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Americans Abroad: Misconceptions about the U.S. in Latin America

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1. Introduction

An under-discussed aspect of teaching American culture abroad is the need to disabuse students of false impressions caused by the U.S. media. Professors of American culture, language, and literature often find this process difficult because of the global reach of American media in the form of television programming and film. The power of these American forms is compounded by the music of the nation, rapidly disseminated via the Internet and television programs. Although much American music is considered countercultural, it nonetheless reinforces the stereotypes in its attempt to debunk the myths of American culture and the easy middle-class lifestyle. American Studies professors grapple with these myths of America as they work with students across the globe.

The goal of American Studies, of course, is to present various cultural and artistic forms to students who wish to develop a greater appreciation of distantly American experiences. Given the wide range of experiences found in the United States' multifaceted geographic, racial, religious, and language niches, the definition of American Culture as a unified concept is problematic: nonetheless, the project undertaken by American Studies is to cull out these unique yet unifying qualities found within all aspects of the United States. One example of a unifying concept is the myth of the American Dream: the belief that through hard work and upright living, any individual, immigrant or native born, will become upwardly mobile. Whether or not the American Dream still is — or ever was — viable is less of a concern than are cultural ramifications the pursuit of the dream inspired. Yet before American Studies professors can begin to discuss such cultural phenomena, they must first dispel fallacies created and perpetuated by the U.S. — and at times non-U.S. — media.

2. Are there accurate media representations?

Before any discussion can be properly established, the U.S. media has to be seen in the right context, i.e. as a very important business conglomerate. It has been used for decades, arguably since its early moments, to advertise the so-called "American Way of Life" both at home and abroad. The use of the media to disseminate official propaganda is not the focus of this paper although it is a recurrent debate in Media Studies. There is a wealth of research focusing upon the U.S. government and its agencies' manipulation of television and radio programs in order to modify the contents to incorporate national interests, especially in the guise of moral or ethical issues.

For a number of reasons, particularly due to the worldwide envy of the comfortable lifestyle of U.S. citizens advertised during the Cold War Era, foreigners began to rely on propaganda-filled media representations of the United States as faithful portrayals of that country. Obviously, looking back at those shows may suggest this argument ignores the multifarious representations of the U.S. in its own television programs. However, U.S. programs disseminated to large international audiences were primarily those which portrayed the U.S. as a perfect society in which people had virtually no problems with urban violence or unemployment: families were always nuclear, and the majority of the inhabitants in this wonderland were presented as unprejudiced WASPs.

Latin America, for instance, was taken over by such programs as *Bewitched*, *Father Knows Best, I Dream of Jeannie,* and *I Love Lucy*, all of which display characters contented with their middle-class lifestyles. Despite minor household incidents, characters were depicted as being very happy with their lives and with their family arrangements. In rich European countries, however, the U.S. media may not have had the same success in establishing a stereotypical view of the country and of its people as it did in developing countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Particularly in Latin America, where many countries operated under cruel dictatorships and were influenced by the United States' economic and military interests, these idealizing television shows enjoyed huge success.

Latin Americans, who are Miguez's regular audience in his "U.S. Cultures" seminars, strongly believed that North Americans (as U.S. citizens were generally called in both Spanish and Portuguese before more conscientious expressions recognized of the presence of Mexico and Canada within North America) led the ideal lifestyles Latin Americans should have as their goal. Therefore, for a long time, anything that did not go right in these "less fortunate" countries, be it a poor political decision, an economic crisis, or simply a long wait in a line at a bank or supermarket, immediately triggered the remark that "it would not be this mess/ chaos/ bad if we were in the U.S."

This comparison becomes more interesting if one considers that most Latin American countries are characterized by strong left-wing ideals in their political arenas. Clearly, left-wing partisans would not approve of such pro-U.S. comments, but it took decades of U.S. foreign policy blunders and disregard for its image in Latin America to change public attitude. The Latin America media took up where the U.S. media left off and quickly changed the image of the United States among its audience. The United States started to be portrayed more authentically, and the romanticized image began to fade.

Of course, we are not considering radical State-sponsored media movements, where populist governments found an easy path to remain in power by openly attacking the United States with the rather overused rhetoric of "U.S. Imperialism." Much more beneficial for these populations would be a serious attempt to discuss what can be learned from the exploitation of Latin American resources by wealthy nations. However, as these Latin American governments squander their countries'

resources on anti-U.S. propaganda, they rely primarily on the U.S. as a(n) (allegedly) free market for their products.

