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## **The Politics and Semiotics of the Smallest Icons of Popular Culture: Latin American Postage Stamps**

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THE POLITICS AND SEMIOTICS OF  
THE SMALLEST ICONS OF  
POPULAR CULTURE:  
Latin American Postage Stamps

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*Abstract: This article uses an interdisciplinary approach to present and analyze information on the smallest manifestations of popular culture in Latin American countries: postage stamps. The disciplines involved are semiotics (the linguistic study of signs), history, politics (internal and international), and popular culture. The project studies how these postage stamps carry significant messages, including expressions of nationalism, politics (national and international), propaganda, and cultural identity. The article begins with an overview of Latin American postage stamps, with an emphasis on internal and international politics. The latter category focuses on several cases of inter-country tension in which postage stamps have played a role.*

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this piece is to examine the semiotic messages and the politics (national and international) involved in what can be called the smallest icons of Latin American popular culture: postage stamps.

This use of the academic discipline of semiotics to analyze postage stamps follows the pioneering work of David Scott in his *European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages*,<sup>1</sup> although this present work focuses more on the politics involved, and is confined to a different geographic area. The semiotic approach relies on the typology first set up by the noted American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and considers the postage stamp to be a unique kind of sign, with the ability to convey a number of messages in a very confined space.

The humble postage stamp, introduced in England in 1840, has evolved over the years to the point where a secondary function of the

1. David Scott, *European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

stamp deserves serious study. This secondary function is the use of the postage stamp as advertisement or propaganda (domestic or international), with themes as far ranging as nationalism, history, politics, economics, art, cultural identity, etc.

The postage stamps of Latin America show an extraordinary variety of themes, formats, and design characteristics. Although Latin American stamp design was originally influenced by trends in European (and later U.S.) stamp design, Latin American stamps in the last several decades have developed their own strong identity, which increases their value as a source of information on the area. Particularly noteworthy in this connection are the stamps of Argentina (especially in the Perón era), Mexico, Revolutionary Cuba, and Nicaragua.

With only a few exceptions (current U.S. stamps being the most prominent), postage stamps are in the public domain since they are government documents. Thus, they may be reproduced for educational purposes without infringing on copyright laws. With the advent of the computer and the digital scanner, it is now easy to reproduce these stamps and incorporate them as illustrations in lectures and monographs via 35mm slides or presentation software such as PowerPoint. They can also easily be sent to colleagues as attachments to email. Once the stamp is digitized using a scanner, then image handling software such as Photoshop can manipulate the scan of the stamp to make it larger, smaller, more focused, etc. Once the desired image is achieved, it can be inserted into presentation software such as PowerPoint or into word processing software.

It can be argued that postage stamps frequently are taken for granted, with the general public paying only passing attention to their designs and messages. The messages are there, however, and the ubiquitous postage stamp is one form of art that is seen on a daily or frequent basis by almost all citizens. The messages carried may be subconsciously and subtly conveyed, but the process of repetition (i.e., seeing the same design many times) consolidates the delivery of the message.

Furthermore, the esthetic and design features of postage stamps merit our attention and respect, for a well-designed stamp represents the creative effort of one or more specialists who have to be carefully attuned to a number of sometimes competing factors: the legal requirement that the stamp show how much postage has been prepaid; the country of origin; the typography; the graphic element (since almost all postage stamps now carry some kind of image); and the artistic presentation of something that is both useful and attractive, all the while working in the confines of a very small space. To convey a strong and effective visual statement in this small two-dimensional area, the successful designer must use contrast and color, as well as typography and symbols to deliver the message. Put another way, in what may be as little as a one-inch square, the designer must comply with

the requirements imposed by the Universal Postal Union concerning the indexing semiotic function of identifying the country, specifying the face monetary value of the stamp, and incorporating whatever iconic or symbolic elements are required.

The sheer numbers of different designs and visual images are staggering. There are approximately 600 different stamp-emitting "entities" or "authorities" in the world, which over the last century and a half of stamp usage have produced an estimated 250,000 different designs; Latin America represents about 10 percent of this total, or some 25,000 different designs for the twenty countries. Moreover, the pace of new designs appears to be increasing, and in one recent year an estimated 10,000 different stamps were issued worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Almost every conceivable theme and image has appeared in some manner on a postage stamp, and the variety of forms, styles, and themes seems open-ended. The range of printing methods and typography add to the volume of different varieties. A number of technical problems have been resolved, and even the less sophisticated stamp-emitting countries in recent years have improved their product, although blunders, errors, and esthetic disasters still occur.

It is possible that the heyday of the postage stamp, and its ideological, political and economic message, may be coming to an end in the face of email communications and the use of metered mail. But that moment has not arrived yet, and in the meantime the postage stamp can provide the Latin Americanist with a special window into the region.

