

# SKETCHES OF LATIN AMERICA

Reviewed by Omar G. Encarnación

*Looking for History:  
Dispatches from Latin America*  
Alma Guillermoprieto

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320 pp.

A consequence of the end of the Cold War is a decline in attention to Latin America by the U.S. media. This is not altogether an unwelcome happening. Even when events in this region dominated the headlines, the reportage left much to be desired. On one hand, journalists became obsessed with specific hot spots at the expense of broader coverage of the region: Cuba in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s, Central America in the 1980s, and Colombia in the 1990s, to name the most egregious examples. On the other hand, the angle of the reporting was essentially the same: Latin America's problems are caused either directly or indirectly by its troublesome relationship with its neighbor to the North, the United States. The intricacies of race and ethnicity, the legacies of European colonialism, and the dismal failures of the political class—developments that stand at the heart of region's instability and other ills—were nowhere to be found.

In light of this dispiriting background, it is refreshing to encounter Alma Guillermoprieto's latest collection of essays, *Looking for History: Dispatches from Latin America*. Over the last decades, the reporting of this Mexico-based journalist has stood virtually alone in capturing the richness and complexity of contemporary Latin American politics. From the subtleties of her first book, *Samba*, a contemplation on dance, politics, and race in Brazil, to her previous collection of essays, *The Heart that Bleeds*, Guillermoprieto has taken her U.S. readers through a journey of discovery into the soul of Latin America. *Looking for History* follows upon the path charted by her previous work and thus is likely to further cement Guillermoprieto's reputation as one of the most astute political observers of the contemporary Latin American political scene.

The book itself is wonderfully eclectic and made up of essays published over the last six years in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. They are devoted to three countries with which the United States has been or is about to become most intensively involved: Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. The book also incorporates three profiles of prominent Latin Americans: Evita, Che Guevara, and the novelist-turned-politician Mario Vargas Llosa.

There is much to like in Guillermoprieto's treatment of her subjects. For a start, there is the personal, conversational prose that distinguishes her reportage. As those familiar with her writing style know, Guillermoprieto is omnipresent in her stories without necessarily making herself the center of attention.

Rather, she uses her persona to filter information and insight or to introduce characters to the reader, more often than not ordinary Latin Americans caught in extraordinary circumstances. Also admirable about Guillermoprieto's analysis is the keen and unexpected insight that she brings to the task of judging her characters and their actions. An essay on a trip to Havana prompted by the Pope's 1998 visit to Cuba serves to issue a pointed indictment of Cuban Communism. But the key revelation here is not the very familiar litany of complaints about increasing poverty, declining social standards, and the emergence of social ills once deemed eradicated (prostitution, for one), but rather the myopia of the Cuban people to see past their relationship with the United States as the source of their travails. A Church official is quoted as saying: "The embargo prevents us from seeing other realities that also afflict the anguish lived by our people: unjust inequities, state paternalism and centralism, and limitations on civil society's ability to participate."

Guillermoprieto's Latin American dispatches are not delivered without some degree of disappointment. Perhaps because her audience consists primarily of U.S. citizens, the choice and treatment of her subjects does not always succeed in expanding prevailing notions of political life in Latin America. Instead, they often tend to confirm outdated impressions about Latin America. Fantasy, violence, and quixotic aspirations—what those in the United States have come to expect of Latin American politics—dominate the analysis of the life and times of Evita and Che Guevara. The basis for these characterizations is factually true, as no one with passing familiarity with either character could deny the otherworldly manner in which they captured the attention of the masses. The problem occurs when old and abused impressions about Latin American politics are employed to interpret present-day Latin American politics, as Guillermoprieto does when explaining Mario Vargas Llosa's futile attempt to get himself elected president of Peru. She writes that his political career failed because of the lack of that "intangible star quality, that ability to generate fantasies that so many Latin Americans hope to find in their leaders." This is a provocative but highly questionable judgment. During the 1991 match between Vargas Llosa and Alberto Fujimori, the former certainly had celebrity and fantasy on his side. Indeed, they were his only currency to elected office.

More troublesome is that the tendency to rely on old standbys to explain politics in Latin America belies the considerable political modernization experienced by the region in the last decades, as suggested most compellingly by the almost routine occurrence of free and competitive elections. This tendency, in turn, creates a caricature of Latin American societies that capitalizes upon its most negative features, or worse yet, a museum populated by political fixtures impervious to change and progress.

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