Over the last decades, in spite of a growing anti-U.S. government feeling, the United States has been more competently portrayed by news programs in Latin American countries. This means that more people are able to discern, when watching an idyllic USA on a television show, whether this portrayal is an example of poetic license or if it is actually some aspect of the life in the United States that other countries should endeavor to adopt. Still, Latin American professors teaching courses in which a U.S. culture component is unavoidable, such as English as a Foreign Language, U.S. Literature, and obviously U.S. Culture/ History, have a very tough task on their hands. At the same time they work with a specific curriculum, they have to take into account their students' attitudes toward the United States itself.

It is not possible to survive your first class unless students realize from which standpoint you are speaking. Your attitude (whether pro- or anti-U.S.) has to be clear from the start. The older the students are, the more interested they will be in finding out your position. It is not that students expect you to be in favor or against the country itself. They only wish to know whether you are a product of the "GO U.S." culture of the Cold War period or if you are a more moderate (thus more reliable) scholar. Once they understand that you are able to critically assess the United States, praising and criticizing fittingly, they will be more interested in studying with you.

Two versions of the United States exist in Latin American minds: the political/ economic monster that controlled Latin American economies for decades—disregarding each country's own interests and needs—and the Disney world/ New York entertainment complex, with its glamour and gleaming lights. Latin Americans are generally able to distinguish very well between the two. Most Latin Americans have, by default, a neutral reaction to U.S. citizens, who tend to be regarded according to which version of United States they embody.

Any professor who works with U.S. culture in Latin America will realize that many stereotypes inhabit the minds of some college students, especially according to their political and sociocultural affiliations/ sympathies. The next section will discuss some of these preconceived ideas that should be included as components of courses (or informal Q&As) in Latin American classes.

Many times, well-substantiated generalizations can be useful to promote discussions in classroom contexts, though some caution should be employed to avoid reinforcing biased stereotypes that do not improve anyone's understanding of the United States. In the same way, our use of the expression "Latin America" may have suggested we are referring to a homogenous group of countries when, in addition to the great linguistic difference between Portuguese-speaking Brazil and the other Spanish-speaking nations, Latin America is very diverse. Similarly, The United States, a country with continental dimensions, cannot be expected to be homogenous. In fact, we should always bear in mind the many different United States that coexist within the USA, peculiarly when discussing stereotypes.

Hopefully, our readers will find the suggestions below useful in their own international classes. Rather than trying to identify from which context such preconceptions might have sprung, we will focus upon their effects on the foreign student. We believe that while such ideas permeate the imagination of many foreigners about the United States, they may be found among U.S. citizens as well. The suggestions compiled here come from the experience of both authors in international settings.

3. What is an American?

Throughout this section we will refer to the citizens of the United States as "Americans" for the sake of simplicity, though we are aware of the inadequacy of the term.

a) The myth of American individualism

Most foreigners who visit the United States for the first time are surprised to find that the ideal of American individualism is a myth. Although Americans like to define themselves as independent and individualist, they often rely upon a group affiliation as part of their personal identity. It is easy to walk around a U.S. city, especially in big urban areas, and run into groups of teenagers that have created a visible group identity: they wear the same clothes, hairstyles, and accessories. It is surprising for someone from abroad to find that teenagers even make up their own words to show they belong to a specific group.

Latin Americans are often intrigued by the ability of Americans to express their group identities in public with virtually no constrains: hair colors, piercings, colorful tattoos, and ultra-stylish clothes. Although Latin Americans are free to express themselves in the same ways if they wish to, there are still many social norms (especially of appropriateness) that would discourage such behavior in public. Young Latin Americans who visit the United States usually return to their home countries with something different in their looks: the sense of freedom of self-expression is too irresistible. However, many will get back to their former selves after a couple of weeks at home: it seems to be too difficult to sustain some changes in isolation.

These seemingly independent "American styles" brought home to Latin America are often media products which can be traced back to some television program or public figure. The notion that people may develop their own styles in the United States directly relates to the growth of the postmodern movement in that country. Postmodernism, according to many scholars, makes identities available to everyone as commodities. One may, for instance, "become" a hippie by going into a department store and acquiring the outfit, the records, and the accessories. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss the validity of this practice, but anyone interested in this subject should take a look at our suggested readings for further scholarly references.

