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**Julio Ramos.** *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 328 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1990-0.



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After the achievement of independence, Latin America's cultured elites set themselves the goal of ridding their lands of barbarism and disorder, of achieving the modernity enjoyed by the happier lands of Western Europe and the United States. Julio Ramos collection of essays explores the encounters Ramos employs the more ambiguous term *desencuentros*, which his translator renders as *run-ins*—of some major Latin American literary figures with the ideal of modernity and with its reality as they observed it at home and in their travels to Europe and the United States.

Ramos, Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Princeton University, defines the main question asked by his book as follows (p. xl): What are the effects of [Latin America's] dependent and uneven modernization on the literary field? He maintains this focus on the interplay of politics, economic change, and literature throughout the book; a good example is his illuminating discussion of the interconnections between the rise of the Latin American capitalist nation-state and the modern Latin American newspaper (like *La Nacin* of Buenos Aires), employing a new print technology and the telegraph, and the appearance of a new literary genre, the *Crnica*, in which Jos Mart excelled.

Part I of *Divergent Modernities* explores the modernizing ideology of what Ramos calls the enlightened le-

trados, represented by Domingo F. Sarmiento and Andrs Bello. Faced with the chaos left by the wars of independence and the recalcitrance of the native masses—conditions that Sarmiento attributed to the fatal Spanish heritage and the backwardness and ignorance of those masses—he was the most passionate modernizer of all. Sometimes he carried his passion to extravagant lengths; he once insisted that “as long as we do not change the dress of the Argentine soldier” (he referred to the poncho and other articles of gaucho dress), “we are bound to have caudillos.” Ramos argues that Sarmiento, with his formless romantic masterpiece, *The Life of Juan Facundo Quiroga: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845), and Andrs Bello, with his notion of writing as a machine of action, as a device that transforms the chaotic nature of barbarism (in Latin America), contributed to the formation of Latin American national literatures and the Latin American nation-state.

Searching for models, modernizers like Sarmiento could choose between Western Europe and the United States. For Sarmiento there was no question as to the United States' superiority over Europe in all respects. He could see no flaws in the North American model. As late as 1883, after the Mexican War and the filibustering expedition of William Walker to Central America had made perfectly clear the expansionist tendency of U.S.

policy toward Latin America, Sarmiento wrote: "Let us not stop the United States in their march; this is as much as some people ultimately propose. Let us catch up with the United States. Let us be America, as the sea is the ocean, let us be the United States."

But the radical Chilean writer Francisco Bilbao, also an ardent champion of change and modernity, disagreed. In his *Amrica en peligro* (1856) (*America in Danger*), he warned that "already we hear the tread of the young colossus that with its diplomacy, with that swarm of adventurers that it casts about like seed, with its growing power and influence that hypnotizes its neighbors, with its intrigues among our peoples, with its treaties, mediations, and protectorates, with its industry, its merchant marine, its enterprises—quick to note our weaknesses and weariness, quick to take advantage of the divisions among our republics, ever more impetuous and audacious, having the same faith in its imperial destiny as did Rome, infatuated with its unbroken string of successes—that youthful colossus advances like a rising tide that rears up its waters to fall like a cataract upon the South."

Ramos rightly observes that Bilbao's critique of American imperialism in many ways anticipates post-1898 Latinoamericanista discourses. Moreover, by claiming that Latin America represented aesthetic and spiritual values in opposition to North American materialism, to its capitalist and technological modernity, Bilbao anticipated the major thesis of a very influential essay, "Ariel" (1906) by Jos Enrique Rod. Bilbao wrote: "In our lands there survives something of that ancient and divine hospitality, in our breasts there is room for the love of mankind...We side with those who see in art, in enthusiasm for the beautiful (independently of its results), and in philosophy, the splendors of the highest good. We do not see in the earth, or in the pleasures of the earth, the definitive end of man; the Negro, the Indian, the disinherited, the unhappy, the weak, find among us the respect that is due to the name and dignity of man!"

Finally, we should note that Bilbao, like Rod, did not simply condemn North American utilitarianism, but rather urged the fruitful fusion of Latin American spirituality with the practical, energetic spirit of the United States. "Let us not scorn, let us rather incorporate in ourselves all that shines in the genius and life of the United States." We shall see that some major themes of Bilbao's important but almost forgotten assertion of Latin American political and intellectual independence reappear in Jos Marts magnificent essay, *Nuestra Amrica* (*Our America*), published in 1891. Indeed, it could be argued that

Mart's essay is in direct line of descent from Bilbao's fiery manifesto.

Most of the second part of Ramos' book is devoted to a study of Mart's encounter with North American modernity during his residence in the United States, 1880-1895, recorded in his *Escenas Norteamericanas* (*North American Scenes*), a series of chronicles of everyday North American life written for various Latin American newspapers between 1881 and 1892. Ramos subjects these chronicles and other writings by Mart to close analysis and assesses their influence in shaping modern Latin American literature. Mart's emerging view of North American life and culture was not a simple or unitary one; it combined wonder at such technological achievements as the Brooklyn Bridge, admiration for such figures as Lincoln, Emerson, Mark Twain, and the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, horror at the vulgarity of the new mass culture that he observed at Coney Island, and growing concern over the rise of monopolistic and imperialist tendencies in the United States. Ultimately, overshadowing all else was his growing fear of United States designs on Cuba. On the day before his death on May 19, 1895, while fighting Spanish troops, he set down that fear: "I know the monster because I have lived in its belly, and my sling is that of David."

This translation of Ramos text comes with a bonus in the form of English translations of three texts by Mart: his essay, "Our America", his prologue to Prez Bonaldes *Poema del Niagara*, and his chronicle *Coney Island from North American Scenes*.

The essay "Our America" is especially important for its influential role in the post-1900 transformation of Latin American patterns of thought. Writing at a time when the dominant currents of that thought were positivism, racism, slavish admiration for North American or European models of modernity, Mart's essay powerfully argued in favor of a search for native roots, of rejection of artificial foreign models, of a Latinoamericanismo that would incorporate and build on the Indian, the black, and other wretched of the earth. Sarmiento had rejoiced that America was occupied by the Caucasian race, the most perfect, intelligent, beautiful, and progressive of all the races that inhabit the earth. Mart pointedly wrote: "There is no hate among races, because there are no races." Even more pointedly, directly referring to the title of Sarmiento's classic work, he wrote: "There is no battle between civilization and barbarism, but between false erudition and nature."

Ramos' book appears to be primarily directed toward

a readership of scholars with special interest in Latin American literature and literary criticism. But its careful exploration of the encounter between Latin American nineteenth-century thinkers and literati and the idea of modernity should prove informative and stimulating to all students of Latin American intellectual history.

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