

Introduction

*“We understand each other through culture –
whether that is language, or the arts,
or simply our way of doing things.
If we want to break down barriers to
understanding, cultural exchange
is essential.”*

Sir Martin Davidson

This book is the fruit of the conference *Hungary and Latin America: Cultural Ties*, held on 6 April 2017 at the National University of Public Service in Budapest. It contains fourteen essays by researchers from the universities of Szeged and Debrecen, as well as Eötvös Loránd University and the National University of Public Service in Budapest, and the University College London.

The writings, elaborated mainly in English and partly in Spanish, follow the movement of people and ideas across the Atlantic, from Hungary to Latin America and vice-versa. Some investigations focus on the activities and contributions of Hungarian artists in Latin America, others on the exchange of ideas, such as the image of Cuba in Hungary or the image of Hungary in Cuba. Of course, ideas do not travel alone; humans are necessary to form and transform them.

The objectives of this book are to rescue the cultural heritage of Hungarian–Latin American relations, and to contribute to its preservation. Contacts between Hungary and Latin America were sporadic until the lost war of Hungarian independence of 1848–1849, but grew significantly after the establishment of the Austro–Hungarian Dual Monarchy (1867). The turn of the century brought flourishing cultural relations, only to see them cut by World War I. The 1920s saw the establishment of Hungarian colonies in various Latin American countries though, and after 1924, when the United States closed its doors to immigrants, migratory patterns changed and Latin America became a more popular destination.

Many Hungarian immigrants arrived in the region between 1920 and 1950. Some arrived directly from Hungary, while others emigrated from neighbouring states, in particular from territories separated from Hungary due to World War I. Where the former group often shied away from their cultural heritage, the latter usually had a strong emotional attachment to Hungarian cultural traditions. Contacts were severed again with the creation of the Socialist Bloc in Eastern Europe; it became illegal to leave Hungary, and the Socialist Government viewed with suspicion Hungarians abroad. Hungarians outside Hungary were labelled as dangerous or even treacherous.

There were three main trends in cultural contacts between Hungary and Latin America during the Cold War: visits in Hungary by Latin American artists having sympathies with the political left; cultural activities of Hungarian immigrants and their descendants settled in Latin America; and Latin American works by emigrated Hungarian artists living outside the region. The latter two could not be known in Hungary until 1990, and it was not easy to re-establish contacts. A lot of information had been lost with the death of the first generations of emigrants, with the disintegration of Hungarian colonies, and with the passing of time.

Hungarian–Latin American ties have had an asymmetrical character. There has been more interest and attention in Hungary about Latin America than vice-versa. It is important to broaden the cultural exchange because it can contribute to mutual understanding. Latin America has been a strategic partner of the EU since 1999, and Hungary has been part of this relationship since its accession in 2004. The essays in this volume demonstrate the richness and diversity of the links between Hungary and Latin America. Yet the volume is far from being comprehensive. It ranges in time from the 19th century to 2017, and over a wide range of arts, movements and individuals. These investigations are meant as a contribution to the European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018) and as a resource for cultural diplomacy. This volume was written primarily, but not exclusively, from a Hungarian perspective for a Latin American public. I consider it a beginning, and hope someday to hold in my hands a Latin American counterpart.

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