It is true, however, that Americans are among the most individualistic workers on the globe. They value individual accountability and emphasize personal

achievement. It is common to see Americans openly blaming an individual for something that is his/her fault, which is seen as a bit tactless according to Latin American standards. On the other hand, the culture of winners lavishly praises those who can accomplish their tasks. This model has been spread all over the world. For example, McDonald's "Employee of the Month" pictures hang in restaurants internationally. Singling out an individual from the group is something that most Latin Americans would rather not do. Being a good team player and recognizing the importance of group effort are values taught to young Latin American children as being more important than winning itself.

b) The myth of the friendly and casual American

According to Latin American notions of friendliness, Americans are perceived as generally rude and cold. It is a very interesting cultural clash. Although Americans often make an effort to show niceness when dealing with other cultures, their informality is seen as excessive, particularly because Americans abroad tend appear too casual even in formal situations. American professors lecturing in South America are— routinely—seen in white sneakers, short pants and very colorful shirts, as if they were on vacation.

Latin Americans, in general, expect a little formality in work environments. When the commonly held stereotype of the formal professional American is disrupted by the authentic casually dressed American, the Latin Americans' immediate impression is that their English speaking counterpart undervalues his/ her job. Although Latin Americans are more informal than Americans in casual settings, particularly in open-air activities, the dress code in formal situations is very strict. Americans are among the very few foreign visitors that stand out on such occasions.

In terms of friendliness, Americans are perceived as cold or distant when visiting Latin American countries. Latin Americans abroad tend to be very open to making new friends wherever they are. Sometimes too open, we should add. Americans, on the other hand, demand a lot of "get to know each other" time to consider someone a friend. Being someone's best friend in Latin America means the two see each other every day, for example, because both attend the same classes or the same club. When the daily connection is interrupted, Latin Americans will remain friends with that person, but they will quickly find another "best friend" to share the stories of their lives.

Americans tend to place more value on their long term friendships. They are usually roommates, long-time coworkers, or even childhood friends. They may live far away from each other, in different states, but their connection is kept by emails, phone calls, and occasional visits. However, in Latin America physical proximity is essential for a friendship to remain viable. It is so easy to make friends that there is little need to go to extremes for an inconvenient friendship.

The American resistance to becoming friends with someone while in line at a supermarket, or while commuting to/from work, is seen as rude by most Latin Americans. It is perceived to be an initial distrust of everyone. By Latin American

standards, anyone who does not promptly respond to a conversation attempt is seen as an unfriendly person

Usually the first advice given to Brazilians who go to the United States for the first time is to be aware that Americans are cold and unfriendly. According to the cultural dissonance outlined above, this may be true. But, generally, when the tourist returns to South America, his/her stories include amazement at how friendly the Americans s/he came across were. Americans probably realized they were dealing with a tourist and, therefore, opened up more easily than they would have if they had met in a work situation.

The American culture of a "work-driven attitude" discourages distractions and irrelevant socializing, when on the job. As a result, it is less relevant for an American to build a solid personal relationship with his/her fellow workers. This behavior is often witnessed by visitors to the United States in airports, stores, and on trains (with Americans commuting, immersed in their thoughts or connected to their .mp3 players), and is many times taken as proof of the advertised unfriendliness of Americans.

c) The myth of work-driven Americans

Any culture that praises achievers has to value its workaholic citizens who constantly seek to improve their performance. Americans often do not see work as way to achieve a comfortable standard of living, but as a means of interminable improvement. Contrary to the suspicion that wealthy people often generate in the eyes of Latin Americans (remember their collectivist heritage), who imagine that such fortune had illegal sources, Americans tend to see wealth as a reward for hard work and inventiveness. This has a lot to do with historical American icons such as Benjamin Franklin.

In comparison with European Union standards, Americans work longer hours and have less free time. They also have to drive or commute longer distances to get to work. Americans indeed like to be associated with hard work. This means they have fewer leisure opportunities and less time to spend with their loved ones. As the first step toward their professional lives, many Americans move away from their hometowns and travel many miles to go to college. This is seen as something typically American in Latin America, where the union of the family is still praised above all and where such a scenario would only reluctantly be accepted if there were no other educational options nearby.

