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Review / Reseña

Ricardo D. Salvatore, John H. Coatsworth, and Amícar E. Challú, eds. *Living Standards in Latin American History: Height, Welfare, and Development, 1750-2000*. Cambridge MA: David Rockefeller Center Series on Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2010.

Short People, Tall Folks and the Revival of Latin American Economic History

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I write this review essay under the safe assumption that most readers of *A Contracorriente* are not versed in the latest trends in *economic* history. Once upon a time (during the creatively turbulent decades of the 1960s-1970s) economic history was the hot boldly interdisciplinary field at the heart of the rising field of modern Latin American Studies. “Developmental,” neo-marxist, and distributional critiques of mainstream economic growth models—i.e., Modernization Theory—were everywhere. Reformist Latin American “structuralist” economics and more radical “dependency” theory sparked flourishing debates and refreshing research around Latin America’s uncharted economic history. Yet today, in the wake of the overwhelming turn to

cultural and political history in the North American academy after 1980, the economic history of Latin America, if more sophisticated in methodological terms, is largely relegated to the more conservative and technocratic margins of the field. Its few active practitioners hold out in (overpaid) economics, political science, or business faculties. That the academic and institutional “right” captured political economy is ironic on many levels, given how central it used to be to both leftist critical and interdisciplinary academic traditions. Yet, most historians I know still run for cover at the mention of economic history, or even socio-economic factors in historical analysis. The flight from historical economics is less pronounced, however, in Latin American universities, where active concerns with macro and material issues never lapsed, given the visible realities of poverty, deprivation, and inequality pressing upon intellectual work.

Non-economic historians and “progressives,” if I may use that word, may thus want to read this new book. The reason: our own reviving twenty-first-century worries about social and international inequality, after a long era of political complacency about it, exemplified by the (mid-2011) North American moral awakening against finance capital around the sidewalks and parks of New York’s Wall Street. In contrast, in Latin America, the other Americas, political struggles with income and wealth inequalities never vanished, as during the 1980s-90s neo-liberal adjustment era. Many of Latin America’s scholars and protesters questioned the political assumptions of democratic transitions unfolding amid the stark gulfs between long opulent elites and Latin America’s workers, rural people, and marginalized poor. In the United States, intellectual interest is finally rumbling again in wide-ranging political economy approaches and methods for studying historical “capitalism” (a word being deployed again after many years of being silenced) and “development” (a modernist ideal derided or demonized in much of the northern academic culturalist turn). In part, this reawakening of political economy stems from a strange hemispheric convergence. The United States, with its steeply rising income and wealth inequalities since the 1970s (and increasingly frayed democracy at home) is looking a lot more these days like “Brazil” or Mexico, and Brazilians, at least, with their vibrant social democracy, are trying to do something about their country’s historical injustices. As I have noted

elsewhere in detail, for studying stubborn and perhaps “indelible” historical inequalities, Latin America is the place to seriously ponder, for by most known markers, the region has been the most unequal part of world, and for as long as we can tell.¹ Latin American thinkers of many generations and traditions have long sensed this fundamental inequality condition, in the categories they use for analyzing deep and complex divisions of race, gender, region, class, citizenship, and culture. But we rarely look the scourge of inequality right in the eye.

Its prosaic title aside, the collected volume under review, whose editors include John H. Coatsworth²—a dean of 1970s scientific economic history, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, one of its most eclectic Latin American practitioners—is rich in revisionisms, heterodoxies, revelations, and puzzles. These puzzles make an excellent starting point for new thinking about both political economy and inequality in Latin America. It challenges us how to think again about the big questions of economic “growth,” social “welfare,” and their historical disparities. It deserves an audience beyond the dozen or so lonely but well-off economic historians left in our field.

Living Standards in Latin American History is built from the pairing of two awkward methodological bedfellows. The first is “anthropometric history”—the specialized field (pioneered by economists such as Nobel Laureate Robert W. Fogel) that tracks biological welfare of populations through measurements of changing human height. This may strike many historians as an exceedingly narrow—a literally concrete—method for getting at human welfare and living standards. In its defense, the vast majority of physical and social anthropologists who study such things find adult height a legitimate and highly reliable indicator, especially for assessing the impact of differential childhood nutrition and food availability. Heights vary across cultures, classes, gene pools, and history mainly due to childhood nutrition and food supplies, something demonstrated by the stunning

1 Paul Gootenberg and Luis Reygadas, eds., *Indelible Inequalities in Latin America: Insights from History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)

2 Disclosure: Coatsworth was my decades-ago doctoral adviser at the University of Chicago, and though I have long strayed from path of strict economic history, has remained a friend and authority figure! (current Provost of The Columbia University of New York). Long a quantifier, see his provocative views in “Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth in Latin America,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40/3 (2008): 545-69.

