



Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul by Michael Reid

Review by: Donald Share

The Americas, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Jan., 2009), pp. 436-437

Published by: [Academy of American Franciscan History](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25488157>

Accessed: 08/01/2013 22:47

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Academy of American Franciscan History is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Americas*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

he concludes, though the resulting centralization of federal authority came at the expense of state-level and municipal power, it did so by reinforcing Mexico's social and geographic heterogeneity.

*University at Albany, SUNY
Albany, New York*

SUSAN M. GAUSS

Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul. By Michael Reid. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xv, 384. Photographs. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$40.00 cloth.

Several themes permeate Michael Reid's intelligent and thoughtful overview of contemporary Latin American politics and economics. First, Reid believes that Latin America is incorrectly viewed by outsiders as a region dominated by dictatorial politics and protectionist economics when in fact "for the first time in Latin America's history, genuine and durable mass democracies have emerged across much of the region. . . . In both its breadth and depth, this process is new" (p. 9). Second, Reid argues, although Latin America has most often been studied as a problem that requires a solution, it has made enormous political, economic, and social strides in the last few decades. Indeed, Reid is confident that Latin America has turned a decisive corner, and that its future is more bright than bleak. A third theme is that the authoritarian right that dominated Latin America for much of the Cold War period, and the Latin American radical left, manifest today in the re-emergence of populist leaders like Venezuela's Chávez and Boliva's Morales, are unlikely to address successfully the problems facing Latin America.

Reid is editor of the Americas section of *The Economist*, and is a veteran journalist with extensive first-hand knowledge of Latin America. His work is unabashedly pro-free market in its analysis of Latin America's economic challenges. He argues that Latin America's economic potential was historically stunted by an overreliance on statism, and he is encouraged by the widespread adoption of market-friendly economic policies in Latin America. But Reid is not a dogmatic economic liberal, and his analysis is best described as social democratic. He favors a Latin American state that is more open to free trade and that owns less of, and intervenes less in, the economy, but that taxes and redistributes more of the national wealth. He therefore reserves his strongest praise for moderate and modernizing leftists like Brazil's Lula da Silva and Chile's Michelle Bachelet, and is most critical of old-style left populists like Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Reid rejects deterministic approaches that have been used to explain the relative underdevelopment of much of Latin America, stating that "rather than being culturally or externally determined, it is more fruitful to see Latin American history as a contest, between modernizers and reactionaries, between democrats and authoritarians, between the privileged and the excluded" (p. 51). Reid is often fiercely critical of U.S. policy toward Latin America. He correctly identifies the 1954 U.S.-backed overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala as a foreign policy disaster that helped

produce generations of antidemocratic and anti-capitalist radical leftists, weakening the moderate social democratic left throughout Latin America. However, Reid rejects attempts to blame most of Latin America's ills on the United States, and he denies that the widespread post-Cold War adoption of democratic politics and Washington Consensus economics was imposed on Latin America by the United States. Reid is especially critical of dependency theory that he believes has so crippled the Latin American left. He dubs dependency "a theory in search of facts" and concludes that it "does not stack up as an explanatory theory—especially as an economic one" (p. 39).

Reid carefully surveys the many flaws in Latin American democracy but nevertheless concludes that Latin American democracy is secure and its quality is likely to improve. He may underestimate the inauspicious constellation of defects weakening the Latin American polity. Flawed institutions (presidential systems with proportional representation electoral systems), the extremely weak rule of law (corruption and impunity), and the rapid erosion of political parties and their replacement by media-savvy charismatic leaders remain serious threats to the consolidation of liberal democracy. Those threats are exacerbated by Latin American political culture, which has been shown in numerous studies to have comparatively low levels of trust in political institutions, and alarmingly high reservoirs of support for non-democratic politics. Given this scenario it seems reasonable to question Reid's optimism that Latin American democracies can survive the simultaneous pressures they are likely to face in coming decades, like the need to adapt to globalization, the need to incorporate long excluded social sectors (like women and indigenous people), and the need to redress growing levels of inequality.

No argument in this book is novel. But Reid offers a serious and well-written synthesis of Latin America's political economy that is meticulously supported by a wealth of data and the work of the best scholars studying the region.

*University of Puget Sound
Tacoma, Washington*

DONALD SHARE

World Class Worldwide: Transforming Research Universities in Asia and Latin America. Edited by Philip G. Altbach and Jorge Balán. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp. viii, 323. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$85.00 cloth; \$42.00 paper.

This edited volume examines the status of research universities in seven middle-income and developing countries of Asia and Latin America, namely Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, India, Mexico, and South Korea. The book's comparative approach "highlights common problems and accomplishments and suggests new ways of thinking" (p. vii) about fostering the growth of research universities. Due to space considerations, however, this review will focus on the chapters related to Latin American higher education.