Review/Reseña

Nicola Miller and Stephen Hart, eds. *When Was Latin American Modern?*

M-O-D-E-R-N-I-T-Y (Find out what it means to me)

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Modernity is a much used and much abused concept in the study of Latin America; that much we can probably agree on. It is harder, as this volume shows, for scholars to agree on, for example, what modernity means or refers to, whether what it denotes is a good or a bad thing, how useful it is for understanding Latin America, or, indeed, *when* it manifested itself in the region. Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that modernity, and its cognates (modern, modernisation and modernism), can have

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1 R-E-S-P-E-C-T to the Queen of Soul.
somewhat different meanings for different disciplines. But even within
disciplines, modernity often can mean quite different things. For this
reason, putting geographers, anthropologists, historians and literary, film
and cultural studies scholars together in a room to discuss a provocative
question such as “When Was Latin America Modern?” was bound to
produce “tensions”, as Nicola Miller acknowledges in her introduction (3).
Although interdisciplinarity is a valuable commodity these days, it is not
easy to come by. True, quite a lot of it goes on without much fanfare within
ostensibly “disciplinary” boundaries in the sense that historians read
anthropologists and anthropologists draw upon the work of literary
scholars, etc. But interdisciplinary summity, of the sort where sociologists,
cultural theorists, and economists, say, sit around a table and try to talk
to/with each other, rarely works. Miller and Stephen Hart should be
commended for trying but, ultimately, this book is less than the sum of its
parts. That said, some of the parts are very good indeed.

All edited books exhibit a degree of diversity in terms of the extent
to which each contribution conforms to, and furthers, the objectives of the
volume and the extent to which the contributions taken together form a
cogent and compelling read. The contributions to this volume are grouped
in two sections titled respectively “historical and social sciences” and
“literary and cultural studies.” What immediately strikes the reader is how
different the first group of texts is from the second. Even before reading the
chapters, the differences are obvious: in the first group the chapters are
longer and have extensive bibliographies. In the second group, the chapters
are short and have bibliographies of less than a page in some cases.
Reading the chapters further confirms the difference. In the first group the
authors have set themselves, or have been set by one or both editors (one
editor is a historian, the other a literary scholar), the task of addressing the
question that forms the title of the book by surveying their discipline
(geography, anthropology, and history)—in fact, by exposing the question
to a critical evaluation arising from their discipline—in order to determine
whether the question is indeed, as the introductory chapter suggests, a
useful heuristic device. They come to different conclusions: for Sarah
Radcliffe, the geographer, the question is useful if it is qualified: not when
was Latin America modern, but *in which spaces*; for Peter Wade, the anthropologist, the question is not only not useful, it exemplifies and perpetuates a teleology that is politically insidious; for Guy Thomson, the historian, it is a useful question but as the comparative case studies he turns to suggest, modernity was/is impermanent; for Alan Knight, also a historian, the question is not a useful heuristic device and is, in fact, a silly question, no different to asking when Latin America was happy.

By contrast, the second group of authors approach the question from a very different perspective. They do not seek to survey the disciplines they represent (literature, film, and cultural studies) or indeed to submit the question to an interrogation derived from a specific disciplinary position. Instead, these authors take the question, and, indeed, modernity, somewhat for granted. William Rowe examines different “cuts” in Peru’s twentieth century cultural history (taken to mean the history of literary/cultural production) that reveal what he understands to be alternative modernities. De Castro Rocha argues that Machado de Assis was modern by virtue of his peripherality (an argument that develops along lines that are interestingly analogous to Alexander Gershenkron’s “late industrializer thesis”). Julio García Espinoza’s chapter makes virtually no reference to the question at hand and, judging by my limited knowledge of issues related to film studies, provides somewhat general musings on Cuban cinema. Finally, Néstor García Canclini’s essay is something of a dog’s dinner: a little bit on migration, a little bit of commentary on two artists’ work, a little bit on cultural industries; all amounting to unsubstantial back-of-an-envelope stuff purportedly on the inherent globality and asymmetry of Latin American modernity. These last two chapters seem somewhat out of place with both the other chapters in the sub-section and with the volume as a whole. It is further striking that whereas the first group of chapters regularly cross-reference each other (and as such, achieve a degree of interdisciplinarity within their subgroup), this is rare in the second group of chapters.