punning rise of the Japanese people over the last century, or the alternatively, the striking anthropometric resemblance of today's typical ill-fed Guatemalan peasant to the stunted English worker of the early industrial revolution. Skepticism of height measures aside, at the very least it is a promising new tool for historians, since strong series of height records are usually found in military, educational, and other institutional archives, even in places like Guatemala. In contrast, modern statistics such as GNP per capita (a proxy for productivity as well as assumed levels of consumption) or Gini indices of income or wealth maldistribution are impossible to find or accurately estimate for the past five hundred or more years of human history, although several scholars (most famously, Paul Bairoch and Agnus Maddison) have tried, sparking ongoing methodological skirmishes. Anthropometric data may also open up a broader vital critique of standard historically and culturally limited categories like GNP. Height often reveals an indisputable wide divergence between progress in human well-being and the timing and ideals of economic growth, as anthropometric history has demonstrated once again as a core paradox of the initial North Atlantic industrial revolutions. Measurable economic growth, even some economists now admit, is not all it's cracked up to be.

In contrast, the second strange bedfellow in *Living Standards in Latin American History* is exceedingly broad or vague: the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI is often touted as the healthier alternative indicator to GNP-type statistics. The book's latter essays embrace this metric, in conjunction with height, as a way of grasping Latin America's most recent historical development and distribution. Another yardstick with a noble pedigree, the HDI is related to the seminal thinking of Indian economist Amartya Sen, that economic growth and development is (or should be) about enhancing human freedoms and potential—so-called “capabilities,” a theory with elastic and even radical social implications. HDI indices (there are many variations) demand actively widening the scope of growth to systematically capture “quality of life” indicators, such as the availability of primary health care, public education, life expectancy, access to consumables, the quality of those goods, leisure time, wealth distribution, and other corrections for negative “externalities” such as

environmental stress, rights deprivation, and unpaid labor forms.³ A foil to market-oriented GNP, the HDI has been officially adopted by UN agencies such as the UNDP (UN Development Programme, and its annual *Human Development Reports*) with increasing sophistication and utility. But it has had scant historical usage and little application to Latin American history, until now.

In sum, *Living Standards in Latin American History* tries to combine two seemingly contrary approaches, one seemingly narrow (height), one broad (quality of life). However, readers may note that in method the book is not especially reflexive about the political or cultural or historical meanings of the idea itself of “living standards.” How and when did people of different stripes become concerned with living standards? When did welfare become thinkable as a political “problem”? Ideals of living standard are by-products of the rise of the modern welfare state in Western Europe, and relatedly, the applied modern social sciences, with their novel twentieth-century commitments to providing citizen-based social services. Do we know the genealogy of its reception, deployment, and interpretations in Latin America? We ought grasp how early twentieth-century populist and nationalist regimes became compelled to address the “social question,” or questions, absorbing living standards into broader strategies of “governmentality” (to use an *au current* term) that oftentimes redraw categories of inequality⁴ This would help understanding why states—even some baldly authoritarian ones—began to measure and preach about the welfare of the national populace, and how even highly oppositional social movements and groups brought modern consumption ideals into the Latin American political repertoire. *Living Standards*, instead, is largely an organized effort to bring a more objective and robust precision lens to historical welfare, albeit inspired by important analytical historical questions. It may or may not sit well with more culturally-inclined (and numerically-challenged) historians

³ For an explanation, Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, *The Quality of Life* (World Institute for Developmental Research, 1993); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: University Press, 1999).

⁴ Paulo Drinot, *The Allure of Labor: Workers, Race, and the Making of the Peruvian State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), for an insightful deployment of Foucauldian governmentality, and which underscores paradoxical inequality-producing effects of many modern social welfare reforms.

and anthropologists.

The strengths and challenges of *Living Standards'* aims are evident in the volume's individual chapter themes and findings. A brief Introduction by editors Salvatore, Coatsworth and Challú primes us about both anthropometric methods and the Human Development Index, and their potential to address burning questions left unanswered by our previous waves of economic history research. What is the relationship of economic growth to welfare in Latin America? To enduring inequality? What have different institutional regimes (for example, Spanish colonial mercantilism and slavery or liberal North Atlantic property norms) got to do with economic growth? How have Latin America's shifting forms of historical integration into the world economy affected growth, inequality, and well-being? Ongoing debates around such questions are not as definitive as many readers might assume from the loaded market fundamentalists who still dominate this conversation. For example, prominent specialists now contest whether the "right" institutions matter as much as neo-liberals and the global establishment dogmatically assert (or is this obsession a long echo of old-style modernization stage theories?). Other specialists question whether export booms, which probably have worked overall to dynamize Latin American economies, have also come at the steep cost of perpetuating or worsening the region's historical caste divisions and other inequalities (just as widely-discredited dependency theory once loved to suggest!).⁵

