



9-2022

### Book Review: Michela Coletta. *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and 'Latinidad' in Spanish America, 1880-1920*

Jeremy Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

#### Recommended Citation

Smith, Jeremy (2022) "Book Review: Michela Coletta. *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and 'Latinidad' in Spanish America, 1880-1920*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 87: No. 87, Article 11.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol87/iss87/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## Book Reviews

**Michela Coletta. *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and 'Latinidad' in Spanish America, 1880-1920.***

**Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021**

Reviewed by Jeremy Smith

There are too few perspectives in civilizational analysis that examine Latin America. One exception is found in the work of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt on multiple modernities and the Americas. Eisenstadt's research is a point of departure for Michela Coletta's *Decadent Modernity: Civilization and 'Latinidad' in Spanish America, 1880-1920*. Through chapters on the so-called Latin Race, rural and metropolitan identities, national education, and what Coletta calls the 'aesthetics of regeneration', the author explores cultural, sociological, and political trends in Southern Cone countries Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina in the *fin de siècle* era of European and American modernities. This is a wonderfully multidisciplinary work covering problematics derived from sociology, art, literature, education, history, urbanism, philosophy, and politics. All this comes together to lead readers to questions about the conceptual apparatus of 'civilization' and 'culture' in an era in which doubts about both notions abounded, but also processes of their pluralization.

The book has two strengths. First, it handles the cultural, sociological, and political trends of the region in this era superbly. Coletta's argumentation amounts to the following insight of interest to readers of *Comparative Civilizations Review*. The notion of civilization underwent a pluralization of meanings in competing cultural interpretations which could not be reduced to French and Spanish sources of Romantic thought, or to new Americanisms emerging from the United States, or indeed to anti-American sentiments as they began to enter the public sphere, particularly in Argentina. Coletta demonstrates, convincingly in this reviewer's eyes, that 'Latinity' and its conceptions of civilization had an originality in the environment of urbanizing Southern Cone countries. There were many contributors and forebears, from better remembered figures like Domingo Sarmiento, Rubén Darío, and José Enrique Rodó to lesser-known writers and reformers like Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Carlos Reyles, Carlos Vaz Ferreira, and Daniel Muñoz.

The chapter on education emphasizes what might be characterized as part of a 'civilizing process' in the words of a later civilizational thinker, Norbert Elias, although Elias' is not a reference point for Coletta. Debates of the day about different models and programs of education turned on the collision of national cultures with values of progress emerging from the process of civilizing the countryside and its peoples (here I use 'civilizing process' in the sense intended by Elias).

In addition, the interaction of national and foreign influences was greatly in question, especially in the promotion of national language and literacy.

The debates could plant the reader in a bewildering labyrinth of works for those unfamiliar with Latin American modernism and Romanticism. However, Coletta deciphers it patiently across several chapters. For this reviewer, her positioning of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* as one of the best-known and most remembered expressions of Latin American ambivalence emerging from this current is excellent. Invoking the binaries of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Ariel* crafted a space for 'culture' opposed to 'civilization', or tradition as a check on the progressivism of the young Anglo-Saxon US Republic. The creative thrust of Latinism is laid bare when, Coletta writes, 'Rodó inverted the paradigm of Latin America as the heir of decadent European values and projects it into the future.'<sup>1</sup> This was simultaneously the creation of regional and trans-Atlantic traditions of modernism while also drawing on 'Spanish-American national imaginaries.'<sup>2</sup>

A second strength is Coletta's ability to pinpoint how cultural transactions, borrowings, and creative adaptations between interacting civilizational sources have shaped culture and politics. The exchanges between living French, Spanish, and German currents and dynamic creole and indigenous traditions of the Southern Cone are highly visible in her analysis of the cultural artifacts, interpretations, and audiences of this period. What the reader is left with is a rich picture of the international impact of cross-Atlantic Latin cultures in pluralizing the cultural terrain of the Americas by introducing Romantic influences as an antidote to naïve and perhaps dangerous faith in the unilinear 'progress' of civilization, coming in the form of Brazilian positivism and US imperialism. There are enough commonalities across the three countries to talk coherently about a region. At the same time, the author does not allow the divergences between them to escape the attention of readers.

We need more works capturing the nuances of the Europe-Africa, North and South America in the creation of transnational and national registers of modernism. Moreover, sophisticated Latin and southern traditions, such as those discussed in *Decadent Modernity*, are actively nuanced in Coletta's documentation of them. The one gap is that the book, having engaged Eisenstadt's framework of civilizational analysis and multiple modernities at the beginning, does not re-engage his historical sociology in its conclusion, or ever declare a clear position on it. Coletta's tendency appears more inclined to 'decolonial' perspectives. Further theoretical consideration of the problematic relationship between the two in light of the historical research she has conducted could lead to a complex and nuanced understanding (and more complex and nuanced than many uses of the decolonial perspective are).

---

<sup>1</sup> Coletta, *Decadent Modernity*, p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Coletta, *Decadent Modernity*, p. 118.

But this lacuna should not prevent anyone from engaging this work. *Decadent Modernity* delineates a regional current of *modernismo* central to the intercivilizational creation of Latin American modernity. This book deserves a long and careful read by all interested in civilizations sitting outside the West yet engaged deeply and problematically with it.