

Chapter 6: Commerce, Coercion, and America's Empire

The rise of the United States as a global power is one of the critical stories of Latin America's twentieth century, but it is a complex narrative that carries several risks in the telling. Told a certain way, we represent the US simply as a violent and oppressive power, one that determines the trajectory of Latin American history with little input from Latin Americans themselves. Similarly, US engagements in Latin America during the twentieth century have had distinct phases. North American aspirations in Latin America have been framed by larger global concerns, as well as an uneven capacity to wield American influence in the region.

We deal with the latter problem in this chapter by focusing primarily on the first half of the twentieth century, the period when the US was emerging as a global power, but before the Cold War. The former problem is confronted by considering the rise of US power not just in military terms, but also as a product of the growth of mass consumption during the twentieth century. We see in this chapter the appeal that North American mass-market goods (including movies, Coca Cola, cigarettes, and other consumer goods) had in Latin America. We also see the ways that Americans consumed Latin American products and icons (bananas and Carmen Miranda, for example).

Our documents in this chapter explore the complex ways that physical domination was tied to a variety of other imperatives during the American Century. Our first text, Augusto Sandino's 1927 Political Manifesto serves as a stark reminder that American domination was in part carried out through soldiers and weapons. Though Sandino in some ways used the fact of the presence of the Marines to serve very specific ends (identifying his local enemies, who supported the Marines, as traitors), the physical presence of an occupying army was a visceral and tragic part of life in many parts of Latin America during the twentieth century.

Our second two texts are films made by North American directors, intended for North American audiences. The first is the film *Silent War*, a Second World War propaganda film that reveals the beneficent scientific work done by American scientists, whose vaccination for Yellow Fever saves both American troops fighting the Japanese menace and indigenous villagers in Popoyán, Colombia. The second film is *Journey to Banana Land*, a 1950 film made by the United Fruit Company that simultaneously promotes the company's good work in Guatemala and encourages North Americans to eat more bananas. Together these films reveal the complex ways that the American presence in Latin America was represented to audiences in the US, and gives us an opportunity to discuss how the Latin Americans portrayed in these films might have viewed this presence.

Our last text comes from Ariel Dorfman's anti-imperialist classic, *How to Read Donald Duck*. Writing during the height of the cold war, Dorfman focuses his readers attentions on the way seemingly innocuous cartoons (or even documentary films) reinforce the American imperial project. His work of criticism reminds readers of the ways that domination is not just a physical project, but a cultural one as well. Still, while Dorfman offers us a compelling way of reading these texts, he does not give

us evidence about how people were already reading the texts. As with all works of propaganda, we are left with questions of how its intended audiences responded.

Questions to Consider when Reading the Documents

What do you make of Sandino's Political Manifesto? Were his grievances straightforward, or does he seem to be creating an enemy in order to justify his views?

Why do you imagine that Sandino has had such a lasting legacy in Latin America, at least in terms of his power as a symbol?

How should we read *Silent War* and *Journey to Banana Land*? Are these films more effective because they are films? What is the power of the medium? Is there truth to learn here?

What do you make of the relationship between the US and Latin America defined in *Silent War*? Is there a real case to be made for American benevolence here?

What do you make of the fact the *Journey to Banana Land* seems hilarious to a modern audience? Does the humor of our reading of the text tell us something about the different views we have of the world today? How do you imagine the students who watched this film in school assemblies during the 1950s responded?

How does *Journey to Banana Land* produce a rendering of both the US and Guatemala? What does it reveal about an image of an America that never was?

Is Dorfman's reading of *Donald Duck* fair? What do you make of the Donald Duck cartoons he references? Can similar issues be seen in Disney cartoons today? How, for instance, would you read *Pocahontas* or *The Search for El Dorado*?

Are the intentions of a text always linked to the way it is read? Do you suppose that all readers of *Donald Duck* became convinced of the superiority of the US?

Is there any point in reading all these texts together? What does a common reading produce?