I was puzzled by the disparity in approach between the two groups of chapters. This is not necessarily a disparity in the quality of the contributions (both Rowe and de Castro Rocha’s are very solid, informed,
and compelling articles) but in how the two groups of authors have approached the question. I was left wondering whether the disparity was a consequence of different editorial decisions made with regard to each group of contributors or whether it reflected something inherent to the academic disciplines represented in each group (is a survey of, say, film studies analogous to Wade’s discussion of “what might constitute an anthropological approach to modernity” possible?). This disparity is clearly (and tactfully?) flagged in Nicola Miller’s introduction: “the following collection of essays has a strong thematic integrity, but also illustrates the dramatic variety of approaches to the question of modernity” (4). As a historian, I am probably guilty as charged of “residual positivism” (3). But, I think that while the first group of chapters succeeds admirably in addressing the question “When was Latin America modern?” in ways that illustrate how disciplines may indeed “reflect critically upon themselves” (4) (even if some of the contributors reject the question), I see only tangential evidence of this in some of the chapters in the second group (Rowe, de Castro Rocha) and in other chapters no evidence at all (García Espinoza; García Canclini). In outlining the various chapters in the introduction, Miller does her best to give the volume some cogency, like a teacher rounding up her students in order to get them to form an orderly line (“In developing new approaches, we suggest that...” my emphasis; 13). But there is no escaping the fact that some of the pupils are simply unwilling to form the line, while others are still in the playground, quite unaware of the fact that a line is being formed.

Laurence Whitehead’s concluding chapter, to continue the school metaphor, reads a little like the intervention of a headmaster, called to establish order (and to discipline the unruly positivist and relativist pupils) after the teacher has all but given up and thrown up their arms in despair. This is a shame, because it would have been useful to have a political science perspective analogous to the perspectives provided by the other representatives of the “historical and social sciences”. Instead, Whitehead’s chapter is a pitch for what he calls “multiple modernities” (a concept which is not fully explained but which seems to stand not for the existence of different notions of modernity but for the presence of islands of
modernity—such as the Internet, 204—in a sea of non-modernity) and for what he believes to be, perhaps in allusion to Albert Hirschman’s “bias for hope,” Latin America’s “bias for modernity.” In making this latter claim, Whitehead provides some counter-examples to prove his point (which, at least in some cases, seem poorly chosen: there was nothing “anti-modern” about Sendero Luminoso). Whitehead espouses a diffusionist view of modernity (Paris and the United States are introduced as a “pole of attraction” or “source” of modernity [195]), which is at odds with most of the other interpretations. In Whitehead’s reading, Latin America’s bias for modernity results from its greater predisposition (compared to other “peripheral” areas of the world) to interact with the centres of modernity (197). What modernity means in this framework is “a collective aspiration, a succession of overlapping and competing objectives for improvement, a restless surge for experimentation that can never be satisfied” (204). Whitehead’s contention that the source of such a collective aspiration is the United States and that Latin Americans have a stronger bias for “improvement” than, say, Africans, is, to say the least, troubling to me.

That said, if When Was Latin American Modern has some flaws as a volume or as a collective project, it is undeniable that most of the individual contributions are first-rate. In my opinion, the chapters by Rowe and de Castro Rocha would have been strengthened if they had been framed by more explicit and systematic disciplinary-based considerations of “modernity” analogous to those offered in the “historical and social science” chapters. The chapters by Radcliffe, Wade, Thomson and Knight seem more complete to me: they don’t necessarily agree with the question that forms the rationale for this volume, but they constitute extremely useful contributions to the debate that the question clearly aimed to provoke and promote. They offer important insight not so much on when Latin America was modern, but rather on the analytical work that modernity and its cognates do in each of these disciplines. Even if they reject the teleology implicit in the question, or question its validity, these chapters represent useful reflections on a concept, which, for better or worse, plays a key role in much scholarly work on Latin America. These contributions are certainly not the last word, at a disciplinary or
interdisciplinary level, on modernity and its conceptual utility in the context of the study of Latin America. But, along with Miller’s introduction, they represent useful and important steps in the debate. For this reason, this is a book that Latin Americanist scholars of all disciplines will draw great benefit from.