

# Improvised continent : Pan-Americanism and cultural exchange (/review/10.5860/CHOICE.207892)

Cándida Smith, Richard. (/search?exactauthor=Cándida Smith, Richard)  
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In the so-called American century, the utopian movement of Pan-Americanism provided the premise for some of Latin America's most significant cultural icons to enter the US market. Cándida Smith (emer., history, Berkeley) examines these cultural exchanges as a lens through which to analyze shifting international relations accompanying the rise of the US as a global power in the 20th century. The book follows an array of "cultural ambassadors," including Mexican painter Diego Rivera, Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and Brazilian novelist Érico Veríssimo, as they negotiated the unequal hemispheric power relations surrounding their visits. In the process, Cándida Smith highlights the ways these artists reinforced US dominance through their visits and subtly critiqued US society through their art. While most accounts of cultural exchange in the hemisphere focus on US programs in Latin America, Cándida Smith studies initiatives funded by the US federal government and private institutions that sponsored programming in which Latin American intellectuals engaged US audiences directly. By shifting the focus to Latin American cultural contributions to the US, the author offers a new look at Pan-Americanism as an idealistic yet highly imperfect project for forging global citizens.

Summing Up: Highly recommended. All academic levels/libraries.

Reviewer: B. A. Lucero (/search?reviewer=B. A. Lucero), Tulane University

Recommendation: Highly recommended

Readership Level: Lower-division Undergraduates, Upper-division Undergraduates, Graduate Students, Researchers/Faculty, Two-Year Technical Program Students

Interdisciplinary Subjects: Latin American & Latina/o Studies (/search?q=&ints[]=lt)

Subject: Social & Behavioral Sciences - History, Geography & Area Studies - Latin America & the Caribbean (/search?q=&sbj[]=lac)

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patrick iber

## Review of Richard Cándida Smith, “Improvised Continent”

January 22, 2018 · by patrickiber · in Intellectuals, Latin America, propaganda, Reviews, US and the World, writing ·

An edited version of this will be in the Journal of Latin American Studies later, but I’m allowed to post pre-print text here.

Richard Cándida Smith, *Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 352, £37.00, \$45.00.

The promise and peril of Pan-Americanism can perhaps be captured together in Disney’s 1944 film *The Three Caballeros*. Donald Duck, representing the United States, travels through Latin American scenes, both animated and live-action, with José Carioca, the Brazilian parrot, and Mexican rooster Panchito Pistoles. “We’re happy amigos, no matter where he goes, the one, two, and three goes, we’re always together,” Panchito sings, expressing a Pan-American vision of wartime unity. Yet Donald offers little but bug-eyed lust after singers, dancers, and, at one point, an entire beachfront of women in Acapulco. There especially, Donald combines desire with incomprehension and indifference to the consequences of his actions. His friends are only partially successful in their efforts to restrain him. In trying to show a vision of continental unity, the film actually puts on full display the inequality of power inherent in the relationship between the U.S. and the rest of the countries of the Americas.

The Pan American Union, Manuel Ugarte once wrote, was nothing more than gatherings of “mice chaired by a cat.” (15) But if this story, however true, seems overly familiar, then Richard Cándida-Smith’s *Improvised Continent* is frequently surprising. In the *Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* of the subtitle, it is the latter that gets the focus. It is not a history of the institutions of Pan-Americanism: it is an exploration of what Pan-Americanism meant for the artists and writers who became part of the circulation of works in a space that was construed as “Pan-American.” The institutions are present, often in the background, operating, as Cándida Smith argues, as the

“practical conditions shaping what any cultural worker can say or do... Writing and art are meaningful when they can be scheduled into the practices that institutions foster to assure the continuity of their activities.” (7) This perspective informs the book’s treatment of “cultural exchange.” What sold? What was published? What structured the market for interest in Latin America in the U.S., and vice versa?

