

Michela Coletta, *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and 'Latinidad' in Spanish America, 1880–1920*

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Although its title says Spanish America, the focus of Michela Coletta's rich monograph is the Southern Cone. Chapter 1 deals with the notion of *raza latina* in the context of differing attitudes to immigration and in light of the idea of *fin de siècle* decadence. Chapter 2 examines intellectuals' and statesmen's mythologisation of rural tradition as an antidote to modern civilisation. Chapter 3 addresses the role of education in debates on national regeneration. Chapter 4 explores José Enrique Rodó's aesthetics of regeneration in contradistinction to the poetics of decadence attributed to *modernismo*. The book's thesis is that cultural debates on Spanish America's late nineteenth-century modernity – at least in the Southern Cone – defined it in relation to one or other variant of the idea of decadence. Was the Latin race, epitomised by France, simultaneously the high point of civilisation and the neurotic end of it? Was a more authentic version of life to be found in the countryside? Wasn't the humanistic – again, French – model of education an overly spiritualised model good for poets but bad for geopolitics and GDP, two things better served by an Anglo-Saxon, practical education? Would Spanish American modernity be better off shaped by a holistic aesthetic of regeneration rather than by a decadent *modernismo*?

One of the book's achievements is to draw attention to the differences between the Southern Cone countries. Supported by a profound knowledge of their respective political, social and economic circumstances, the author repeatedly signals the fact that the slippery thing called modernity was not the same in Argentina as it was in Chile or Uruguay. Coletta can signal thus because she commands the politics and economics of these countries, as well as the peculiarities of their cultural debates. The book makes use of extensive primary sources, from which telling details are selected. It gathers together key contributions from the time (for example, that of Carlos Octavio Bunge) as well as those contributions that history has unfairly – though perhaps inevitably – forgotten. It is at its most effective when working outwards from these texts. At such moments, it acquires a specific density that threatens the history or sociology of ideas it is otherwise inclined to follow.

The book connects cultural debates on modernity to the region's broader history and politics (telling us, for instance, that the foundations of the Argentine schooling system were laid in the 1850s and 1860s by French exiles). It is surprising therefore that it should begin with the claim that an increasing number of scholars have become interested in understanding modernity as 'a cultural category independent

from [*sic*] processes of economic and social modernization' (p. 1). In fact, leaving aside the question of religion, which is omitted from the book, but which is never less than interesting where the question of Hispanic modernities and the independence of cultural categories is concerned, it is one of the book's merits that it consistently suggests that the opposite is the case (for example, 'Responses to European immigration were fundamental in shaping ideas about Latin America in the Southern Cone' (p. 54)). It is not that culture is isomorphic with processes of economic and social modernisation, since it demonstrably has a relative autonomy of its own. It is that culture cannot easily be divorced from such things. Not when it is a question of immigration, the rural population, a nation's education system, etc.

This initial stumble is symptomatic of the difficulty the book has – above all in the introduction and the conclusion – whenever it is a matter of pulling together the various threads of its rich fabric. The difficulty may stem from the author's penchant for 'postcolonialism', which means she highlights rejections of Europe (Europe as decadent, *modernismo* as decadent because too French, etc.), when what might be in play, rather, are rejections of Europe long since performed by Europe itself – and thus themselves part of the European legacy. Thus, objections to *latinidad* by turn-of-the-century Spanish Americans may not be a criticism of Europe as such, so much as a (typical European Enlightenment) criticism of 'backward' lower-class (here Mediterranean) Europeans. Likewise, objections to hypaesthetic, 'aristocratic' European writers smack of European Romanticism's criticism of culture removed from authentic nature. The difficulty is condensed, for instance, when Coletta writes of José Victorino Lastarria that he had 'considered the United States to be a model that Chile should follow [...] His belief in individual freedom based on the philosophical tenets of the Enlightenment had led him to reverse Sarmiento's idea that Europe should be the model of civilisation. In this, he followed Laboulaye's admiration for the Anglo-Saxon ideal of democracy' (p. 138). This is a strange kind of reversal, since the Anglo-Saxon ideal of democracy is precisely Anglo-Saxon, that is to say, European in origin.

The book also appears to accept the idea that *modernismo* was a form of decadence. Early on it discusses the influence of Max Nordau and other European theorists of degeneration on Spanish America, singling out Nordau's belief that *fin de siècle* (i.e. French) culture had become a 'morally diseased', 'self-indulgent and weak' (p. 8) body that would be the ruin of civilisation. So, when Coletta moves from the idea of *latinidad* as decadence to an endorsement of Rodó's view of *modernismo* as decadent, it is as if Nordau was right all along. In fact, it is hard not to see this judgement on *modernismo* as a judgement on art *tout court*. Therein a difference of emphasis. Coletta is entirely aware of *modernismo*'s 'sense of the modern' (p. 142) but emphasises the movement's early 'decadence'. For Julio Ramos, in contrast, *modernismo* is modern precisely by striving to be autonomous, that is, precisely by refusing the diktats of the polis – which in this context would include traditional, Catholic colonial diktats. Notwithstanding these different emphases, Coletta has produced a bibliographical storehouse. Her book is a scholarly, well-researched and informative work that exposes many of the complexities of the debate on Latin American modernity.