HIST 291: Latin America in the U.S. Imagination

Fall 2009
Mr. Volk
Tuesday, Thursday 9:35-10:50 AM (King 323)

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On Line Syllabus: http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/svolk/291f09syllabus.htm

ACCESSING THE COURSE: All course materials can be found on the Blackboard system.

In the midst of the Sonia Sotomayor’s confirmation hearings for a seat on the Supreme Court, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) joked in a discussion about local laws and gun rights that the judge would “have some ‘splaining to do” if she came after him with a gun. Everyone laughed, and it was only a bit later when the blogosphere lit up with a discussion of the phrase, which was a signature exclamation Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz), a Spanish-accented Cuban bandleader on the famous “I Love Lucy” show used when exasperated with Lucy (Lucille Ball), his ditzy (Anglo) wife. I have very little doubt that (at that moment), Coburn thought he was both funny and hip in a pop culture sort of way. Yet it also suggested that what he was thinking about when he questioned the nominee was not a New York accented judge, but a Spanish-accented Cuban, i.e., another Latino. That move, in one sense, is what this course will attempt to understand.


The basic theme of the course is not what happened in Latin American history (take my survey courses, HIST 109/110 for that), and it’s not about the nature of U.S.-Latin American relations (ditto: HIST 294), but rather how (US) Americans frame their
understanding of both of these things. Do you remember the “Far Side” cartoon below? Well, to return to the Sotomayor-Coburn example, I’m interested in exploring the gap between what Sotomayor said (“If I go home, get a gun, come back and shoot you, that may not be legal under New York law because you would have alternative ways to defend...”) and how Coburn heard it (“blah blah blah Latina blah blah blah limited English blah blah”).

What I find interesting about this is precisely that I don’t believe Coburn consciously was looking to demean Sotomayor at that moment. Rather, he recurred to those images in his mind that unconsciously shaped his response. This class is not about why Coburn opposed Sotomayor’s nomination (i.e., his politics), but why, when he saw her, he couldn’t get past Ricky Ricardo.

Some of the main representational devices which we will analyze to help us understand how this process works are those of semiosis (a study of “signs”), metaphor and stereotype. Language, of course, is one of the means through which these representational operations occur, but they also work via images, sounds, artifacts, etc., all of which help shape a culture. When we talk of people sharing a “culture,” at least one way to understand that is that when they see, hear, or read a particularly “representational” item (for example, the man with a large hat in the image on the first page of the syllabus), they will consistently derive similar meanings from what they see, hear or read, meanings that go beyond the pure image (man, hat, tree, etc.) itself. This course will explore how these various representational operations work, how meanings are made and shared, and how they continue to shape understandings long after we have stopped “thinking” about them.

**Purpose and Learning Goals of Course:**

This semester’s course will focus on increasing students’ abilities to better understand the nature of U.S. interactions with Latin America, Latin Americans, and Latinos/as in the United States via an exploration of how Latin America came to be represented (“imagined”) in the United States. To do this, students will examine not only the historical context of these interactions (wars fought in Mexico or Cuba; the expansion of U.S. corporate activities in Latin America, etc.), but the cognitive frames through which (US) Americans came to understand these events. In the process students will gain skills in information literacy, skillful writing, image analysis, critical thinking, and the ability to work collaboratively. Among the specific learning goals are the following:

-To introduce students to the history of some important interactions between the United States and Latin America.

-To introduce students to the study of semiosis, of how meanings are produced, consumed, regulated, challenged, reformulated, or overturned, particularly
through an examination of some major forms of representation such as metaphor and stereotype.

- Because culture and power are closely entwined, it will also engaged in issues of power and persuasion.

To help students understand some historical approaches to asking and answering questions, including:

- How to identify, closely read, and analyze primary sources.
- How to work with and evaluate useful secondary sources, specifically identifying and evaluating their central arguments.
- How to work with non-written sources (including images and artifacts).
- To understand and appreciate ambiguity in historical argument and presentation.

To further students’ abilities to work collaboratively in shaping and answering questions and in solving problems.

Course Organization:

This course is primarily a discussion-oriented course which will be supplemented by some short lectures. As such it required that students complete readings on time and come prepared for class discussions.

Accessing Course Materials:

You can access the course texts in a variety of ways: (1) Required texts are on sale at the bookstore (or can be purchased on-line). (2) All required articles are on Blackboard under “Readings” (not on ERES). (3) You can find all the required texts plus one copy of the required articles on Print Reserve in the library. (4) Texts can also be obtained through OHIO LINK. Please let me know if you are having any difficulties accessing any materials.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING POLICY. NOTE: You will receive a fuller explanation of each project at least 2 weeks before the due dates.

