of gender as a category of analysis that has helped me unpack some of the enabling tensions in the works I examine.

Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory captures the specific qualities of the relationship between culture and society as it played out at this time. For in Adorno, art’s redemptive promise retains its transformative power and its intimations of transcendence, relying on critical analysis as well as on the power to produce apparitions through images that work as explosions. The logic Adorno works with has the qualities that characterize the decade itself, paradoxically intense and evanescent. “If it holds true that the subjective rationality of means and ends—which is particular and thus in its innermost irrational—requires spurious irrational enclaves and treats art as such, art is nevertheless the truth of society insofar as in its most authentic products the irrationality of the rational order is expressed. In art, denunciation and anticipation are syncopated.”
Hence in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno moves within the *syncopation* or rhythms alternating between critique or negativity and expectancy, working with the age of Enlightenment but also provoking it—much in the spirit in which his collaboration with Horkheimer had denounced the Kantian system in its ambiguities and contradictions. For Adorno art is akin to explosion, and it operates as a catastrophic fulfillment:

Artworks not only produce *imagines* as something that endures. They become artworks just as much through the destruction of their own *imagerie*, for this reason art is profoundly akin to explosion.... Appearance, however, and its explosion in the artwork are essentially historical.... What appears in the artwork is its own inner time; the explosion of appearance blasts open the continuity of this inner temporality.... To analyze artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them.  

It is this very explosion of appearance in its Adornian sense that is the gamble of the present book. Each chapter seeks to pry open (since the Adornian “blasting” may be too powerful a claim) a complex knot of relations that coalesce at key moments or *problématics* of the Latin American sixties between the world (in its social, economic and political dimensions) and the symbolic order that sets out to chart it, domesticate it, or interpret it. Borrowing from Barthes’s work on photography, we might compare the scene to the *punctum* in photography: it is like a mark that stings with the forces it gathers. Thus, each chapter will seek to elucidate the structure of feeling of the period through the analysis of meanings and values that obtain in particular configurations characterized by the mode of change. The elements in the “structure” comprise social and political relationships, forms of behavior, forms of production and communication, ethical assumptions and gender relations, cultural and technical innovation, notions of space and time, forms of language and expression, and other factors that contribute to the shape of lived experience as it is represented in different forms of writing. And writing is precisely a field in which the cultural and political contradictions of an era are performed and represented.

The only possible beginning for this book was the Cuban Revolution, which inaugurates the decade in its fullest sense, rise with continental projections and claiming that insurrection was to end the neocolonial stagnation in which Latin America was mired. The chapter discusses the negotiations between the cultural and the political imagination, and the cross-fertilizations among institutions, myth-making, and writing in the construction of a
are absent from my discussion, as is the great José María Arguedas, who deliberately avoided the boom's scene. Such an enterprise would be not only encyclopedic but also beyond my guiding logic, which was to alight on scenes of particular productivity in the changing relations between ways of life and different kinds of writing. What constitutes each scene is a sort of emergent intensity—that is to say, the energy of what is coming together to construct something new, be it a "new man," a new sense of national identity, a new location for the intellectual, a new literary school, or new kinds of cultural tastes or configurations for the novelistic imagination. An imagined future unbeknownst to the past was privileged in varied realms of activity—hence the investment in invention. The chapters tell stories about the different forms of invention that result from the dense interweaving of the material and the symbolic. With counted exceptions, there has not been a revision of the scholarship produced in the seventies and eighties about this foundational moment. I believe it is time to evaluate said scholarship, and to revise some of the assumptions that guided earlier interpretations.

It is the creativity and the instability of this period's experiments in writing and living that are among their most striking characteristics. The 1960s were less linear history than what Barthes refers to as "points" of history, moments of possibility that, while braided together, still retained their own particular textures. A decade of moments is a decade nonetheless: a time when the horizon of possibilities seemed to overpower, at least for a moment, the sphere of experience. The future in the present weighed more than the past in the present. To be sure, this balance shifted quickly, but later disillusionment has never completely obliterated the upsurge of cultural and political defiance that we know as the 1960s. If this book succeeds in illuminating points along the way in this extraordinary decade, then it will have reached its destination.