*Improvised Continent* joins Greg Grandin and other historians who have emphasized that Latin America served as a kind of laboratory for the U.S. to work out institutional arrangements that would later be used elsewhere in the world. In some ways the Pan American Union became the blueprint for the exercise of global U.S. power: rather than formal colonization, the U.S. offered commercial relations on the U.S. model, with diplomacy working to support private initiative, and cultural work to build a common imaginary. The Pan American Union’s building was funded by Andrew Carnegie, who also appointed Elihu Root to head the Carnegie Endowment. Root probably did as much as anyone to build institutions through which the U.S. federal government could exercise its particular form of imperial relations, and cultural relations were important to that project. Carnegie launched pilot cultural exchange programs and helped make Spanish the most studied foreign language in the U.S. by 1925.

Yet exchange did not necessarily mean comprehension. What attracted the attention of editors and reviewers in the decades up to World War II were stories of fundamental civilizational difference: reaffirming ideas of U.S. “mechanical progress” compared with Latin America’s “virgin nature.” The early chapters of the book cover diverse figures, from Gabriela Mistral, who benefited from early translation, to painters like Diego Rivera and Cândido Portinari, whose work excited audiences in the U.S. in the 1930s, to writers like William Carlos Williams and Waldo Frank, who wanted to rethink the U.S. in a transnational context in the first case, and who promoted an idea of Latin America as a source of spiritual redemption, in the latter.

The middle chapters of the book take up a major shift in direction for the Pan-American circulation of ideas and culture. In 1938 the U.S. State Department created the Division of Cultural Relations; in 1940 the White House created the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, headed by Nelson Rockefeller. (It was this latter office that subsidized Disney’s wartime work.) Despite tension between these two, the political needs of World War II required that U.S. citizens think in terms of commonality between the U.S. and Latin American countries, not fundamental differences. The emblematic figure of this shift—and the central figure of the book—is Brazilian writer Érico Veríssimo. Veríssimo did a major tour of the U.S. in 1941, and while there met with Macmillan about possible translation of his works. Historian Lewis Hanke recommended against, arguing that his work wasn’t “Latin American” enough, in the sense of being distinguishable from work of writers from more developed countries. But Veríssimo’s friends Thornton Wilder and John Dos Passos urged the company to reconsider, and Veríssimo became the best-read writer from Latin America in the U.S. for twenty years.

But new priorities in the Cold War created new tensions. In 1948 the Pan American Union became the Organization of American States. “Cultural exchange” was displaced in favour of “public information,” whose primary goal was explaining the U.S. to other countries, to be achieved by policies of “open exchange” and “freedom of information” that provided advantages to already powerful U.S. institutions. Political tensions split communities of writers along generally liberal

and Communist lines. The anti-Communist Veríssimo was seen by many in Brazil as an agent of U.S. imperialism. But he grew increasingly disillusioned with the U.S. He was openly critical of the military government in Brazil after 1964 and U.S. support for it. In 1967 he published a novel critical of the Vietnam War. His last novel, 1971's *Incidente em Antares*, spoke against torture and dictatorship and became the biggest-selling book in Brazil's history but was never translated into English. The U.S. market had moved on to the writers of the "boom," supported by the Rockefeller-funded Center for Inter-American Relations, which for its own Cold War reasons championed the autonomy of writing and works of imaginative invention. The politically liberal Veríssimo had, ironically, published a book that was too socially committed. Pan-Americanism, as an ideal, was for all intents and purposes, dead.

*Improvised Continent* is, above all else, a deft history of publishing. In following the changing reception and enthusiasm for works of the visual arts and writing, Cándida Smith has written a keen and sensitive history of how institutions created shifts in public consciousness and perception. There is not much archival research here (Veríssimo's papers are one exception, and part of what makes his story richly rendered). But what the book does do extraordinarily well is to follow both the commercial logic of major publishing concerns in the U.S. and Latin America, and the way that their work intersected with the legitimation strategies of government institutions. In so doing, *Improvised Continent* becomes a valuable intellectual history of the Americas that reveals a deeper foundation of inter-American exchange than is usually assumed. This material history of art and ideas is executed in exemplary fashion, never reductive, making *Improvised Continent* a book that should be read not just by scholars of Pan-Americanism or inter-American relations, but by anyone interested in how institutions shape the diffusion of culture across national lines.

