

John H. Coatsworth

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Early one afternoon in 1968 John and Pat Coatsworth heard an insistent knock on the door of their Mexico City apartment. When they opened the door, a young Mexican poet they had met a few weeks earlier rushed in and asked the Coatsworths to hide him. The Mexican authorities had begun to crack down on a massive student movement demanding democratic reforms. On the eve of the 1968 Olympic Games tanks surrounded the national university, troops opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, and police agents arrested and often tortured hundreds of intellectuals who supported the movement. The young poet had been warned in time to escape from the police. The Coatsworths had no hesitation in hiding him until his wife and family arranged to pick him up and get him out of the country. This was perhaps the riskiest episode in the Coatsworths' lifelong commitment to human rights. In the United States they helped refugees from all over Latin America, especially Chile and Central America. Their work was recognized by Chile's first democratically elected president since 1973, Patricio Aylwin, when he invited them to attend his inauguration in 1991.

John Coatsworth's efforts on behalf of human rights in Latin America were matched by his scholarly commitment to the study of Latin America. His dissertation, published in book form with the suggestive title *Growth against Development*, analyzed the contradictory effects of railroad development in Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the one hand, he found that railroads alone were responsible for half of the per capita increase in economic activity between 1880 and 1910. On the other, railroads increased land values in once isolated regions and helped inspire the mass expropriation of peasant lands that occurred during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1877-1910). Railroads contributed directly to the discontent that erupted in the Mexican Revolution, one of the great social upheavals of the twentieth century. At the same time, Coatsworth showed, nothing was done to create the kind of linkages that might have accelerated manufacturing and thus provided work for the expropriated peasants. According to Nobel Prize Laureate Robert W. Fogel, John Coatsworth's book "is a major study [that] provides a very important counterpoint to the analysis developed in the United States. Coatsworth's work is outstanding for its careful

attention to detail and his capacity to incorporate such information into a broader interpretative framework.”

Coatsworth's now classic study of Mexican railroads reflected his strong interest in a basic problem not only of Mexican history but of the history of Latin America as a whole. Why did Mexico's economy lag so far behind that of its northern neighbor? In a seminal essay published in the *American Historical Review*, Coatsworth addressed the problem of the origins of Mexico's underdevelopment. He began by providing original estimates of Mexico's gross domestic product going back as far as 1800. On the eve of Mexico's independence, he showed, Mexico's per capita income was half that of the United States. Fifty years later it had fallen to only one-eighth that of the United States. In explaining Mexico's growing backwardness, Coatsworth rejected earlier theories that blamed Spain's commercial monopoly, its pillage of Mexico's natural resources, the latifundio system of great estates, and the economic role of the Church. Instead, he argued that a combination of Mexico's difficult terrain and its premodern economic institutions (along with political instability after independence) accounted for the country's decline vis-à-vis the industrializing countries of the North Atlantic. Mexico had no navigable rivers, and the country was divided by deserts and mountain ranges that made communication and thus economic integration very difficult. In addition, Spain had not developed either the legal basis or the other institutions needed for economic growth. Theoretically, these obstacles could have been surmounted once Mexico acquired its independence. Railway technology became available in the 1830s, and officially many of the impediments imposed by Spain disappeared. Constant civil wars and foreign interventions prevented modernization. The Mexican economy did begin to grow in the 1880s, but along a path that led to the Mexican Revolution.

Coatsworth never considered economic history as isolated from social and political history. In another incisive essay on “the social origins of authoritarianism in Mexico,” he took issue with the view that Mexico's modern problems arose from a lack of democratic traditions and argued that the independence era of unstable governments actually witnessed an unprecedented development of democratic participation at the regional and above all the local level. This was due not only to the weakening of the central state but to the economic decline that debilitated the economic power of the large landowners in many parts of Mexico so seriously that they were unable to exercise effective control over the country's free villagers.

