Latin America is a term frequently used, but rarely questioned in the academic world. The term itself structures University departments, academic publishing, and, most importantly perhaps, the way scholars of „Latin America“ think about many historical and social phenomena occurring between Tijuana and Tierra del Fuego. And yet, there is no consensus on what the term „Latin America“ precisely means, little agreement on the significance of the historical weight it carries, and almost no debate as to whether the term is necessary or helpful at all. This debate about the possibilities and dangers of using the term „Latin America“ is much needed and has certainly been set in motion with the powerful intellectual intervention of Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo in his recent book „Latin America. The Allure and Power of an Idea“. Disguised as a mere geographical description, the term „Latin America“ carries a cultural and conceptual history that is riddled with conflicts, contradictions, and confusion. The adjective „Latin“ in „Latin America“, as Tenorio-Trillo shows, „has stored a basic array of racial, historical, and cultural beliefs“ through which „modern yeses and nos have been phrased“ (p. 2). In this sense, „Latin“ could signify the affirmation of the French imperial project of the nineteenth century, an alternative non-Western ontology, a Catholic republicanism, or an indigenous post-Marxist revolution project. At the same time, „Latin“ entailed the rejection of U.S. expansionism and „Anglo-Saxon“ materialism/individualism/Protestantism – the exact content of critique always depending on the concrete context of its usage. But while the concept of „Latin America“ was always historically contested, its power in today’s world lies precisely in the fact that it is taken for granted, especially in the context of North American academia. This assumed commonplace character of the term „Latin America“ irritates Tenorio-Trillo, who seeks to historicize, criticize, and, ultimately, subvert it.

The essay – powerful in its precision and coherence in less than 200 pages – consists of three main parts: first, an intellectual history of the concept’s origins; second, a thorough critique of its use in today’s Latin American studies departments in the United States; and third, the conclusion that the term will not vanish and scholars will have to find strategies to cope with its inherent problems. In this nuanced intellectual tour de force through centuries, literary genres, and cultural phenomena, the author maintains a tone that is sharply provocative and sarcastic as well as undoubtedly passionate and humorful at the same time. The ability to write engaging and thought-provoking prose is probably a necessary requirement to treat such diverse topics as popular songs (Chapter 5: „Singing „Latinoamérica““) or the complex relationship of Brazilian thinkers to the idea of Latin America (Chapter 3: „The Question of Brazil“).

The first chapters focus on the concept’s cultural and intellectual history, sometimes touching on its Begriffsgeschichte without the need to use constant references to the ever-same theoretical paradigms and authors. The connotations implied by the term „Latin America“ differed, but always included the encounters of modern empires (whether in the form of an imperial agenda or as anti-imperialist resistance), a non-Western alternative modernity, contradictory ideas about identity, history, and community, and concepts of race. Especially the genealogy of the imperial concepts of Latinité and Iberismo and their influence on the „Latin“ in „Latin America“ are delineated: both concepts in their various forms signaled an alternative to the West’s assumed decadence, but also a way to grasp the mixture of cultures, races, and imperial interests (p. 59). The process of the „invention of Latin America“ in the 1850s and its development throughout the nineteenth century was as anti-imperialist as it was racially charged. As such, it was always directed against the United States and was accompanied by problematic anti-liberal longings.

The second part of the essay provides an example of rigorous (self-)criticism that is rarely encountered in the academic world. Tenorio-
Trillo’s enemy is not so much the community of U.S. scholars working on Latin America (among whom he is a leading voice), but rather what he calls the „US textbook version of Latin America“. This textbook version assumes a homogenous cultural or colonial legacy of Latin America, requiring constant clarification on the historical or cultural specificities. „Latin America“ (always in English, never Latinoamérica!) as a category obscures more than it reveals, as it is often more concerned with societal developments or academic trends in the United States than in Latin America itself. At times, Tenorio-Trillo’s picture of the current state of Latin American studies at U.S. universities (allegedly obsessed with authenticity, identity, race, and otherness) seems to be at the verge of exaggeration, but then again, his critique is consciously constructed as polemic. One of the strongest points of the many that could be mentioned is certainly the call for a joint analysis of Mexico and the United States and their closely related histories, economies, and cultures. To only treat Mexico as part of „Latin America“ (and thereby as the „Latin other“ of the U.S.) „only obliterates the undeniable fact of the Mexico/US coexistence“ (p. 123).

In the third and last part, Tenorio-Trillo comes to a conciliatory conclusion. The term „Latin America“, however problematic, multi-layered and contradictory, will endure for the foreseeable future. „Latin America“ is here to stay and scholars will have to find a pragmatic way to deal with it. One cause for hope for the author is that „Latin American history“ is, at least, no national or nationalist history. As a concept, „Latin America“ has always been about more than the national (albeit at the cost of exoticism, cultural, and racial atavism), and could be used meaningfully if approached with „meek specificity in the consideration of time, space, evidence, and language“ (p. 168). According to the author, language skills are the key to connecting local specificity to global developments in which Latin America is undoubtedly partaking.

Tenorio-Trillo’s inspiring essay is a great example of what skillful history writing can achieve: to combine deep historical knowledge with sharp political analysis. Add the ability to write engagingly and a refreshing sense of humor and you have the essence of this book: a must-read for every scholar of „Latin America“ but also a prime example of critical engagement with the fundamental concepts underlying scholarly work.