

Chapter 5: Signs of Crisis in a Gilded Age

Chapter Four offers us insight into how the export boom was experienced as a triumphal epoch. Chapter Five introduces an alternative narrative of the same period. We also trace the growing sense of crisis that was evident to many but often ignored.

Two specific examples of this crisis dominate the chapter. The first focuses on the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and ended the export boom here twenty years before it ended elsewhere. The second focuses on the *Semana Trágica* (Tragic Week) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during January 1919, when a general strike was followed by brutal repression of working class Argentines.

The documents chosen for this chapter introduce four different instances in which Latin Americans endeavored to address the crises of this era. They include work by Rubén Darío, José Vasconcelos, and José Mariátegui, along with Emiliano Zapata's *Plan de Ayala*.

Emiliano Zapata's *Plan de Ayala* was a revolutionary declaration signed by a group of indigenous Mexican villagers in 1911, providing a stark contrast to the Mexico described by James Creelman just three years earlier. Darío introduces us to a poetic lament about the growing power of the United States in the region. Vasconcelos in turn mixed revolutionary enthusiasm with concern about the influence of the US, but expressed his anxiety by turning North American racial theories sideways and claiming Latin American racial superiority (or at least seeming to do so). The last document is an essay titled "The Problem of the Indian" from José Mariátegui's *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, published in 1928. Mariátegui takes an approach to Latin America's problems in this essay that simultaneously looks back to a utopian indigenous past and forward to a socialist future.

These documents come from distinct voices, address different questions, and propose differing solutions to Latin America's problems. Still, for all their differences, they remind us of the various ways in which some Latin Americans did not see the export boom as an era of progress. We can read these texts for their internal logics and beauty, as each represents in its own way an eloquent argument and piece of literature. We might also imagine them as part of a common oeuvre, the literature of the crisis.

Questions to Consider when Reading the Documents

How are these texts addressing similar and different concerns?

Does the fact that three texts (Mariátegui, Vasconcelos, and Dario) were produced by literate members of the elite, and one (the *Plan de Ayala*) was produced by poor rural people, change the nature of the texts, or how we read them?

What can we take away from the texts, both in their descriptions of the world and their prescriptions for the future?

Do these texts offer us a common sense of crisis and problems, or are they so particular to their individual contexts that they ought not be considered together?

Are these texts better read as fiction or truth? Is there a difference?

How can these texts be read against Creelman?

In the end, can we reconcile different versions of the export boom (1870s–1930) in a single narrative?