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# Improvised Continent: pan-Americanism and cultural exchange

Alex Bryne

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of the type or quantity of light fittings in North Korean housing blocks or long statistical paragraphs could all have been considerably shortened. And for a book that contains microscopic level of detail, as evidenced by its 1,186 footnotes, it is rather a surprise that there is no bibliography, an omission that makes it much harder to navigate through the material. Nonetheless, these are minor quibbles. Hong has produced an ambitious transnational study that also throws new light on German–German relations during the height of the Cold War.

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**Improvised Continent: pan-Americanism and cultural exchange**, by Richard Cándida Smith, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, vii + 352 pp., £37.00/\$45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-81224-942-2

In *Improvised Continent*, Richard Cándida Smith examines the fascinating history of pan-American cultural exchange programmes during the twentieth century. Although the interplay between diplomacy and culture in the formation of the United States' Pan-American policy has attracted significant scholarly attention, existing studies tend to focus on how cultural programmes were utilized to influence Latin American opinion. Smith adopts an alternative perspective and analyses the overlooked impact that inter-American cultural exchange had within the United States itself.

Beginning in the 1910s, both the federal government and private organizations began to sponsor programmes that brought Latin American 'cultural ambassadors' over to the United States to promote Pan-Americanism (7). On the surface, these initiatives served as an amenable means through which the United States sought to further its foreign policy goals within the Americas. However, Smith argues that they additionally provided Latin American intellectuals, writers, and artists with a unique opportunity to engage directly with the United States public. This opportunity was a 'privilege' for Latin American cultural figures that 'came with obligations to help whoever encountered their work see inter-American, and ultimately global, relations from the perspective of an intellectual from another country' (2–3). If a shared, pan-American public opinion could be established among the American nations, then their citizens could 'act to limit the evil their governments do' and hold them accountable to pan-American ideals (8).

Latin American cultural ambassadors sought to test the boundaries of what was officially demanded of their sojourns and attempted to exhibit some of their own personal concerns. Despite the policy goals of cultural exchange programmes, they provided scope for Latin Americans to promote the more liberal and democratic ideals of pan-Americanism and weaken its imperial connotations and implementation. Smith draws upon Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*<sup>1</sup> to support his argument and he posits that an inter-American community could not grow from the mere existence of assumed shared values. Instead, an effort on the part of all American citizens to understand one another

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<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958).

and reconcile their differences was essential. Cultural work presented an ideal medium for this process, because idealized visions of pan-Americanism could be absorbed without the need for any disruptive public action. Citizens simply had to think and dwell upon pan-Americanism after listening to, reading about or observing its ideals and subsequently communicate any desires for change after a sufficient understanding of other American nations had been achieved (9–10).

*Improvised Continent* is based upon a range of primary source material, including archival manuscript collections as well as the cultural artefacts created via these exchanges, that is suitably transnational. Its pages are illustrated with a myriad of photographs, and the inclusion of short biographies that outline the life and aspirations of each major Latin American artist grants each cultural initiative a personal and human touch. Smith traces the development of these cultural exchange programmes in chronological order, dedicating chapters to one or two important individuals in a specific cultural field, ranging from the likes of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, to the Brazilian author Érico Veríssimo. *Improvised Continent* is divided into three main sections, the first of which details the origins of pan-American culture in the early twentieth century and outlines how private organizations sought to use cultural exchange to generate and solidify pan-Americanism after the outbreak of the First World War. The second section is closely associated with the development of President Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy and the threat of the Second World War. The State Department's Division of Cultural Relations sought to generate domestic support for the policy through coordinating private initiatives and emphasizing the need to bring the lived experience of Latin America to the citizens of the United States. Policymakers desired specific results from these programmes, namely for the American nations to cooperate against fascism, which frustrated many Latin American voices, and the government was hostile to any efforts of critical self-evaluation that might be drawn out of cultural exchange initiatives. For example, Brazilian cultural ambassadors who questioned United States race relations and the persistence of segregation aggravated Southern Democrats in a moment when a war-time political alliance was essential. As such, the 'vision of a fuller intersubjective communication collided against the necessity of formulas, even of stereotypes, to present comprehensible social messages' (135).