First Project: Due at start of class, October 8

Using any of the primary sources I will give you, prepare an analysis of the rhetoric (metaphors, stereotypes, etc.) used in discussions of the war with Mexico. (5 pages)

Second Project: Due at start of class, November 3

Prepare a semiological analysis of any film on a list you will be given. For the project groups of three will work on the same film. You will then have the choice of writing separate parts of a single paper (e.g., with each participant writing on a different set of images), or you can write separate papers after you have discussed the film together. (7 pages)

Final Project: Due December 17, 11:00 AM

A major content analysis using the tools gained in the class of any single issue that has received wide coverage in the news and which deals with Latin America and/or Latino/as. Examples: immigration; drugs; the coup in Honduras; etc. (You will get a longer list.) (12-15 pages)
Assignments are to be turned in on (or before) the due date noted in the syllabus. Late papers turned in without prior permission - you must request an extension **before the due date of the paper** - will be reduced by one grade-step for each day that the assignment is late. For example, a paper due on Thursday, October 8 which is turned in on October 9 will get a "B-" instead of the "B" that it merited; if it is turned in on September 10, it will get a "C+", etc.

Your first assignments *must* be turned in by the last day of the Reading Period, December 14, or they won't be counted. I will not allow an "Incomplete" in the course to allow you to finish those assignments. Your final papers are due no later than 11:00 AM on December 17. No papers turned in after that time will be accepted unless you decide to take an "Incomplete" in the course; in which case you must talk to me and fill out the appropriate paper work.

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

- **First Project:** 20%
- **Second Project:** 25%
- **Final Project:** 40%
- **Participation:** 15%

**Plagiarism and the Honor Code:** "The word plagiarism derives from Latin roots: *plagiarius*, an abductor, and *plagiare*, to steal. The expropriation of another author’s work, and the presentation of it as one’s own, constitutes plagiarism and is a serious violation of the ethics of scholarship." [American Historical Association, Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct]. Copying the work of others goes against everything that a liberal education is about. It is a serious affront to the other students in the course, to me as a member of the course, and to the plagiarizer him/herself. The college requires that students sign an "Honor Code" for all assignments. This pledge states that "I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment." For further information, see the student Honor Code which you can access via Blackboard>Lookup/Directories>Honor Code. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, particularly in the context of joint or collaborative projects, please see me or raise it in class.

**Students with Disabilities:**

Appropriate accommodations will always be granted to students with documented disabilities. Any questions about the necessary process of documenting disabilities should be addressed to Jane Boomer, Coordinator of Services for Students with Disabilities (Peters G27-28; x5-5588). If you have a documented disability, please see me early in the semester.

**Research help:**

If you need help finding information or conducting library research, you may wish to schedule an appointment with a reference librarian. Librarians can help you plan a research strategy, search databases effectively, and locate books, articles, quality web sites, data, and other resources for any type of research project. Fill out the form on the library’s web site to get started. Drop-in research assistance is also available in all campus libraries.

**An Important Blog:** [http://textmex.blogspot.com/](http://textmex.blogspot.com/) -- written by William Anthony Nericcio, San Diego State University, and which he describes as a blog which “devotes itself to the aggressive, relentless, and, at times, pathological interrogation of Mexican, Latina/o, Chicana/o, "Hispanic," Mexican-American, and Latin American stereotypes.”
FINAL NOTE: If you are having problems with the readings, the lectures, or just want to discuss further any aspect of the course (from content to class dynamics), I strongly encourage you to see me during office hours or to make an appointment. Please don’t wait until late in the semester to express these concerns.

Books Recommended for Purchase

Robert W. Johannsen, To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination (NY: Oxford), 1985. [NOTE: This text is available as electronic resource at OBIS.]


Otto Santa Ana, Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse (Austin: University of Texas Press), 2002. [NOTE: This text is available as electronic resource at OBIS.]

Syllabus

Sept 1, 3, 8, 10: Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Sept 1: Introduction

Sept 3: Semiosis: The Production and Interpretation of Meaning

Ideology, Semiotics

Semiotics/Semiology

Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2001), Chapter 1 ("Basic Notions") and 3 ("Six Species of Signs" (pp. 3-23 and 39-63).

