

WRITING AGAINST EMPIRE

A Conversation with Greg Grandin



Interview by **Samantha Moon and Helena Vargas, Yale College '26**

G

reg Grandin is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and historian who specializes in Latin American History. He is the Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor of History at Yale University, where he teaches courses investigating the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Latin America. In April 2025, Grandin's newest book, *America, América*, was released. In this interview, we speak with Grandin about *America, América*, his journey writing it, and how it addresses the legacy of imperialism in Latin America today.

Your book, *America América*, is coming out on April 22nd. To begin, can you give us an overview of the scope of the work. What is its objective?

The scope is large. It runs from the Spanish conquest to the present, and there are a number of different objectives. These were things I've been thinking about and writing about for a long time in different places. I'm trying to think through what the United States' relationship with Latin America is in a way that goes beyond just simple condemnation of the US as an aggressive informal Empire and beyond recounting its various outrages—whether it be taking half of Mexico or various coups and supportive death squads. I want to think more about the relationship between Latin America and the US as a kind of productive tension, looking at the way that Latin America has served, at different moments, to socialize or ground the United States.

The United States is an exceptional country in the sense that it is the most powerful and wealthiest nation in history, and its engagement with the world, in many ways, was mediated through Latin America. Latin America was the place where the U.S. learned how to project its power in all of its many dimensions. But I wanted to go beyond that and think about another question that's been long on my mind, and that is the persistence of the social democratic ideal in Latin America. Despite all of the violence and terror that has been directed at the region's reformers and activists, the idea of democracy is still social. There is a sense that Latin America is the last region in the world to take the enlightenment at its word—as a defense of universal humanist values.

America, América starts at the conquest. The Spanish conquest was one of the most horrific events

in human history in terms of human mortality. Within a century, some 90% of the Americas' first peoples were gone, mostly from disease, but also due to violence and displacement caused by slavery and other forms of tribute-taking by the Spaniards. At the same time, the conquest generated a kind of crisis within Catholicism. People like Bartolome de las Casas and legal theorists like Francisco Vittorio began to question: *By what right does Spain have to rule over Native Americans?* This moral crisis didn't slow the horrors of the conquest down, but it did lay out many of the terms of modern political theory: notions related to sovereignty, the equality of peoples, the legitimacy of war, the illegitimacy of aggressive war, the idea of individual freedom, the emancipationist ethic.

There is a sense that Latin America is the last region in the world to take the enlightenment at its word—as a defense of universal humanist values.

Of course, the Spanish Empire went on for centuries. In *America, América*, I look at when Spanish independence leaders began to break free from Spain

and then had to confront an expanding United States. They already had in place an intellectual apparatus through which to critique the United States' expansion. So, as the United States was revitalizing the doctrine of conquest and moving west across the continent, Latin America applied to the United States the coherent and comprehensive criticism of conquest that had earlier been applied to Spain. That critique of conquest ultimately became the foundation of international law and liberal multilateralism. One of the objectives of *America, América* is to think about the emergence of what we call the liberal international order. Historians have looked at it through the lens of European decolonization and through Anglo US relations, but I wanted to look at it as emerging out of the tension of the New World—as a kind of productive tension between Latin America and the United States.

A work like this feels like a massive undertaking. How long have you been working on it, and how did writing *America América* compare to writing your other works?

I've thought about many of these questions for a long time, so I had a framework in mind for my book. It was a question of finding the right vehicle for the narrative. I try to write in narrative form, following an individual, a group of individuals, social movements, the evolution of a revolution, or wars for independence. My writing is often a narrative mingled with conceptual and historiographical arguments.

I started writing *America, América* during the COVID pandemic, so I had a lot of free time to write and rework the project. At one point, I thought I might start my book with Spanish independence, or the wars of the Age of Revolution—US independence and Spanish American Independence. However, I felt the need to return to the conquest to consider how Spanish Catholicism lent itself, intellectually and morally, to what later became social rights. The thing about the Spanish conquest is that there was no conceit that Spain was conquering empty land. The fact that Spain conquered a people raised all sorts of political and ethical questions that went into the criticism of conquest, which I discuss in my book.

In what ways do you think that legacy of imperialism impacts Latin American nations today? To what extent has it shaped or determined the trajectory of the development of North and South America?

It's hard to compare North and South America on this front. When we talk about North America, we're talking about the United States, the most powerful and wealthiest nation in history. Coming out of World War II, the United States superintended the global capitalist order with a degree of legitimacy and power that surpassed the dreams of any other empire. Dissimilarly, a continent of poorer nations inherited the considerable weight of Spanish colonialism and immediately faced debt and impoverishment. Colonialism produced two very different social realities.

