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HST-230-01

Final Exam Essay

The lives of Latin Americans in the twentieth century were largely defined by neocolonialism and nationalism: neocolonialism was fostered by the United States; nationalism was Latin America’s response. However, this is a great simplification of the complex histories of countries in Latin America. Common people in countries like Paraguay and Bolivia fought in the deadly Chaco War for nationalist pride yet neocolonial interests; people in countries like Peru fought against US-backed dictators with a Marxist/socialist ideology and a nationalist focus on inclusivity and indigenous roots; people in countries like Brazil fostered a national culture independent of Europe and used industrialization for greater economic independence. These countries experienced neocolonialism and nationalism in unique ways during the early-to-mid twentieth century, as did Cuba and Angola (albeit in slightly more modern forms) in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Revolutionaries in Cuba fought a guerilla war – gathering support of common people across the country – to end US interference in Cuba and end poverty. Their victory allowed them to aid countries like Angola internationally and help them gain independence from foreign powers as was done in Cuba. The brutal experiences of United States neocolonialism caused common people in early-to-mid 20th-century Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru, and Brazil as well as everyday people in Cuba and Angola during the mid-to-late 20th century to retaliate against neocolonialism with nationalist movements; these nationalist movements differed for each country and had varying goals and respective successes or failures, but they shared a hatred of imperialism and/or the blending of class and race under a new national identity and culture.

To claim that the US perpetrated neocolonialism in all these countries requires proof for each country, which will tie together their neocolonial and nationalist experiences. Generally, neocolonialism thrived from industrialization of its practicing countries and the resulting export of extracted natural resources from Latin American countries. One example specific to Brazil/Peru was rubber: “the latex sap of the rubber tree was a raw material consumed especially in the United States for tires… rubber workers [in the Amazon] earned tiny wages, barely enough to pay for the food and supplies sold them by the rubber company” (Chasteen 199). This is one of many examples that shows the industrialization of raw materials exported to the US at the expense of Latin Americans. Bolivia and Paraguay had a much more deadly example of neocolonialism: a commonly accepted origin of the Chaco War is “the discovery of oil [in the Chaco region] in the 1920s,” (Chasteen 190) undoubtedly attracting US and British oil interests to the war, which was a war of such brutal thirst that “to hear [a] request, to piss in the mouth of a comrade” (Lambert, Nickson 204) was possible. Neocolonialism in Cuba was rooted in the sugar economy, where following the Spanish-American war, “the outcome of the war benefited US strategic and economic interests, not those of the people who were rescued” (Chasteen 218); the Platt Amendment allowing “US Marines [to] intervene in Cuba whenever the US government thought it necessary” further entrenched Cuba in the US’s neocolonial grasp. Overall, these examples display a trend of US resource extraction in Latin American countries that harmed the people of these countries.

As the foreign interference of US neocolonialism was so miserable for people subjected to it (just as it was in earlier Iberian colonialism), the Latin American countries developed nationalist movements that were unique in their goals, circumstances, and outcomes. Arguably the greatest contrast between mid-twentieth century and early-twentieth century nationalist movements would be between Bolivia/Paraguay and Cuba. This contrast may be surprising because both movements were violent conflicts, but the underlying sentiments that drove them were vastly different; to demonstrate the contrast, take the experiences of socialist revolutionary Carlos Bonzi in Paraguay and socialist revolutionary Che Guevara in Cuba. Both participated in violent wars and were on the winning sides of those wars, but their attitudes after the conflicts were strikingly different. In the film “Che 1,” following the Cuban Revolution, Guevara says the revolutionaries “were very aware that [they] represented the hopes of an unredeemed America” (Che Part I, 2:05:00) and wanted to “bring the Revolution to all of Latin America” (Che Part I, 2:04:07). Contrast this with Bonzi, who reflected that “instead of killing each other in that ridiculous war, we should have been writing love poems, working peacefully with an eye to our futures” (Lambert, Nickson, 204). These attitudes reflect the purposes of their respective wars: for the Chaco, an example of imperialism that abused the nationalism of Bolivia and Paraguay by playing the two sides against each other; for the Cuban Revolution, an end to this same imperialism that had also abused Cuba. These attitudes also reflect how the people of these wars experienced nationalism: for the Chaco, a war where blind patriotism was abused for people like Cristobal Arancibia from Bolivia that went to war “for the sake of defending our flag, because everyone else went” (Aguirre 93); for the Cuban Revolution, a guerilla war gathering people of all classes and races to establish true national independence for Cuba by erasing the forced dependency of US neocolonialism. The anti-imperialist nationalist ideologies of Cuban Revolutionaries defined their war’s unique outcome; the nationalist patriotic fervor of the fighters in the Chaco War produced its own unique outcome.

