Disciplinary Conquest

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When Gilbert Joseph was in the process of organizing the “Rethinking the Postcolonial Encounter” conference, which would later become the edited volume Close Encounters of Empire, he asked me to contribute some ideas about the current status and possible direction in the study of U.S.–Latin American relations after the cultural-linguistic turn. The paper I presented at the conference (titled “The Enterprise of Knowledge”), hosted by Yale in 1995, launched me on a long journey into examining the formation of U.S. hegemony as a question of representation and power rooted in a quest for knowledge. Initially, my primary object of curiosity was how the nature and purpose of the U.S. empire in Latin America was represented and encoded into written texts. For a while, the U.S. informal empire and its “representational machines” stood at the center of my intellectual preoccupations. Yet with time my focus shifted toward the role of disciplinary knowledge in the making of U.S. hegemony over Latin America. Somewhat in between that conference and drafting this book, I discovered that “Pan-Americanism” in its various renditions was a force that tended to color much of the discussion about U.S.–Latin American relations since 1910, continuing to exert significant influence during the 1930s and 1940s.

My first thanks go to Gil for guiding me into this line of research, which has turned out to be so interesting and rewarding. And to Cathy LeGrand, who started the whole conversation about the communicative and discursive nature of imperial engagements and about the importance of culture in mediating the memory of past U.S. economic, military, and political interventions in Latin America. Since 1998, the year in which Close Encounters of Empire was published, my opportunities to discuss the American empire, its representations,
and its forms of knowledge have multiplied exponentially. Consequently, there are many, many people I need to thank. My intellectual debt being so large, I am tempted to simply declare myself in default and be done with it. But that would be unfair. So I will mention a selected group of colleagues, librarians, and students who over the years have helped develop the ideas that are part of this book; at the same time, I extend my acknowledgment and gratitude to the many others who have given me the opportunity to present these interpretations.

It was at Princeton, during my stay at the Institute for Advance Studies (1988–1989), that I first discovered a close connection between mercantile activities and the available body of knowledge about overseas peoples. The extraordinary collection of “letter writers” and travel books I found at the Firestone Library helped me realize that, for merchants of the American Northeast, gathering information about other lands and peoples was a cultural imperative. In a paper I presented in 1990, at a University of Minnesota history workshop, I attempted to root the expansionist tendencies of the U.S. Northeast in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on both the curiosity awakened by travel and the mandate to register Otherness imposed by mercantile culture. The impulse to acquire transnational or global knowledge was constitutive of the notion of a “good merchant.” By extension, one could expect that this intertwining between foreign commerce and knowledge would continue to influence U.S. expansionism in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth—only that now, after the War of 1898, the entanglement between business and knowledge would be projected into a foreign policy view (U.S. Pan Americanism) and re-elaborated by business experts, scholars, and diplomats.

Hence, I will begin by acknowledging the good work of the librarians and archivists who helped me find the wide range of materials needed to write this book, among them the librarians at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Yale University, Harvard University, Duke University, Georgetown University, and the Columbus Memorial Library in Washington, D.C. Without these resources and the librarians’ advice, this project would have been more difficult to accomplish. As the reader will see, I was able to examine archival documents for three of the five scholars discussed in this volume (H. Bingham, C. Haring, and Leo S. Rowe). For the other two, my analysis is based on their works and memoirs.

Second, I would like to thank the institutions that funded my research. A Fulbright Advanced Research Fellowship allowed me to reside in Washington for two months, where I was able to research the papers and work of Leo S. Rowe and the Pan-American Union. A De Fortabat Fellowship at the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard, allowed me sufficient spare time to work with Clarence Haring’s papers. Before that, I spent a semester at Yale University.
University, as an Edward L. Tinker Visiting Professor. There, at the university archives, I encountered abundant materials about Hiram Bingham and the Yale Peruvian Expedition. Back in Argentina, the Secretaría de Ciencia y Técnica (SECyT) provided funding for the assistance of graduate students. One of them, Juan Pablo Scarfi, helped me establish connections between the U.S. scholars and local intellectuals. Another group of graduate students worked on a database of U.S. publications about South America during the period under examination.