Spanish America became independent, already a kind of community of nations, a league of nations. The six or seven republics that came into being early in the 19th century both legitimated and threatened one another. They legitimized each other because they each affirmed the right of the people to break from colonial rule and establish independent republics. They also threatened one another at times. Based on the old legal order, in which aggressive war was justified, what might stop Argentina from acting like the United States and trying to make it to the Pacific? Argentina wasn't going to do that, but they had to come up with a kind of legal framework that justified their sovereignty, that wasn't based on the right of conquest or the right of discovery. To do this, they rehabilitated an old Roman law doctrine where each nation recognized the old colonial borders as legitimate. There was no notion of expansion. In many ways, that became foundational to the global liberal international order. Thus, in Latin America, a community of nations came into being, and this became a model for later international law.

At the same time, Latin America suffered economically. Latin American nations produced raw materials for countries like the United States, which added value to those products. As a result, the United States became increasingly wealthy. Meanwhile, Latin America became, in some ways, the first region forced to deal with a national kind of structural poverty. It's in Latin America where more heterodox economic theory, including dependency theory, takes shape. We see the

emergence of the idea that political sovereignty evolves into economic sovereignty—the belief that, in addition to having the right to govern themselves, countries also have the right to control their economic resources.

You just mentioned dependency theory. Can you expand a bit on the theory and how it has shaped conceptions of Latin America?

Dependency theory is the idea that the wealth of one is dependent on the impoverishment of another. In the 20th century, an Argentine economist named Raul Prebisch came up with a theorem that explained why poor countries remain poor. Classical liberalism or modernization theory held that a poor country just had to replicate whatever it is the wealthy countries did, and it would advance and move from a stage of resource extraction towards manufacturing. Using economic data, Prebisch came up with the counterargument that the trading relations between countries that export primary material and countries that export value added material

will always deteriorate.

There's a structural rift between what Prebisch identified as the core industrial countries of the United States and Europe and the peripheral countries of what later became known as the Third World. Classical economists said that trading relations would equalize over time as production diversified in the third world, but Prebisch argued that there were structural limits on development and that the wealth of the First World was dependent on the underdevelopment of the Third World. That wasn't necessarily called dependency theory at the time, but it was certainly one of the foundational premises. As theories radicalized in the 50s and 60s, Prebisch's theory took on the name dependency theory. Dependency theory has been important in Latin America because it helps explain chronic poverty. It also helps explain chronic political crises. Why could no governing coalition emerge and create a stable government that would last over a long period of time? Because the economics that underwrote that coalition were always deteriorating in relationship to the core. Dependency theory just becomes a commonsensical way of thinking: wealth is dependent on poverty; poverty is dependent on wealth. It's a way of thinking about the world economy and its totality.

Do you see any historical tipping points in terms of relations between the United States and Latin America?

In the book, I talk a little bit about the run up to World War Two, which was the high point of the Good Neighbor Policy. It arrived in 1933 after decades of the U.S. refusing Latin America's demand to give up its right of intervention. At the time, there was a sense in the United States that challenges to national security were emerging in Europe and Asia, so in 1933, Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Cordell Hall, extemporaneously accepted Latin America's demand to recognize the absolute sovereignty of Latin American nations. If Donald Trump's tariff announcement is the worst policy change in US history, extemporaneous acceptance of the absolute sovereignty of Latin American

