

Coletta, Michela. *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and “Latinidad” in Spanish America, 1880-1920*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2018. 190 pp.

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The rethinking and reconstruction of Latin American modernity has a long critical tradition within the scholarship of the region. From considering the colonial inventions of modernity, postcolonial instabilities, the independence movements of the early nineteenth century, and the establishment of neocolonial institutions to the nation-building machinations of the last half of that same century; theorizing modernity has gained speed with the theoretical expansions and renewed archival practices of the last few decades. In *Decadent Modernity*, Michela Coletta turns to the heterogeneity of discursive tactics in intellectual and elite circles in the three Spanish American Southern Cone nations at the turn of the twentieth century. The three neighboring nations of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay share historical tendencies in their move towards independence and nation-building practices. Nevertheless, despite the geographic and intellectual similarities among them and assumptions about similar historical processes and attitudes towards race and national identity, Coletta has produced a carefully investigated study on the divergent ways of conceptualizing modernity in the Southern Cone. This analysis on the dynamics of privileging certain discursive trend and the rejection of others, all for the sake of creating national autonomy, is a welcome addition in understanding aesthetic, racial and political convergences at the time.

*Decadent Modernity* performs a deep reading of the racialization of the nation in the Southern Cone *fin de siglo*. As cosmopolitan and transatlantic factors shaped the cultural and intellectual spheres through the guises of education, immigration, progress and *modernista* aesthetics, the degeneration and decadentism expressed within these various discursive trends became touchstones of both nationalist retrenchment and the construction of political discourses. These shaped the reception of the decadent within the spheres of political modernity and national advancement. Consequently, the ebbs and flows of the expression of modernity in the region nuanced racial factors as cultural elements. The book's introduction serves as an instructive primer on the foundational ideas formulated through the complexities of “Latinidad” and its notions of race in relation to civilizing and nation-building motivations. Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile all experienced material progress at the *fin de siglo* but, as

*Decadent Modernity* describes, the state model and response towards modernity shifted through intellectual factors. The levels of import and integration of ideas on positivism, *Krausismo*, criminology, racial mixture and, at times, *modernismo*, together with historical and demographic factors (not least of which was the unprecedented levels of European immigration to the three nations at the time), frame Coletta's contextualization and the book's careful consideration of the transference of these intellectual trends to national discourses.

Chapter one outlines the cultural ideologies that responded to waves of European immigration to the Southern Cone. *El problema de la raza* consumed political thought and Coletta argues that a decadent Latinity molded political debates on racialized elements of nationalism. A highlight is how discourses of Latinness permeated textual expression and made their way across the Atlantic to Latin American intellectual and political circles. Despite geographic proximity, the acceptance and interpretation of racialized concepts of Latinness varied widely across the Southern Cone. The book's deep reliance on and nuanced reading of archival sources shine through in this regard. Coletta incorporates obscure magazine articles and references to epistolary correspondence among lettered elites, together with what are now obscure European sociological texts that helped to develop national conversations. The gathering of political debates of the period on race and nationalism, in English, and reading them comparatively is insightful and often surprising. Both the acceptance and rejection of European heritage highlight the heterogeneity of political thought of *fin de siglo* Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.

The study of Latin American regionalisms at the turn of the twentieth century is understudied and often overlooked as cosmopolitanism, modernisms, and state formation dominated widely disseminated cultural production. Within archives bursting with perspectives emerging from and for the population centers of the region, debates on civilization grasped hold on currents running against the cosmopolitan grain using rural culture as a response to the degenerations emanating from cities. Chapter two of *Decadent Modernity* shows how discourses of *criollismo*, the gaucho, the pampa, and the Chilean *huaso* constructed an authentic nationality. Literature that incorporated these traditional figures seeped in the countryside set up contrasting national figures to the influx of European immigrants. This original analysis posits the gaucho among other comparative and divergent rural symbols within the Southern Cone. Of particular note is the study of the well-established Argentine gaucho as a myth that resists and provides an antidote to modernity (71) in contrast with the Uruguayan *gaucho oriental*, described in positivistic terms by *modernista* Julio Herrera y Reissig as an atavistic character who, because of his mixed blood, stood low on the hierarchy of racial types.

Public education was, of course, a central point of progress in Latin American modernity. Chapter three of *Decadent Modernity* methodically contextualizes the education of national leadership and intellectuals in the framework of how this education impacted and shaped State identities. As European pedagogical and philosophical models deeply influenced circles of power, models emanating primarily from Great Britain and Spain such as *Krausismo*, voluntarism, regenerationism, and home education, among other economic and humanistic pedagogical philosophies, penetrated political modes of thought. All of these were dependent on nationalist discussions and frameworks: from a more North American looking Chile, to a cultural and historical model in Argentina, and a Uruguayan “mesoregional outlook” (115) primarily influenced by José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel*.

Finally, Chapter four performs a well-researched reading of the long and complex relationship between Rodó and Rubén Darío. Attitudes towards aesthetic decadence shifted as Darío zigzagged his way across the continent, producing some of his most Parnassian work in Santiago, Chile, in the late 1880’s, then spending years in Argentina in the 1890’s and producing his famed *Prosas profanas* and *Los raros*. As *Decadent Modernity* signals in its last chapter, Darío gained prestige across the Americas in the last fifteen years of the century, and Rodó responded with not only his *Ariel* treatise, but also with publications directed towards Darío’s literary persona. The chapter succinctly documents the wide dissemination and influence of Rodó across the region and the ideological and discursive back and forth together with the consequent network of aesthetic thought established between the two most influential cultural producers in the Southern Cone of the period. The book’s final chapter lucidly places Rodó’s essential text together with the shifts in the *modernista* movement in the contextualization of politicized discourses in the Southern Cone. This book is essential scholarship that brings to light exciting Latin America research to English-speaking readerships. It should be required reading for researchers of literary and cultural studies as well as historians interested in the intersections of race, politics and aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century.