The rest of the book's chapters deal with largely individual case countries along a roughly chronological line. Amilcar Challú bats off with a long-range colonial-early republican study, "The Great Decline: Biological Well-Being and Living Standards in Mexico, 1730-1840," which demonstrates (based on the size of military recruits) a century-long period in which living conditions markedly deteriorated, linked to fluctuating Mexican grain prices and drought cycles. Race mattered too: the declines were greater among darker-hued Mexicans (characteristics dutifully noted by the record-keepers). Was this era, then, the crucible

⁵ For example, again Coatsworth, "Structures, Endowments, and Institutions in the Economic History of Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, 40/3, (Oct. 2005): 126-44; or broadly, Adam Przeworski, "The Last Instance: Are Institutions the Primary Cause of Economic Development?" *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, XLV (2004) 2: 165-88.

of modern Mexican inequality? Chapter 3, by Moramay López-Alonso, brings Mexico further along with “Living Standards of the Mexican Laboring Classes, 1850-1950: An Anthropometric Approach.” This is another dismal story: Mexican workers continued to shrink in size during the Porfiriato land-grabs and industrialization (as expected), during the decades of revolutionary upheaval, and (unexpectedly) far into the twentieth century. The trend reversed only with massive reforms in Mexican public health after the 1930s. In chapter 4, Adolfo Meisel and Magarita Vega turn to Colombia and to a very different social group: the “elites” (not surprisingly, data are pretty good from passport and ID applications). Although they towered over their laboring classes, it turns out that wealthy and corpulent Colombians (subjects so affectionately portrayed by painter Fernando Botero) did not themselves necessarily take off with coffee-led prosperity. Instead, as in other cases, gains in height were governed more by generalized improvements in urban sanitation and medical services after the 1920s. In Chapter 5, Ricardo Salvatore takes on a number of shibboleths in “Better-Off in the Thirties: Welfare Indices for Argentina, 1900-1940.” This is among the book's most intricate and sophisticated contributions, as Salvatore constructs, analyzes, and compares a range of indices, which combine both stature and a gamut of HDI-type measures (on mortality, education etc.). Again, a disjuncture appears with standard economic growth trends: Argentines did not all fare well at the peak of the nation's early twentieth-century agrarian export bonanza (not that shocking, given its class disparities), yet as a whole actually did better during the Depression, a result of Argentina's emerging social welfare apparatus. Chapter 6, Leonardo Monasterio, Luiz Ferreira Nogueiról, and Claudio Shikido, “Growth and Inequalities of Height in Brazil, 1939-1981” is the most concertedly econometric chapter, able to employ the detailed modern data of Brazilian “POV” family consumption surveys. During Brazil's miraculous decades of rapid continuous industrial-led growth (3.2 percent annually), Brazilian people continued to seriously lag in nutrition and overall well-being, and their height differences reflected the country's renowned racial and regional divisions. It will be fascinating to follow these trends in a future study covering Brazil's post-1981 return of democracy to Brazil and the subsequent rise of union-based PT regimes. Does the democratic left

make a real enduring difference in conditions of deep inequality? This has long served as many Latin Americanists' key "counterfactual" (or hope) for modern Latin America. Chapter 7, by the team of Luis Bertola, Maraí Camou, Silvana Maubrigades, and Natalia Melgar is equally complex, the only chapter with explicit national and international comparisons (core European countries and the United States). With varied models, they unpack the twentieth-century welfare trajectories of today's Mercosur nations—Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay—rigorously studying the impact of growth and inequality on welfare progress. James McGuire's sharp Chapter 8, "Politics, Policy, and Mortality Decline in Chile, 1960-1995" is not as controversial as warned in finding that the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-81) appears to have improved childhood mortality rates of the poor. The story is actually more nuanced: Chile underwent a long-term reversal of its historically extreme rates of infant mortality, starting with the policies of previous democratic and socialist governments, including, of course, that of Salvador Allende (a pediatrician by training). Pinochet, to offset his ugly image problem abroad, took the technocratic advice of Chile's National Planning Office, and focused on a few cheap but effective public health and sanitation programs. Thus, targeted public health interventions often do work, regardless of the politics involved. Finally, Chapter 9, "An Anthropometric Perspective on Guatemala: Ancient and Modern History," by biological anthropologists Luis Ríos and Barry Bogin, arguably takes the longest view, even attempting a few comparisons with archeological findings about pre-Hispanic Mayan populations. Here is a country which still sadly exhibits Latin America's historical extreme—the active "stunting" of rural indigenous people — with only mild advances in biological welfare at the tail end of the twentieth century. They dub Guatemala's long record of inequality "structural violence," a term usually associated with revolutionaries and liberation theologians than biologists and economists.

If Latin Americanists in the United States now seem ready to overcome an outdated phobia of political economy, this smart volume may be the place to start. Avoiding the pitfalls of ideological economic history, these studies deeply complicate the reigning pro-market and institutional-reform dogmas. They demonstrate together, with clarity and facts, the historical social and governmental interventions that make

for healthier, developing, and more just societies. They offer a good glimpse at a heterodox and reviving field. The tall and the short of it: an important, provocative book, one that deserves a wider reading.