

Introduction

Klaas Dykmann

After many years of neglect, Latin America again seems to be on the international agenda. After the region was perceived as a subordinated priority of the United States in the so-called “war on terror” and also faced with relative disregard in economic terms in contrast to the attractiveness of the breathtakingly fast-rising Asian powers, now there seems to be a renewed interest in Latin America – not only because of the controversial Bolivarian project of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. However, the media in Europe still tend to portray Latin America with a couple of stereotypes – in former decades, these consisted of corrupt caudillo leaders or brutal rightist military juntas fighting against dogmatic left-wing guerrillas. Not only the press but also non-expert politicians and even academics in Europe used and abused Latin America as a mirror for their own endeavours. This pattern seems to have resurfaced in recent years: The neat image of a “leftist wave” in various Latin American countries challenging the “neoliberal” imperialists of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation and the US government is only one of the most prominent reflections in this regard.

As this perceived “turn to the left” in Latin America has been closely associated with social issues – besides a general discontent with the established political class – this volume aims at shedding some light on selected topics in this regard. It aspires to set the current image dominating the European media into the appropriate perspective by providing studies on some selected topics of contemporary Latin American history and politics. These articles stem from an eponymous cycle of lectures at the Centre for Advanced Study, University of Leipzig, in summer 2007. The goal of this cycle of lectures, and of the present volume as well, has not been to present an encyclopaedic overview on Latin America but to provide some insights into the field of research in Latin American studies from various angles. The main questions of the cycle of lectures were the following: What

are continuities and discontinuities in Latin American contemporary history? Who have been the major actors in the region, and has this changed up to the present day? Where can the (global) historical perspective change or challenge prevailing assumptions?

To answer these questions, Jochen Meißner and I were pleased to welcome to our 2007 lecture series numerous experts on the specific issues from various disciplines such as history, political science, sociology and literary studies.¹ Unfortunately, due to the large number of lectures, we cannot present all topics here. Four essays will help to illustrate temporary Latin American history and politics, analysing the subjects of indigenous peoples, human rights, feminism and the German Latin America policy including prospects of the region. The selected topics also reflect the current debates in the region on the rights of disadvantaged groups (indigenous people, women, and the poor) and the emphasis on social equality.

Wolfgang Gabbert (Hanover) argues against traditional dichotomous perceptions of the conflict between indigenous people and the Europeans in Latin America. He considers different historical examples of European-indigenous alliances that led to a much more complex picture of the relationship between colonisers and the colonised. In his contribution, he particularly emphasises the dynamic of the ethnic stereotypes and power relations which prove to appear stable merely on the surface. Gabbert argues in favour of taking the active roles of indigenous people in the Latin American historical context much more into account than is usually the case. Dictatorships, particularly during the 1970s in the Southern Cone and the subsequent civil wars in Central America in the 1980s, are the subject of the article by *Klaas Dykmann* (Leipzig) on human rights and the inter-American system. It explains the idiosyncrasies of the institutional evolution of the inter-American human rights system and analyses the human rights policies during the 1970s and 1980s in particular. Furthermore, the essay focuses on the changes during the 1990s, including the issue of dealing with past abuses, and finally draws conclusions on the current human rights situation in the region. *Niels Annen* (Hamburg), a member of the German Parliament (Bundestag) and participant of its Committee on Foreign Affairs, provides an insider's view on the German Latin America policy. He provides some insights into views on the region and policy-making in foreign affairs from a German perspective. Furthermore, the article outlines fields of intensified future cooperation between Europe and Latin America based on an analysis of German and European interests in the region in light of recent political and social developments in the countries of the subcontinent. The author proposes a future policy approach to the region as a whole. *Barbara Potthast* (Cologne) distinguishes between two waves of feminism that can be observed in Latin America, but not exclusively. A first wave started in the late nineteenth century over civil rights and class interests. The second wave of feminism began in 1975, which in one tendency argued more in favour of traditional gender roles while a second tendency challenged these with a demand for more democracy.

1 I wish to express my appreciation for Jochen Meißner's support for this volume.