Latin Americans understand employment as means of securing one's standard of living and his/ her free time. Although work for Latin Americans is a way to achieve social prominence and live a comfortable life, they believe that one regularly needs time away from work to spend with friends and family. Leisurely outdoor activities are very important in Latin American cultures. Such activities are one of the first things a Latin American misses in the United States, where many children can do without leaving their houses during the weekend, as long as they can play computer games or watch television.

In keeping with the concept of high work efficiency, Americans are the frontrunners in new technologies and inventions which improve their productivity. Cell phones are obsolete, Blackberries are in. Bulky laptops are out, Windows Vista-ready palm tops are in. Bluetooth is out, Wireless is in. Printers? Scanners? Copy machines? Nope. All in one. Keys to your car? Not anymore. Your fingerprints will do it. Some specialists predict the end of the CD player era, as a growing numbers of Americans turn to downloading digital music. The problem is that the more work-ready someone is, the more work s/he will be expected to do. Time-saving machines turn out to be work-increasing opportunities. Americans have a very peculiar sense of time which does not translate well into other cultures. Americans always seem to be in a hurry to beat their own obstacles and to become more productive.

d) The myth of the Land of the Free

Although most Americans believe they live in the land of the free, from the standpoint of a foreigner, this is clearly a myth. U.S. television programs boast of the freedoms Americans enjoy in their country, while such liberty may be more curtailed than many people admit.

The strict Protestant heritage, which still permeates many aspects of American culture, dictates a number of social norms that surprise many foreign visitors. For example, despite the recurrent portrayal of sexually active teenagers in Hollywood movies, sexual activity is still a taboo in many U.S. households. Many women in Latin America are led to believe that their American counterparts enjoy a very active sexual life, like the *Sex and the City* characters, and firmly believe that most American couples have sex on the second date. It is a misguided image that hides the actual, very conservative, values that many American families cherish. Women go out with whomever they choose, of course, but what they do on those dates is restricted by embedded cultural norms. It is hard for a foreigner to know if the reserved demeanor of Americans is personal choice or a social imposition.

In keeping with this, Americans imagine Latin Americans as very liberal in terms of sexual activity. This may be due to the misrepresentations of Latin American countries as tropical jungles with natives sunbathing all day long on gorgeous beaches. If we take a closer look at social norms in Brazil, for example, in the pre- and early Hollywood period, moral codes were strict. As movie depictions of the United States abounded, Latin Americans began to revise some of their social values in favor of the much more liberal ideals presented in such films. Even dress codes changed: Brazilians, for example, used to wear European-looking outfits in the 1920s-1940s, but gradually adopted the U.S. casual urban wear as early as the 1960s, with the huge popularity of jeans and T-shirts. Nonetheless, the American view of Brazil ignores the influences of the Catholic Church on sexual norms and perceives the country as permissive. This contrast in the perception of American and Latin American sexual norms is replicated many other aspects tenets of American self-perception as well as Latin American interpretation.

The laissez-faire attitude of Americans toward life, the 'live and let live" perspective, is another aspect of U.S. culture that captivates Latin Americans; often overlooked, however, is the fact that this attitude is actually regulated by socially established and governmentally supported rules. Otherwise, individual rights taken to their full extent would override the core principles essential to maintaining the United States as a cohesive society. However, many Latin Americans believe the myth of the U.S. population's peaceful coexistence. For many, the U.S. remains a wondrous mixture of Henry David Thoreau's quasi-religious pond with John Grisham's quasi-chaotic corporate America: It is perceived as a permanent conflict of individual interests with national unity maintained by invisible degrees of social conformity underling everything.

e) The myth of the American Melting Pot

The United States is not a melting pot, at least not in the sense that foreigners understand it: a society in which different ethnic backgrounds combine into one culture, as group differences eventually become invisible. Instead, it is a society in which immigrants and native-born citizens work side by side everyday with minor conflicts but, in most big urban centers, do not mix after work. There are a surprising number of ethnic neighborhoods in large cities the United States, which suggests that foreigners, both immigrants and visitors, do not feel comfortable mingling with the "locals."