**Ideology**


**Sept 8: Metaphors and Understanding Meanings**


**Sept. 10: Application. Short student presentations analyzing a contemporary Latin American event.**

Working in groups of 4, students will present (in whatever format) a short discussion of the “meanings” embedded in discussions about Latin America today. The purpose is not to analyze the event itself (e.g., why was there a coup in Honduras), but to think about the meanings layered in how the event has been presented in the news. (We’ll discuss potential topics in class.)

"The Kiss of the Oceans" - Meeting of the Atlantic and Pacific
Artist: C.A.DeLisle, 1910

**I. Deep Historical/Cultural Meanings**

**Sept. 15: The Cartographic Imagination**


**Sept. 17: The Black Legend: Spanish Imperialism vs. English Imperialism**


**Sept. 22, 24: Mexico Imagined in the First “American” Foreign War**


**Sept. 29, Oct. 1, 6: The “Spanish American” War and Cuba.**

Pérez, Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 24-228.

**FIRST PROJECT DUE AT START OF CLASS, OCTOBER 8**

**Oct. 8: Visual Analysis**

Although we have been looking at images, we pause here to more fully explore visual analysis methodology: *how* to look.


Oct. 13, 15: When all Latin Americans were Mexican: Imagining Latin America in the first decades of the 20th century.

Oct. 13: Responding to the Mexican Revolution

Agnes C. Laut, “In the Hells of Tehuantepec,” Forum, LXI, No. 6 (June 1919), 641-651.


Oct. 15: Mexicans in the United States


Oct. 20, 22: FALL BREAK

Oct. 27, 29: Re-Imagining Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s: New metaphors, new stereotypes, new needs.


SECOND PROJECT DUE AT START OF CLASS NOVEMBER 3

Nov. 3, 5: The Cold War and New Metaphors

Nov. 3: Nixon in Caracas (1958)

News coverage of Nixon’s trip to Caracas, 1958 (YouTube clips, etc.)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNsp8B1qlI8
Available at: Blackboard>Video>YouTube video of Nixon in Caracas.

CBS Radio news special following Nixon’s trip to Latin America to understand what went wrong. You can find the program on Blackboard>Video>Nixon in Caracas, 1958. The broadcast, from May 15, 1958 featured moderator Stuart Novins and Galo Plaza, former President of Ecuador, Adolf A. Burleigh, former Assistant Secretary of State. Serafino Romualdi, Inter-American Representative for the AF of L/CIO (and also, it was later found, a long time CIA agent), Robert Alexander, Associate Professor of Economics at Rutgers University, Frances Grant, Secretary General of the Inter-American Center for Democracy and Freedom and CBS news correspondent Wells Church, who was traveling with the Nixon party.

Vito Perrone, “Image of Latin America: A Study of American School Textbooks and School Children, Grades Two through Twelve.”

Nov. 5: The Overthrow of the Arbenz Government in Guatemala, 1954

Sean O’Brien, “Capturing the Death of Democracy” (unpub. paper).
Four articles from Time Magazine:

Packet of New York Times articles from April-June, 1954. (Browse)

Nov. 10, 12: “Morning in America,” wars in Central American

Nov. 12: Refocusing: Grenada and Central America

Reagan speech on Grenada (Blackboard>Video>Reagan Speech)
Video footage of US in Central America
Set of Ronald Reagan speeches (print)
   March 10, 1983: Remarks on Central America and El Salvador at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Manufacturers
   April 27, 1983: Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America
May 9, 1984: Address to the Nation on United States Policy in Central America

March 16, 1986: Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua

June 24, 1986: Address to the Nation on the United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance

Feb. 2, 1988: Address to the Nation on Aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance

**Nov. 14: Red Dawn**

Images and the news: News photography and the coverage of Central America, from press photography to Susan Meiselas.

President Reagan in Robert McFarlane's office with Adolfo Calero, a Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance (Contra) leader, and Oliver North. 4/4/85. Blackboard>Images

President Reagan speaking at a White House ceremony for Medical Students from St. George's School of Medicine in Grenada on south lawn. 11/7/83. Blackboard>Images

General John Vessey discussing the situation in Grenada a group of bipartisan members of congress including Trent Lott and Dick Cheney in cabinet room. 10/25/83. Blackboard>Images
Nov. 17, 19: Post-Cold War Fears: Drugs & Gangs

Nov. 17: Latinos/as and Crime


Nov. 19: Drugs

*Traffic*

Dec. 1, 3, 8, 10: Post-Cold War Fears: “Alien” Invasions and New Hybridities

Dec. 1: Prop 187


Dec. 3: Prop 209


Dec. 8: Aliens and Intruders


Dec. 10: Conclusion

**Final Project Due Thursday, Dec. 17 at 11:00 AM.**