THE CONTEMPORARY
HISTORY OF LATIN
AMERICA

TULIO
HALPERÍN
DONGHI

THE
CONTEMPORARY
HISTORY OF
LATIN AMERICA

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN

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First published in the United Kingdom 1993
by THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world and in the
USA by Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina

ISBN 978-0-333-60940-8 ISBN 978-1-349-13436-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-13436-6

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
Typeset in Trajanus and Trump Mediaeval by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

*The translation of this book was supported by a grant
from the Mellon Foundation.*

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PREFACE

WORDS, FIRST OF ALL, OF GRATITUDE. Translating a text of history from Spanish to English is never an easy task. As Emilia Viotti da Costa, who courageously decided to absolve a similar task by herself, eloquently commented in the Preface to her *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories* (1985), "The real problem was how to convert a Brazilian prose that is more suggestive than precise, full of long sentences, often written in the passive voice . . . into the short and assertive sentences of the American style." In the case of my *Historia Contemporánea de América Latina*, the problem was compounded because although the book has found its main use in university courses in Latin American history, it had been written with a different audience in mind: those members of the general public who might be attracted to it by informed curiosity for things Latin American. Trusting that the readers would share—to quote again Emilia Viotti—"the same assumptions, the same codes, and the same anxieties and perplexities" that underlay my explorations, I felt even more free to do full justice to "the nuances, the interconnections," and the complexities present in every historical process. Something more than a translation was needed to achieve the metamorphosis of the almost idiosyncratically Spanish American text that resulted from my efforts into a book capable of satisfying American students' demands for clear answers to their precise questions. With reckless generosity, Professor John Charles Chasteen took time from his heavy and exciting intellectual and academic agenda to undertake the difficult task of translating and editing the text with that goal in mind. As a result of his effort, *The Contemporary History of Latin America* now reaches the English-reading public as a different—and I hope better—book than the one known by the readers of the original Spanish version and other translations. For this—and for the good grace with which he enter-

tained (within reason) my pleas for the text that underwent a not always painless metamorphosis—I shall be forever grateful.

Except for the Epilogue, rewritten for the present edition, and for the Bibliographical Essay, prepared especially for it, this is an edited translation of the enlarged thirteenth Spanish edition published in 1990.

Tulio Halperín Donghi
Berkeley, 1993

TRANSLATOR'S
PREFACE

FOR A QUARTER OF A CENTURY, Tulio Halperín Donghi's *Historia Contemporánea de América Latina* has been the most influential and widely read general history of Latin America in the Spanish-speaking world. Most historians of the region already know its fine-grained interpretation, unparalleled in breadth and ever attentive to the paradoxes of Latin American reality. The special purpose of this English-language version, then, is to make a landmark of Latin American historiography available to a totally new readership.

To produce a book that would read as though originally written for an English-language audience, the transformations of the Spanish text have exceeded those normally indicated by the term *translation*, extending beyond lexicon and syntax to prose conventions and addressing needs specific to new readers who possess less background knowledge of Latin America. Thus, the "lead story" has sometimes been highlighted more vigorously than in the original, which assumed prior familiarity with it, and some matters formerly left implicit have been made more explicit. In addition, a general streamlining occurred as the prose was recast using the shorter sentences and the patterns of paragraphing that are conventional in contemporary English usage. The paragraphs of the original interlock conceptually like links in a chain, a technique involving complex sentences that often reiterate or summarize an earlier idea before proceeding to elaborate on it, while the sentences of the English-language version follow one another more like beads on a string. In this sense, *The Contemporary History of Latin America* has been edited as well as translated. It would have been impossible to undertake such an ambitious task without the benefit of careful monitoring by the author, and I am grateful for his close cooperation throughout the process.

Something is inevitably lost in translation. In this case, the richness of nuance characteristic of the original, its relentless exploration

of internal contradictions, nested one inside another, have occasionally been muted by the heightening of primary emphasis and the application of greater forward momentum. Consequently, this translation cannot substitute for consultation of the original on matters of particular interest to specialists. On the other hand, thousands of new readers—many of whom might have been frustrated by a more traditional sort of translation—can now explore a book that has exercised incalculable influence over Latin Americans' understanding of their history.

John Charles Chasteen
Chapel Hill, 1992

PROLOGUE TO THE
THIRTEENTH EDITION

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1967, *The Contemporary History of Latin America* has required a new edition to include what have been, for Latin America, two very long decades since that year. After the process of revision began, it quickly became clear that updating was not enough. These twenty years have thrown a different light on Latin American history, especially on the last half century. Therefore, while I made few changes in the first five chapters of the original version, I decided to rewrite totally the materials covering the period since the crisis of 1929 and to add two more chapters beginning with the Cuban Revolution. The perspective of the last two decades has brought the period of Latin American history after World War II into sharper focus, and, of course, the period during which I first wrote also looks different in retrospect.