The outcome of the Cuban Revolution merits a second look, however, because of its use of violence to achieve revolution. In modern-day America, violence in political movements is often discouraged; those who discourage it usually use the Civil Rights demonstrations of Martin Luther King as an example of non-violent change. The history of Cuban non-revolutionary socialist movements offers some insight into perhaps why the Cuban Revolution was violent. Ofelia Domínguez Navarro “formed the Unión Laborista de Mujeres, which was intended to attract women of all classes to fight for a broad program of reform” (Stoner 129); this movement was, like others of the time, “anti-imperialist and nationalistic” (Stoner 129). However, because Ofelia championed feminism and was a socialist, her movement “did not advocate the destruction of democracy through revolution” (Stoner 129) as the later Cuban Revolution did. This appears to have been a grave mistake that allowed the dictator Machado to promptly arrest and jail Ofelia. The article consistently shows Ofelia’s hesitance to become a revolutionary: “she sympathized with the communists, but did not join the party” (Stoner 134) and “openly advocated revolution, although they would not bear arms themselves” (Stoner 132). In contrast, Castro and Che were correct (as far as practical success goes) in using violence to overthrow the Batista regime, not being deluded that US-backed forces would simply submit to non-violent change that would threaten their power. They did not try to work within the democratic system, as Ofelia did, but instead worked around it, which was successful because the “democratic system” of government in Cuba was more dictatorial than democratic. However, while the Cuban Revolution used violence successfully to obtain independence, there are always consequences to war, shown in Angola.

The colonial origins of Angola were similar to those of Cuba: Angola was “a coveted source of slaves for… Brazil” (Ondjaki 113) and under dictator António Salazar suffered “a ‘New State’… which raised barriers between the races and accelerated Portuguese immigration” (Ondjaki 114). Therefore, the Marxist MPLA movement for Angolan independence – and its subsequent alliance with Cuba – was also a nationalist product of astoundingly recent abdication of Portuguese neocolonial (or perhaps just colonial) rule in 1975 (Ondjaki 114). Traces of nationalist inclusivity are seen throughout the book, even throughout its late twentieth-century setting: the characters’ races are never mentioned, but include “Blacks, Creoles, mestiços (such as the author and his fictional alter-ego, Ndalu), East Indians and whites” (Ondjaki 118), and the characters’ classes are implied to be of “all social classes” (Ondjaki 118). The occupying Cubans fighting alongside FAPLA against the imperialist forces of UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi and supported by “apartheid South Africa and Ronald Reagan’s White House” (Ondjaki 116), unquestionably represented the anti-imperialist side of the Angolan nationalist movement. The lives of children like Ndalu, who had little independently formed ideology, were undoubtedly influenced by the fighting: the life of a child during the Angolan Civil War expressed in Good Morning Comrades is paradoxically one of constant fear through the innocent eyes of the relatively privileged young boy Ndalu, who lived in a society where photography in airports is not allowed, food is rationed, and children live in fear of being abducted while in school (Ondjaki 21-29). Unlike with Paraguay and Cuba, Ndalu did not fight in the Angolan Civil War, but instead lived alongside it. Angola serves as an important reminder that while the goals of MPLA were benevolent, war (and those imperialist forces that stoke it) is nonetheless brutal, as the Angolan Civil War continued into the twenty-first century despite MPLA victory in United Nations elections, resulting in a total of “300,000 people [dying] in an endless war of attrition” (Ondjaki 119).

Not all nationalist attitudes in the twentieth century always resulted in wars. People in other Latin American countries, such as Brazil under the rule of Getúlio Vargas and those involved in Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre’s APRA movement in Peru, experienced calmer conditions. Brazil largely experienced nationalism through the forming of new culture rather than through anti-imperialism; one of the greatest examples of this new culture was soccer. Soccer allowed Brazilians of all classes – even working-class Brazilians – to participate in national culture. Some of the most famous players came from working-class backgrounds: Brazil’s Garrincha and Peru’s Miguel Rostaing both had working-class upbringings, but their fame made them national heroes. Rostaing (a black Peruvian) notably worked “full-time (sometimes twelve to fifteen hours a day) as a bricklayer” (Stein 15) while he played soccer. The multi-class and multi-racial appeals present in Brazilian soccer represented Brazil’s independence from Europe as a new culture – it perhaps was, in a very passive and distant sense, anti-imperialistic. Torre’s nationalist movement in Peru likewise attempted to create a new national culture by “[highlighting] the region’s indigenous roots” (Chasteen 246), but failed because Peru was very racially divided, where “the highlands [were] heavily indigenous, the coast more black and white” (Chasteen 246). Peru provides an important example of how nationalism was not totally dominant throughout Latin America in the early twentieth century, and provides a contrast to Cuba, where conditions of poverty provided a better environment for mass unification and revolution.

The experiences that people in twentieth-century Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Peru, Cuba, and Angola had were immiserated by US neocolonialism; they fought back with nationalist movements that implemented anti-imperialist rhetoric and new national cultures with broad appeals to people of all races and classes. These nationalist movements were followed by dictatorships and then neoliberalism in the late twentieth century; US dominance has reigned following the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues today. Some countries, like Cuba, escaped US neocolonialism with their nationalist movements; others, like Peru, could not. Following the right-wing dictatorships of the 1970s, most Latin American countries returned to democratically elected governments; their struggle today is to keep them in the face of conservative nationalists like Jair Bolsonaro that threaten a return to the chaos of the twentieth century.

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