

Permanent Forum for Latin American Affairs

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THE ESTABLISHMENT of the *Cátedra de América Latina* (Permanent Forum for Latin American Affairs) provides us with a new opportunity to consider the significance of Latin American unity. However, the first thing that comes to mind is this well-worn critique: given the political and economic dispersion of the continent, integration is mere rhetoric. But this is not accurate. Nonetheless, if we were to imagine it were accurate, we would need to examine the logic underlying the objection that has been raised since the times of Simón Bolívar.

Undeniably, integration is a dream. I would even say a need that the Latin American spirit has energetically pursued from the very depths of its soul. It could also be called a profound utopian aspiration. This brings to mind the Argentinian, Dominican and Mexican, Pedro Henríquez-Ureña, who said, "We must put spiritual values back into utopia. Make the effort so that social reform and economic justice do not become the end of our goal. Strive to stop economic tyranny while being consistent with complete freedom. Be people," he added, "open to the four spiritual winds."

The utopian spirit contrasts with the skepticism and bitterness brought on by serious problems throughout the history of our countries. Bolívar not only talked about utopian spiritualism but also mentioned that regenerating Latin America was like plowing the

sea. Skepticism and the impulse towards utopia are the two strongest alternating moods in our history. José Martí, a Cuban, synthesized these currents when he said, "The sea is productive."

Henríquez-Ureña is correct in not limiting the concept of America to economic factors but stressing humanistic elements. True, a person's potential declines significantly when basic needs cannot be satisfied. However, the experiences of large industrialized countries, i.e. consumer societies, illustrate that an abundance

of material things does not necessarily meet people's search for the meaning of life. This meaning can be identified as a spiritual activity. This is why we feel that it is important for integration to take place at this time within an academic setting.

Latin America or Ibero-America, whichever we choose to call it such that it includes all our countries, is an immense continent with a variety of social and economic realities, needs and people, some of them quite isolated. It is also true that the unification of our America might not

Nineteen countries formed the Cátedra de América Latina (Permanent Forum for Latin American Affairs) at the National University of Mexico, UNAM, last fall. José Sarukhán, Rector of the UNAM, addressed the inaugural ceremony. The Forum will strive to promote the interchange of cultural, educational, scientific and historical values common to our region. The participating countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela.

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be considered to be in the best interests of foreign powers. Thus, many elements make unification difficult. There is, however, a clear and undeniable deeply-rooted unity at the very core of the Latin American character. It is this shared culture that we must take into account; creating a Permanent Forum for Latin American Affairs must be considered a landmark in the process.

Latin American philosophy contemplates a specific issue: many of us exist thinking that we are someone else, i.e. without full consciousness of our own identity or with an imposed and alienated identity. Self-knowledge, however, has become critical in recent years.

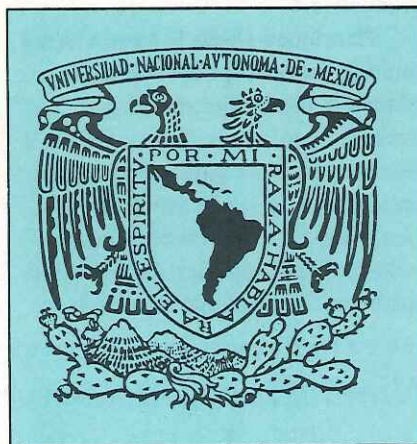
We must know who we are, even if that self-image which reflects our qualities and shortcomings does not match the foreign archetype. We cannot initiate a process of integration without an accurate image of our own reality. Further, evaluating our own reality must be accomplished by using our own values. Let me pursue and reflect on what we could find.

First, we'll find immense diversity within our common heritage, which is not negative, but rather a positive source of enrichment. A truly productive way of defining integration would be: uniting differences without forfeiting specific individual traits.

Countries with Pre-Hispanic roots must integrate those roots into their cultures and identify their role in our *mestizo* (the cultural and physical mixture of the native Mexican and the Spaniard) environment. This includes exploring what Luis Villoro identifies as the "symbolic role of the native world." At the same time, concern with our indigenous past cannot outshine the contemporary Indian. Today's Indian community deals with a reality that reflects problems facing most of Latin America's rural farm population. These make for good reasons why the Indian communities

have become symbols of revolution and protest.

Afro-Latino culture also needs to be considered. Gilberto Freyre, the Brazilian anthropologist, lucidly warned us not to confuse today's Afro-Latino culture with the slave culture of the nineteen thirties. The Africans were uprooted from their homes and dropped into slavery, where their communities could not help but reflect the limitations on what they could do or create. They would have to struggle for centuries before beginning to fully realize their potential.



The Cuban poet Roberto Fernández-Retamar wrote a magnificent essay on the way Latin American cultures perceive Blacks struggling for freedom. He honors Calibán, a man created to symbolize the people plunged into slavery. Calibán is identified as a mute, since he does not speak the language of the master, the colonizer.

Now we can combine this with yet another aspect, that of finding our place within Western Civilization. Are we newcomers, less "western" because of the Indian and Afro, or are we a people with a history who have contributed greatly and are therefore entitled to being considered in the same cultural realm as more homogeneous western cultures? Is our continent a dependent one? Are we

a group of nations locked into a permanent struggle for independence?

Our place in Western Civilization can be looked at through an infinite number of approaches, each requiring precise analysis as well as the firm will not to be influenced by prejudice. Thus, the *Cátedra de América Latina* offers unlimited opportunities. It is also sufficiently alluring and vital to attract the attention of scholars and the general public.

It is appropriate and timely to emphasize the Latin American nature of the National University of Mexico. Our emblem represents the confirmation that the modern phase of the UNAM originated with the objectives expressed by José Vasconcelos, one of the first rectors: develop an Ibero-American version of Universal Culture, not just European Cultures. The murals on our walls reveal those ideas. They are permanent symbols of culture depicted with Mexican images.

Both Vasconcelos and Justo Sierra, who established the University, knew that the only way to make culture truly universal, to prevent knowledge from becoming exclusively scholarship, and convert the UNAM into a way of life, was to give it local substance and color.

At the UNAM we have always felt that there was no need to limit ourselves by shallow nationalism. Nationalism is valid only as a limited means of self-knowledge and as a shield against imperial designs. Self-knowledge on its own is not enough, it must be within the entire cultural context. A universal view is the only way to develop suitable attitudes. I therefore believe that this Permanent Forum for Latin American Affairs must establish truly broad horizons so that what we call "American" will develop into a contribution to universal culture **M**