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The Casualties of Culture Shock

Why Anti-Gringo Winds Often Blow South of the Border

One of my vivid memories of South America is that of a man with a golf club—a five-iron, for memory serves—driving golf balls off a penthouse terrace in Caracas, Colombia. He was a tall Britisher; and as he drove, he would say "a quality pot" instead of a waistline. Beside him on the chair was another Britisher—tall, dark, and slightly rumbling, very much like a house tonic, which he refilled from time to time at his own expense.

He had a good swing, and each of his shots carried long and low over the wall. Where they fell, neither he nor anyone else on the terrace that day had the vaguest idea. The penthouse, however, was in a residential section on the edge of the Rio Caril, which runs through the middle of town. Somewhere below us, in the narrow streets that are lined by the white adobe houses of the urban shanty town, a strange ball was rattling on the roofs—golf balls, "old practice dolls," as the Britisher told me, that were "hardly worth driving away."

In the weeks that followed, when I became more aware of the attitude a good many Colombians have towards that nation's Anglo-Saxon population, I began to realize that nobody had traced the source of those well-mannered, well-dressed Colombians, along with the Venezuelan neighbors, may well be the most violent people on the continent, and that mischievous one Valladares does not rank high as a national dish.

Concept of Noblesse Oblige

It is doubtful that the same man would drive golf balls off a rooftop apartment in the middle of London. But it is not really amusing to the same man to do the same thing in Caracas. There, where the distance between the rich and the poor is so great, and where Anglo-Saxons are automatically assumed to be rich, this idea of noblesse oblige is subject to odd interpretations.

The attitude, however, does not go unnoticed by the natives. Indeed, for a foreigner to stand on a rooftop apartment on any of the larger hotels in Caracas, perhaps take a stroll on the roof, may be a sign of honor, or a sense of humor, but the Britisher would be likely to sit down and read a newspaper. When the people of the United States, which to the Latin American is more easily identifiable with capitalism and imperialism than any other country in the world.

With this in mind, a traveler in South America gets one shock after another at the things he has thought he has finally taken for granted—his gringo—and sometimes a worse shock at the stance he takes himself. One young American put it this way: "I came down here a real gun-ho liberal, I wanted to get close to these people and help them—but in six months I turned into a hard-line conservative. These people don't know what I'm talking about, they won't help themselves, and all they want is my money."

It is a sad fact that living for any length of time in a Latin American country has a hardening effect upon every person, and to avoid it takes tremendous adaptability, intellectual courage, and sheer bloody-mindedness.

Take the example of a young man named John, a representative in Latin America for an international relief organization. His work consists mainly in distributing surplus food to the poor. He works hard, often going out on field trips for three or four days of rough driving, bad food, primitive living conditions, and dysentery.

Sells Food to Speculators

But he has to work with other people. He can't understand why the principal of a back-country school will steal food that he has actually paid for and sell it to speculators. He can't understand why his warehouse—lying in the middle of a military barrack—is not protected, and why the peasants are not protected. They are being constantly broken down by the very people who are standing up to be counted for their regular wages.

He broods on these things and wonders if anybody ever really cares about the poor, just being taken for a sucker. Then, one day, he becomes involved in a plot to prevent over some corn and the rubber of compulsory labor. He is paid over some new evidence of calumny or corruption, he hears before the window the blowing of a horn. A man is standing on the steps of a fountain, shouting hoarsely at the people, "You must not pay. You should be doing to the village."

Our man, standing at his window, suddenly recalls that January, in the city of La Plata, they had to pay a man on the stairs. He turns around and says, "Come down with the capitalist swine!"

Our man, standing at his window, suddenly recalls that January, in the city of La Plata, they had to pay a man on the stairs. "They've tricked us!" he says. "The peasants are really paying a man on the stairs."

The young American, who is a Latin American country more than anything else, has to be in with the cold American colony that blooms in every city of any note in South America.

Americans living in Latin American countries are usually a part of the Latinas themselves. The typical American has a quite a bit of money by Latin American standards, and he is often a countryman who doesn't. An American often finds himself feeling out of place, being seen in a sport shirt on the streets of his home town will be shocked and offended at a suggestion that he appear in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, in anything but a cold tie and suit. The same man often, no more than 30 years old—might have been living in a prefabricated tract house in the states, but Rio he will arrive at Copacabana beach with two maids, servants, a maid, and a helicopter-looking off the sea.

Some people say that the American is holding his own image in South America—"that instead of being a showpiece for democracy in Latin America, it is a circus, the most anti-American, anti-wealthy, anti-democratic Latin, and sometimes beats them at their own game. Suddenly finding himself among the elite, the American is determined to hold his own ground, unlike the genuine aristocrat who never doubts his own worth, the newcomer to status seeks to prove it at every turn.

Discipline or Anarchy?

Others, though, repeat the old, familiar question, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do?"

In South America, so the thinking goes, the lower classes have no grasp of discipline and individual freedom. So the only alternative is to make them a part of the system. But the problem is: how to do it in Brazil. "She's lazy and I want her to know I'm watching her. With the people," he says. "You see, it's a difficult problem.

Another problem that plagues the gringo is dress. Because he is a man of a foreign language, because his income is usually embarrassing, because he is an expensive expense-account protagonist, because he worries continually about being cheated of his money, and because he never gets over the feeling that most upper-class Latinas consider him a fool from his own country, he is often cold, rich; and he can never understand why people don't seem to like him for what he is—just a good guy who feels at ease in any situation. He worries continually about being seen in a sport shirt on the streets of his home town will be shocked and offended at a suggestion that he appear in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, in anything but a cold tie and suit. The same man often, no more than 30 years old—might have been living in a prefabricated tract house in the states, but Rio he will arrive at Copacabana beach with two maids, servants, a maid, and a helicopter-looking off the sea.

"To relax" is the usual excuse, but sometimes there is almost no choice. In Rio, for instance, the evening traffic jams are so bad that getting from the business district out to Copacabana—where "everybody" lives—is almost impossible between 7 and 9. Often Odessa, or a French-born, Italian arrival is told, "If you can't change the local conditions, you'll just have to change yourself. You'll have to lose weight and settle down to serious drinking until eight." This phrase in the day is the usual excuse.

With many people, the "drinking hour" soon becomes a necessary habit. Sometime it leads to disaster. Often Odessa, or a French-born, Italian arrival is told, "If you can't change the local conditions, you'll just have to change yourself. You'll have to lose weight and settle down to serious drinking until eight." This phrase in the day is the usual excuse.

Because of things like the drinking hour and other, purely local, situations, a man returning to the States after a stay in Latin America is often struck dumb by the question, "What can we do about that place?"

Seldom Time to Relax

He has no idea, because he has never had time enough to relax and give it much thought. His concern has been survival. Objectivity is one of the first casualties of a culture shock—a term for the man who appears when a North American, who inherits his country's heritage of Puritanism, Britain, and Puritanism, suddenly finds himself in a world with different traditions and a different history.

It is an odd feeling, to return from a year in South America and read a book by a young man, who toured the continent in six weeks and spoke only with peasants, cabinet ministers, and other "leading figures" like him. His book, "Traditions," is an extraordinary book that is easily so well written that it is impossible to read it without wishing that he had been more careful.

Now, looking back on that man with the golf club, it is easy to see him as a fool and a beast. But I recall quite vividly how many of those people on the terrace had jumped up in protest.