The zeitgeist of the 1960s is no longer with us. Gone is much of the optimism created by the great postwar prosperity of the developed world. Gone, too, is some of the impatience then awakened in peripheral countries unable to participate in that prosperity. More than we realized at the time, that optimism underlay both our diagnoses of past ills and our proposed remedies for them. During the 1960s, developmental theories and opposing revolutionary analyses alike rested on assumptions about a happier future seemingly almost within reach. Although neither of those rival faiths dominated this *Contemporary History of Latin America*, rereading makes plain to me how the spirit of the decade colored my own interpretation of those years, since even the grimmest descriptions of current problems revealed the impatient conviction that a solution lay tantalizingly near.

Today that eager confidence in a better future appears clearly as the hallmark of a past era. Need I say that very little of it remains in the new edition? Instead, the new edition must bear the mark of the

two decades that have passed since the first appearance of this book, among the most tragic periods in a history rich in tragedies.

What new moral shall we attach to the unfolding story of Latin America or adopt to guide our exploration of its past? The wisdom of disenchantment has replaced the faiths of twenty years ago in their ambition to guide Latin America into the future. I subscribe to no particular version of the current wisdom and propose instead that the future is likely to surprise us. For Latin America, far more than for more settled societies with a longer historical experience, the future will remain an elusive source of political inspiration but an untrustworthy starting point for the study of history.

Tulio Halperín Donghi
Berkeley, 1988

PROLOGUE TO THE
FIRST EDITION

TO WRITE A HISTORY of independent Latin America is problematical indeed. The contrasts of the land itself and the motley variety of Latin American experiences are among the first impressions of outside observers. With understandable caution, Lucien Febvre chose a plural form in his title of the *Annales* volume dedicated to Latin America, *À travers les Amériques latines*. Are there, then, as many different histories of Latin America as there are independent republics? Such a solution has the charm of simplicity, and one finds a score of parallel histories neatly arrayed in many textbooks. However, none of the twenty independent nations provide a unified object of study, as Leslie Byrd Simpson indicated in his synthesis of decades of sagacious research, *Many Mexicos*. From pre-Columbian empires to twentieth-century revolution, multiplicitous Mexicos emerge in the course of time, but owing to the tortured geography of the country, many Mexicos have also always existed simultaneously in the tropical coast, the northern desert, and the central highlands. Similar regional contrasts impose a plural history even on much smaller countries such as Ecuador and Guatemala.

Another obstacle to the creation of a unified history of Latin America lies in the way most scholars have approached the past. Traditional historians have lost themselves in accounts of presidential administrations, partisan politics, and wars. Geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists have emphasized continuities that span centuries of the Latin American past, and Fernand Braudel has shown that history can be the study of continuity as well as change. Such approaches often have created a simple dichotomy between enduring structures and the ephemeral events, be they colorful anecdotes or patriotic narratives, that have absorbed the energies of so many historians. There exists an important middle ground, however, between the clutter of anecdotal narrative and the apparent rigidity of unchanging

structures. This is the realm of historical process—coherent, gradual social and economic change—a more problematic historical dimension than either of the other two. Only at the level of social process can a unified interpretation give due attention to enduring patterns without abandoning the problem of historical change.

In the history of modern Latin America, the themes of unity and transformation converge in the region's incorporation into an international economic system with its center in Europe. We will begin with the end of Latin America's original colonial compact with the crowns of Spain and Portugal and follow the process of transformation brought by a new compact with burgeoning industrial powers like Great Britain in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, we will observe how this arrangement, too, enters a period of protracted crisis, a search for a new equilibrium in the relationship between Latin America and the international system. As we will see, the tensions of the mid-twentieth century reveal the failure of that search.

In order to provide a coherent picture of this complex process, the field of view must necessarily be carefully limited. No attempt is made here to provide a total history of contemporary Latin America. The reader will not find a profusion of red-letter dates, vignettes on the lives of famous persons, or synoptic treatments of literary and ideological trends. Nor are these the only omissions to which the author has resigned himself. Nevertheless, this *Contemporary History* will not be without some value if it provides historical perspective on the problems of Latin America today—cruel dilemmas that have escaped effective solutions for centuries and that now suddenly attract the alarmed attention of the world.

Tulio Halperín Donghi
Buenos Aires, 1966