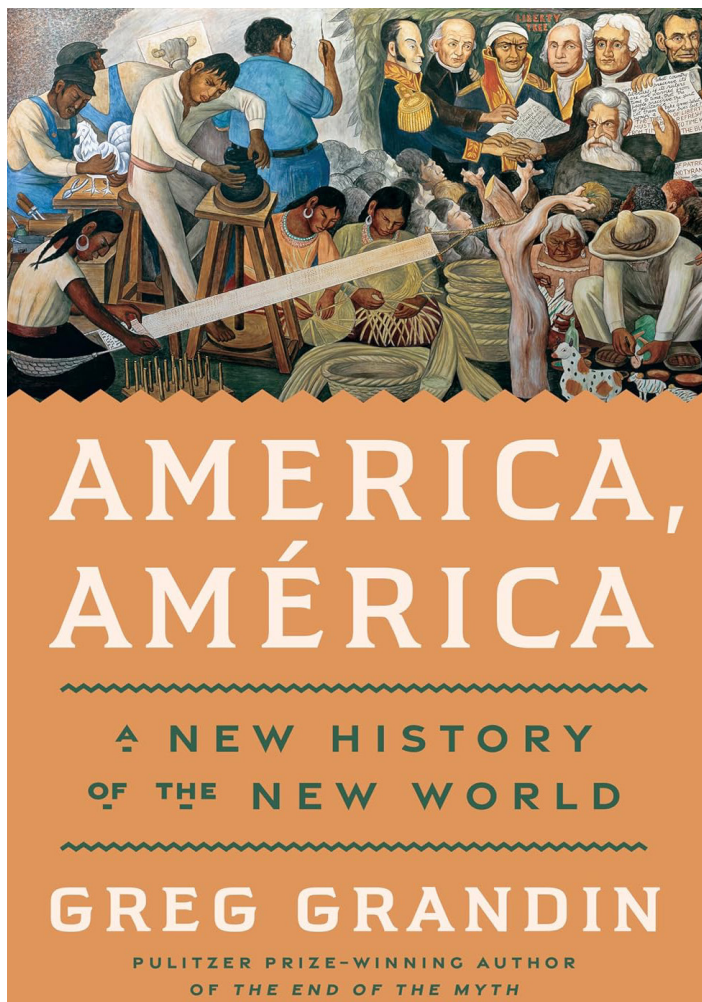


Figure 1: The cover of Professor Greg Grandin's newest book, *America, América*.

nations was probably the most successful. It was a radical change in how the United States dealt with Latin America.

Well, that's the thing about being a historian: *historians are always revising themselves*, not because the past has changed, but because they have to answer questions in the present.

The Good Neighbor Policy set up a decade of goodwill. Two tracks emerged. One is that the left wing of the New Deal worked with Latin American social democrats in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile. Many grand strategists feared that the Spanish Civil War would spread throughout all of Latin America because its countries shared many of the same sociological variables as Spain. This includes a landed class ruling over a large number of servile workers, a militant peasant movement, and a strong patrician culture. Some people saw the Mexican Revolution through the lens of the Spanish Civil War, and Mexican revolutionaries were constantly assaulted by right wing fascist movements. The United States stood firmly against these movements and supported social democrats and economic nationalists in a number of countries, which prompted the defeat of fascism.

The second track is that Hall's turnaround on intervention created an enormous amount of goodwill, allowing him to sign many free trade treaties with Latin American nations. This solidified a more modern

corporate economic base that was export oriented, capital and labor intensive, and didn't mind the New Deal. They may not have liked the New Deal, and they may not have been happy with the National Labor Relations Act, but they weren't dead set against it. In exchange for supporting Roosevelt, Latin American leaders got open markets in Latin America.

The two tracks emerged from that tipping point, when Hall accepted the sovereignty of Latin American nations. On the one hand, the United States imagined the construction of a continental New Deal with higher living standards not just in the United States, but throughout the Americas. Like FDR, Vice President Henry Wallace insisted that if you didn't raise people's wages, no matter what happened in the battlefields of Europe, fascism would continue. On the other hand, this corporate bloc was solidified, which benefited greatly from free trade with Latin America and supported the New Deal. The twin American goals—expansion of liberalism domestically and of an internationalist Foreign Policy—defined the New Deal order.

How does your work inform the way you view current events, especially as they pertain to Latin America?

Well, that's the thing about being an historian: historians are always revising themselves, not because the past has changed, but because they have to answer questions in the present. It's just the nature of the discipline of history, which is unstable in the sense that you're constantly answering questions about the past based on the demands of the present. Of course, this flies in the face of a lot of conservative thinking about history: these the facts, and we just want the facts, and we don't want overinterpretation. But human beings are interpretive machines, right? We can't help but interpret things according to our own circumstances. So, living through the sudden rise of a kind of nativist nationalism, a revival of the rhetoric of territorial aggrandizement, you can't help but try to work through what it means and what role Latin America will play in it. I think that as Trump upends that liberal international order we talked about, what emerges in its place is a return to balance of power politics—the idea that when you have large nations pushing against each other and asserting their interest, the creation of countervailing

force will create stability. But Latin Americans have always critiqued the balance of power politics as a way of organizing the international order. They say it can't help but lead to war. And it certainly seems that that's one of the things to worry about in the current moment.

In many ways, Latin America is where it *begins* and where it *ends* for the United States.

You've indirectly answered this question, but I figured we would ask it directly. Why do you study Latin American history?

Well, I went to college in the 1980s, and I didn't really know what I was going to do. But then I fell in with these different historians, and they were wondering whether the Soviet Union, whether Gorbachev, was going to be able to reform socialism. And then socialism collapsed, and I started paying attention to US policy in Central America—Ronald Reagan, support for anti-communist regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the support to the Contra counter revolutionaries in Nicaragua. I became more and more interested in that region. My first two books were on Guatemala, and then I moved out, and I've been thinking about different aspects of U.S. power abroad. But you can't think about that question without thinking about Latin America. In many ways, Latin America is where it begins and where it ends for the United States.



