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mart Oxford philosophy professors, seeking to find out which of their smart students were smartest, and perhaps worthy of becoming the next generation of smart philosophy professors, used to set examination questions along the lines of: “Is this the right question?” The answers were hardly useful; they were never—to my knowledge—expanded into enlightening books entitled *Is This The Right Book?*, but they did serve an immediate purpose—sorting philosophical sheep from nonphilosophical goats. The question we are considering has something of the same instrumental quality: it has served to provoke some lively discussions and (unlike the previous example) it *has* been developed into a diverse and interesting book. Pragmatically, therefore, the question works; but as a “heuristic device” for understanding Latin America, it is not much help. Like “Is this the right question?” it is laden with conceptual difficulties and, if we seek to go beyond such difficulties and “operationalize” the question in specific empirical contexts, it is difficult to make progress. In this, it resembles many other notional questions we might concoct: When was Latin America happy? When was Latin America good? And, the most obvious cognate question: When was Latin America traditional? On the other hand, it differs from other questions which, though they sound similar, are substantially different, since they are conceptually clearer and, to some degree, empirically operationizable, for example: When was Latin America literate? When was Latin America urban? When was Latin America industrial?

Even with these valid and useful questions there are several problems, of the kind that attach to all such sweeping interrogatives. Some problems can be quickly disposed of. First, the definition and derivation of
“Latin America” need not detain us. Whether there is an entity called “Latin America” that shares common characteristics, making it a valid unit of analysis (one of Huntington’s building blocks of civilization, for example) (Huntington 1996), is not at issue; this is a separate question, worthy—perhaps—of another book: When or what was Latin America? We have enough on our hands as it is and can take “Latin America” to refer to the twenty republics conventionally defined as Latin American: the eighteen successor states of the Spanish Empire in the New World plus Brazil and Haiti.\(^3\) If, for example, we found that Brazil was significantly different from the rest (perhaps it “modernized” earlier or later than Spanish America?), that finding would be of interest and we could incorporate it into our conclusions. But in my view it wasn’t and it didn’t, so the question doesn’t arise. Meantime, we need not fret about what “Latin America” is; we have a very clear workable definition. Indeed, it’s about the only clear workable definition in the whole discussion.

Second, any such question—when was Latin America modern, literate, urban, or industrial?—needs to be spatially disaggregated. Social and cultural change tends to be patchy and does not sweep across a huge landscape like a tidal wave. There are major differences between countries and even within countries. Chihuahua is not Chiapas and—with all due respect to President Kirchner—Santa Cruz is not the Provincia de Buenos Aires. Thus, even if the question is a broadly meaningful and manageable one—when was Latin America literate?\(^4\)—we would probably conclude that, to be useful and convincing, the answer should be disaggregated by country, region, sector (e.g., city/countryside), sex, and age cohort/generation. And, since we are dealing with cumulative sociocultural processes (not sudden tidal waves), we would have to resort to broad chronological conclusions derived from time series: Mexico became literate in the 1940s, urban in the 1950s, and so on.

Furthermore, the bigger the unit, the more broadbrush is the answer. We can state more precisely and, I think, more usefully, when a region became urban or literate than when an entire country did. If Mexico (on average) became literate in the 1940s, Nuevo León had already crossed the threshold in the 1920s, while Chiapas did not do so until the 1960s (Wilkie 1970: 208–9). The same is true of countries within continents or even continents within the world. Every scalar increase brings, necessarily, an increased dispersion of values, thus, even if we could say when Latin America as a whole, on average, became modern, that would not tell us much about many component countries or regions within Latin America. Indeed, the conclusion