Coatsworth's interest in social history extended far beyond Mexico. In one of his most remarkable works, he analyzed "patterns of rural rebellion" across two centuries of Latin American history based on accounts of more than six hundred uprisings from 1700 to 1900. He was the first to call attention to the similarities between small-scale slave revolts and the equally numerous village riots of Mesoamerica and the Andes. He also argued, however, that more effective and intrusive government discouraged slave rebellions but tended to provoke larger numbers of Indian village revolts by raising taxes and interfering in village governance. After independence, weak central governments coincided with rural social peace, particularly in the Andes. In Mexico, this correlation disappeared when beleaguered Mexican governments were forced to raise taxes and mobilize peasant recruits to resist foreign invaders. One of the main consequences of Mexico's defeat at the hands of the United States (1836, 1846–48) and France (1862–67), Coatsworth argued, was the unusual number, intensity, and political sophistication of peasant revolts in Mexico far earlier in the independence era than elsewhere in Latin America.

Coatsworth's initial interest in Latin America was closely linked to the policies of the United States toward that region. Originally, in fact, he went to the University of Wisconsin to study U.S. diplomatic history with William Appleman Williams. The most outstanding product of this interest is his latest book, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus*. One of the main questions Coatsworth addresses in this book is the disproportionate level of social and political violence, in comparison with the rest of Latin America, that has afflicted modern Central America. Since 1954, when the U.S. CIA organized the overthrow of Guatemala's elected government headed by President Jacobo Arbenz, more than 130,000 people have died in recurring civil strife and repression in that country. From 1978 to 1990, political and social violence in the entire region escalated to unprecedented levels, with more than a quarter million dead and several million refugees in three countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua) whose combined population numbered less than 20 million people. In his book, Coatsworth argued that the close links of these countries to the United States created a particular intransigence on the part of the ruling elites and an extremely strong sense of nationalism on the part of revolutionaries. His analysis of U.S. policies in the 1980s concluded that "No U.S. government has ever devoted as much of its own political capital and the nation's resources to Central America as did the Reagan administration between 1981

and 1989. None had such profoundly traumatic effects on the region. None left office with so little control over events in the region."

Coatsworth's interest in Latin America was not due to family background or special links between the areas in which he grew up and Latin America. Born in New York City, he was raised in Columbus, Ohio, and southwestern Connecticut. He obtained his B.A. at Wesleyan University in 1963, and Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1972. During this era of the Cuban Revolution and the Alliance for Progress, his interest in Latin America was first awakened. It was on a student trip to Cuba that he first met his future wife, Pat. Both had their passports confiscated on their return, and Pat was indicted on a federal charge of criminal conspiracy for helping to organize a subsequent student trip to the island. It took five years for a federal court to order the passports returned and a unanimous Supreme Court decision upholding Americans' right to travel before the charges against Pat were dismissed.

John Coatsworth was appointed assistant professor of history at the University of Chicago in 1969, and it was there that the Coatsworths' daughter, Anna, was born. Following the family tradition of commitment to human rights, Anna worked assisting refugees applying for political asylum in the United States as an asylum counselor at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in New York after graduating from New York University. She is now a graduate student in political science at NYU and works at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Coatsworth had an enormous impact on Latin American studies at the University of Chicago where he taught from 1969 until he moved to Harvard University in 1992. Graduate students flocked to work with him. During his years in Chicago, he was the primary supervisor of more than 27 dissertations dealing with the history of Latin America; he served, and in some cases continues to serve, on 22 other dissertation committees in Latin American history.

Under Coatsworth's leadership, Chicago's small Latin American studies program evolved into a major Title VI National Resource Center recognized and supported by the U.S. government and foundations such as Mellon, Tinker, MacArthur, and Hewlett. It soon became a center that welcomed intellectual and political figures of the most diverse backgrounds and opinions from all over Latin America.

Coatsworth's extraordinary ability to build consensus out of diversity, together with his outstanding scholarship and organizational

abilities, led to his election as chair of the Chicago history department in 1989. From 1989 to 1992, he led the department in successful efforts to recruit new faculty, especially junior faculty, and to modernize its policies in many areas. He also founded and directed the university's Council for Advanced Studies on Peace and International Cooperation, an interdisciplinary program that supported faculty and student research and developed new courses and workshops on international issues.

In 1992 Coatsworth joined the faculty at Harvard University as the Monroe Gutman Professor of Latin American Affairs. When Harvard inaugurated the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies in 1994, he was named its first director. Among his many professional contributions, Coatsworth has served on the editorial boards of six academic journals, including the *American Historical Review*, chaired the ACLS/SSRC Joint Committee on Latin American Studies, and served as treasurer of the Latin American Studies Association. He has taught as visiting professor at major institutions in Mexico, Argentina, and Spain.

Respectfully submitted,
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