At various workshops, conferences, and symposia, I presented rough ideas about the nature of U.S. Pan-Americanism, the representational nature of the U.S. informal empire, and the multiple activities and processes that led to the establishment of Latin American Studies in the United States. Among these presentations were those I delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington (1999); at a seminar on economic integration sponsored by the University of New Mexico in collaboration with my home university, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (1999); at the international colloquium “Repensando el Imperialismo” at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (August 2000); at a Duke–Di Tella workshop on “Globalization and the Humanities” at Buenos Aires (August 2001); at a symposium on “Cultural Encounters and Resistance” at University College London (June 2001); at a symposium on “Hybrid Americas” at the University of Bielefeld (2002); at a colloquium on “The Location of Knowledge” jointly organized by Universidad Di Tella and Duke University (2003); at the conference “Looking North” at the Universidade Federal Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro (2004); at the Social Science Research Council conference on “Empire and Dissent: U.S. Hegemony in Latin America” at Cuernavaca, México (2005); at a Harvard Global History Conference (February 2008); at a meeting of the Associação Nacional de Pesquisadores e Professores de História das Américas in Victoria, Brazil (July 2008); at the fifth global conference of International American Studies Association (IASA) in Rio de Janeiro (July 2011); and at the symposium on “Fugitive Knowledge” at the University of Rostock (September 2012).

I want to thank the organizers of these events for their efforts and kindness: Linda Hall and Gilbert Merkx of the University of New Mexico; Walter Mignolo, Grant Farred, and Cathy Davidson of Duke University; Nicola Miller and Christopher Abel of University College London; Josef Raab of the University of Bielefeld; Carlos Altamirano, Jorge Francisco Liernur, and Claudia Shmidt, my co-organizers of the Buenos Aires colloquium; Virginia Dominguez, Jane Desmond, and Sonia Torres, organizers of the Rio de Janeiro conference; Itty Abraham and Fred Rosen, organizers of the Cuernavaca workshop;

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The reviewers who read this manuscript were very generous with their time and very precise in their criticisms. Their work certainly served to improve the coherence and persuasiveness of my argument. My friends Carlos Aguirre and Carlos Forment provided valuable advice in terms of the bibliography, as well as continuous support to this intellectual project. And so did Gil Joseph and Cathy LeGrand, already named. My colleagues at Buenos Aires have read drafts of various chapters or papers containing related ideas and responded with useful insights. Among them are Juan Manuel Palacio, Ernesto Boholavsky, Horacio Crespo, Hugo Vezzetti, Guillermo Ranea, Jorge F. Liehnur, Irina Podgorny, and Karina Galperin. To all of them, I extend my thanks.

During the different stages of writing, the content and center of this volume changed. Indeed, three primary revisions were needed for this book to be as readable as it is. For this, I must thank my former editor Valerie Millholland, who provided early guidance, and Miriam Angress, who steered the project to completion. If the reader should notice that the book reads well in English, though written by an Argentine, it is due to the valuable help of the developmental editor Laura Helper-Ferris. My thanks extend also to the various technicians, correctors, and assistants who constitute Duke University Press and contribute to the excellence of its publications.

Though I was abroad for extended periods of time, visiting different universities, my academic home has remained Universidad Torcuato Di Tella. I thank my colleagues for making this work environment a precious refuge, isolated from the instability and rhetorical warfare that constitutes Argentine political life.

While writing this book, I encountered some unexpected life difficulties. The passing of both my parents between 2008 and 2011, after prolonged periods of illness, profoundly affected my emotional stability. My wife, Laura, helped me to navigate this difficult time, providing the support I needed to continue with my academic work. To her—and to the memory of my parents—I dedicate this book.