The final section of the book accounts for the shift that occurred during the Cold War. Cultural exchange became less of a policy priority for the government and was replaced by the generation of information about Latin America. Ultimately, results consistent with United States practices took precedent and the practicalities of cultural exchange programmes organized and facilitated by the United States government hindered the objectives of participating Latin Americans. As Smith explains, the demands of 'organizational routines' had to be satisfied for any cultural work to reach its intended audience (7). Smith's conclusions thus embody the disappointment that many Latin American artists felt, and he argues that the cultural exchange initiatives failed to alter domestic perceptions of Latin America, which still 'lacked political complexity' (239). He returns to the question posed by Secretary of State Elihu Root at the dawn of the century to emphasize a sense of missed opportunity: 'can a country be a responsible global leader if its citizens know nothing about other places, and have no interest in hearing what people in other countries find important and compelling?' (271).

Yet Smith notes that the pall of disappointment does not belittle the historical importance of pan-American cultural exchanges for two reasons. Firstly, these cultural ambassadors did create moments in which 'new ways of understanding the world emerged' (9). Secondly, these experiences can help historians 'clarify the fractures that accompany any ostensibly utopian project' such as pan-Americanism (7). Although *Improvised Continent* presents a melancholy conclusion for adherents of the pan-American dream,



Smith's analysis is compelling and highlights the value of critically examining the ways in which pan-Americanism was received within the United States.

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### **Étudiants Africains en Mouvements: contribution à une histoire des années**

**1968**, edited by Françoise Blum, Pierre Guidi and Ophélie Rillon, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016, 366 pp., €25 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-85944-978-0

The last decade has experienced an explosion of historiography on what has been variously termed the 'long 1960s' or 'long 1968'. The volume of output has been matched by a diversification in approaches. Students on Parisian barricades or at Berkeley sit-ins still feature prominently in this new historiography, as do Cold War flashpoints like the Tet Offensive or the show of steel which brought an end to the Prague Spring. Yet these events are increasingly woven into a transnational landscape of protest that includes the global South. The Third World, especially through China's Cultural Revolution and conflict in Vietnam, provided ideological stimuli for European and North American protest. However, youth unrest also affected Latin America, Asia, and – as this volume demonstrates – Africa. In their introduction, the editors state their ambition to break from the 'scientific straitjacket of area studies' by bringing into conversation this flourishing history of the 'global 1960s' with research on social movements in Africa (17). The result is a set of original and engaging essays, which cover a wide geographical and thematic terrain.

As the editors note, although Africa's student protest movements had connections with their contemporaries in Europe and North America, the circumstances in which they emerged were very different. The debilitating legacies of colonialism meant that African states were short on educated manpower to staff bureaucracies and provide essential technical expertise. The numbers of aspirational young Africans entering institutes of higher education on the continent therefore grew rapidly in the years after independence. Young people were held up in state discourse as the embodiment of the future of the postcolonial nation. However, students possessed visions of modernity, especially those inflected by Marxism-Leninism, that were often at variance with the state's own concept of development. Amid the deteriorating economic conditions of the late 1960s, they came to pose a threat to increasingly inward-looking regimes. By the 1970s, with the one-party state or military dictatorship almost ubiquitous in Africa, most student organizations had been suppressed or absorbed into the apparatus of authoritarian regimes. Yet their revived voices offer constructive counterpoints to the usual history of the postcolonial state, 'long reduced to a simplistic account [*imagerie d'Épinal*] of a succession of military coups' (20).

The volume is divided into three sections. The first concentrates on the role of students in postcolonial nation-building projects. The second looks at attempts to transform society through debates about practices of education in independent Africa. The final part – 'Diasporas: Connections and Circulations' – moves away from the nation-centred approaches of the preceding sections, in examining student movements' links with pan-African organizations in the diaspora, the metropole, and socialist Eastern Europe. The essays demonstrate a commendable commitment to bilingual research (three are in