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Review

The Great Depression in Latin America

Paulo Drinot and Alan Knight (eds). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 376pp.

N. Clark Capshaw *

This book is an edited collection of essays on the effect of the Great Depression on various Latin American countries. Though not all Latin American countries are addressed, there is sufficient coverage to enable some generalizations, comparisons, and contrasts for the region, and to infer some general lessons about the enduring effect of the depression on the region. The countries addressed include Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Cuba.

The introduction by Paulo Drinot sets the tone by noting that “there is a broad consensus among historians that the Great Depression was a watershed for Latin America...[but that] Latin America as a whole weathered the Depression better than its neighbors to the north” (3). The introduction does provide some framework for comparison and contrast of the experiences of the different Latin American countries studied, but it does not go far enough to establish the basis for comparison and contrast for the forthcoming essays. The integration of the information from the essays is mostly left to co-editor Alan Knight in the final chapter. Though such integration is appropriate for a final chapter, the lack of preparation to the essays’ common themes in the introduction makes what comes after seem lacking in cohesion.

That said, each of the essays is similar enough in form to allow for comparison and contrast of the experience of the depression in the countries studied, although the

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amount of detail in each essay may make it difficult for the reader to identify the key information for such a comparison.

One similar theme is that the depression spurred radical political shifts in most countries, though not always toward a common endpoint. Shifts occurred both from left to right and vice versa. No regime type tended to dominate, but radical change proved to be the common denominator.

Most of the essays avoid using explicit economic science language, and hence are suitable reading for the non-expert in economics. They rather show the interaction between the business/economic climate and how this drove political change, how political change then drove further economic change, and how shrewd political actors were able to take advantage of the ensuing disruption.

The essays also signal the emergence of the twentieth century Latin American political actors who would continue to dominate the stage throughout much of the century, either as an enduring legacy to follow, or a cautionary tale to be avoided. Examples include Somoza in Nicaragua, Peron in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Batista in Cuba.

The politics and economics of coffee, oil, bananas, and sugar dominate the discussion in many of the essays, as many of the economies described herein relied upon only one or two of these commodities to support their economies. The volatility of these commodities often drove the depth of the depression in Latin American countries. Responses were more often than not driven by political considerations as well as economic considerations. Sugar plantations in Cuba were often owned by absentee landlords (often from the United States), and this issue drove the politics in Cuba to the left, at least initially. The banana industry in Central America was dominated by the power of the United Fruit Company, also U.S.-owned, which created and sustained leftist political opposition in Central America throughout the century.

Some takeaways from the book include the effect of the depression on the emergence of a “national” identity in many of the countries studied (as opposed to regional or tribal identification, which had been dominant prior to this century), the enacting and refinement of labor laws, protectionism, assimilation of indigenous peoples (a particular theme in Central America during that time), movements for and against land reform, and responses to calls for radicalism and communism.

In the final chapter, co-editor Alan Knight aims to tie everything together with these themes. Knight notes the similarity and contrast of Latin American experiences during the Great Depression—he counts eight of the countries as fast recoveries from the depression, three countries that experienced slow recoveries, and three others in the medium category (280). Political instability is addressed in detail across the countries studied (293–94). The burgeoning power of the state as an economic force is also addressed in this manner (297–302), as is the growth of labor politics and labor policy (303–4). Urbanization as a consequence of economic change is addressed (305–6). Radicalization also emerged in several countries, some with success, others not (307–8). Another political consequence was the emergence of nationalism and national identity in these countries. This is also addressed in some detail in a cross country comparison (309–10). Knight’s final chapter does an excellent job integrating the information from an assortment of varied essays.

In summary, the book is an informative and worthwhile read. Comprising a wealth of both political and economic information, it is suitable reading for the expert and non-expert alike, although the better acquainted one is with Latin American history, the more one will be able to gain from reading this book.