The idea that Americans are inherently a tolerant people is another belief instructors may wish to discuss. The U.S. concept of "political correctness" has done a good job in controlling people's open attitude against minorities because it "wouldn't be PC to say this or that about someone." Such self-imposed correctness might not generate comprehensive acceptance of otherness in adult Americans, but it may influence the attitudes of their children. What may be play-acting for adults in the "PC environment" will become authentic expressions of inclusively for younger generations. The intolerance merely concealed in today's PC environment may actually die out in a couple of generations. A second aspect of American of tolerance can be investigated through the current national debate over same-sex marriage. Some Americans are associated with traditional family values, which makes them more biased against sexual minorities and alternative family structures, whereas many Americans, particularly in urban centers, live in a culture replete with various family and lifestyle choices. If fact, this blending is already so common that many urban Americans forget that life is quite different elsewhere in the nation. Nonetheless, the beauty of the so-called American melting pot is not the fact that cultures mix into one, but the fact that they are preserved within immigrant communities (where cultural differences are sometimes exaggerated to make up for the immigrants' homesickness). Being able to walk around urban centers and to see people from virtually all over the in the world, perhaps dressed in their traditional clothes or speaking their native tongues, is one of the features that makes the United States such an interesting place to experience. It is perhaps more accurately described as a colorful quilt rather than as a melting pot.

In Latin America, Brazil is perhaps the country that has welcomed the greatest number of immigrants from the most varied national origins. In Brazil, immigrant traditions are no so well preserved as in the United States because, once foreigners are allowed to immigrate, they automatically lose their immigrant status in the eyes of the local population. Many of them, if asked what their nationality is, will directly refer to their present day Brazilian status instead of explaining they had been born abroad. It is very interesting the way in which Brazilians seldom refer to their European, Asian, Native Indian, or African ancestry as a way to define themselves. Whereas in the United States, the origins of someone's family may be an element more often discussed. In Brazil, this ancestry is quietly left behind because the only thing that matters is the fact that the person is now a Brazilian and not a combination of nationalities.

When Brazilians discuss the imagery of the United States as a melting pot, they do not easily understand why the U.S. is described as such, since its immigrant communities are often self-segregated in major cities. Another thing that surprises Brazilian students is that immigration in the United States is slightly different from their own country. Great numbers of immigrants want to pursue a career, study and make money in the U.S.; however, many people move into the United States to seek sociocultural freedoms they would not be able to find in their own countries.

f) The myth of the ignorant American

Perhaps one of the most recurrent jokes in Latin America is about Americans' limited knowledge of Geography and World History. Many Americans are relatively isolated from the rest of the world in small towns where they have everything they need, including American-made television shows. Though they are clearly aware that the world outside exists, they may not score very high in describing it. This is in part due to the American educational system. The pragmatism that guides the curriculum of U.S. schools and colleges is often undervalued by Latin Americans. It is the result of a different educational approach in U.S. schools and colleges, which emphasizes more practical skills instead of abstract information storage taught in many Latin American schools. The curriculum of a Latin American high school student is more specific in most disciplines than that of U.S. schools. This may be due to the fact that the world may have had more influence on Latin American countries than on the United States, which had a considerably isolated development during the colonial period in comparison with other colonies in the Americas.

American undergraduate degrees, on the other hand, tend to be much more field-specialized than such degrees in Latin American countries, where there is an emphasis on disciplines that are not directly related to the student's major but which may be important for his/her career. For example, students majoring in any area in Brazilian private universities often have to take Philosophy, Environmental Sciences, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship as mandatory disciplines.

Therefore, the myth of American ignorance comes from a generalized misunderstanding of the design of the curriculum followed by American schools

and institutions of higher education, which is much more adequate to the future professional needs of pragmatic Americans. It is important to show students of American culture that, in their fields of specialization, Americans are perhaps the best skilled professionals in the world. The U.S. has the best libraries and academic resources on the planet just waiting for anyone who needs specific information.

4. Conclusion

It is important to make students of U.S. culture perceive that the stereotypes detailed above can tell them something either about the United States or about their own cultures. Each country has its own cultural filters that modify any information that comes in from abroad, a rereading of the foreign culture in the light of a given country's own cultural and social codes. In any case, clearing up some of these points is mandatory if one wishes his/her students to fully understand the contribution that Americans have given Latin American countries, and vice-versa, of course.

At the same time, it is important to enable our students to critically assess any foreign culture which has, whether we like it or not, influenced our own way of life. We are living in the information age; therefore, one of the most important skills we can impart to our students is the ability to recognize faithful information outlets in the media. That way they will be able to make up their own minds about the issues briefly discussed here and about other stereotypes of U.S. that are, or will become, widespread in Latin America and all over the world.

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