#### YES, BUT IS IT POPULAR CULTURE?

A major figure in Latin American cultural studies has warned of the risks of any scholar taking an academic approach to popular culture because "the field is regarded as an amorphous, ill-defined, and even dubious area by the academic establishment."<sup>3</sup> This attitude apparently stems from the rather arbitrary division of culture into three categories with supposedly well-defined boundaries: folk, mass (or popular), and high. In this typology, folk culture is that created by lower-class artisans and craftspeople, while mass or popular culture is that which is well accepted and enjoyed by large segments of the population. This leaves "high" culture as the province of the elite and the corresponding intellectuals and curators of the treasures of literature, music, and art (among other fields). This arbitrary division has come under increasing

2. Dennis Altman, *Paper Ambassadors: The Politics of Stamps* (North Ryde, NSW, Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1991), 1. Also Eduardo Escalada-Goicoechea, *Exposición mundial de filatelia Granada: Colecciones Iberoamericanas* (Granada: Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1992).

3. Jean Franco, *Critical Passions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 169.

criticism in recent years by those who argue that the boundaries are permeable and impossible to accurately define.<sup>4</sup>

A strict and narrow definition of popular culture would limit it to culture created by and for the people, which would presumably include folk and some elements of mass culture, but exclude elitist high culture. This narrow definition would also exclude postage stamps since they are the creations of governments, not the people. The definition of popular culture we prefer to employ is that suggested by Jean Franco:<sup>5</sup> that it should include all aspects of culture except those institutionalized as "high culture." This would include folk culture, popular and mass culture, and related areas such as entertainment, the media, communications, and the "culture industry." This broad definition also can be extended to include a multitude of aspects of daily life among the majority of the population, that is, the things that ordinary people do for pleasure and to enrich their existence. Popular culture becomes, then, a mirror by which societies can grasp and perceive the entertainment, pastimes, pleasures and activities of everyday life which collectively contribute to the national identity of a people.<sup>6</sup>

The range of possible topics subsumed under this broad definition of popular culture can be seen from a list of chapter titles in the comprehensive three-volume *Handbook of American Popular Culture*:<sup>7</sup> almanacs, jazz, leisure vehicles and the automobile, magazines, magic, newspapers, physical fitness, pornography, records, popular science, trains, advertising, best sellers, circuses, death, comics, editorial cartoons, games and toys, the occult and supernatural, photography, religion, romantic fiction, gothic novels, verse, women, animation, children's literature, film, popular music, the pulps, radio, science fiction, television, and the Western. We should also note that one of the chapters (by John Bryant) in the first volume of this series deals with stamps and coins as objects of popular culture.

Within the field of Latin American studies, there is a parallel to the pioneering *Handbook of American Popular Culture* and to the *Journal of Popular Culture*. The parallel is the work of Harold E. Hinds Jr. and Charles M. Tatum, who in 1985 published the *Handbook of Latin American Popular Culture*. As the editors recognized, their effort was "a modest, yet sound beginning"<sup>8</sup> in which ten chapters by different authors explored a number of areas of Latin American popular culture, including music, sports,

4. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1-9.

5. Franco, op. cit., 169, 179.

6. Altman, op. cit., 3.

7. Thomas Inge, *Handbook of American Popular Culture, 3 vols.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978, 1980, 1981).

8. Harold Hinds Jr. and Charles M. Tatum, *Handbook of Latin American Popular Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), xi.

popular religion, comics, television, photo novels, film carnivals, cartoons, and newspapers. The editors noted that the scholarship on Latin American popular culture "is in its infancy,"<sup>9</sup> a situation they found unsurprising given that the field as a whole is relatively new. Hinds and Tatum were also the editors of the only specialized publication in this field, *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, which began publication in 1981 and continues to date. The journal did carry a few articles on postage stamps as elements of Latin American popular culture, most notably by David Bushnell.<sup>10</sup>

Hinds and Tatum noted, as several scholars have previously done, that there is no widely accepted definition of popular culture, although they tentatively advanced their own definition:

some aspect of culture which is accepted by or consumed by significant numbers of people. Acceptance or consumption may take the form of (1) widely held artifacts, symbols, beliefs and myths, or (2) direct participation as a viewer of, reader of, listener of, or some other sensory response to some aspect of popular culture.<sup>11</sup>

Hopefully the broad definitions of popular culture explored above leave adequate room for a scholarly approach to the postage stamps of Latin America as objects of study. With the exception of the aforementioned articles by Bushnell, and one by Frank Nuessel on Latin American territorial and boundary disputes depicted on postage stamps,<sup>12</sup> there have been almost no scholarly publications on Latin American postage stamps as icons of popular culture. As Bryant has noted: "The scholar interested in postage stamps as art object, social icons, or historical evidence stands before a field virtually untouched by the cultural historian."<sup>13</sup>

#### THE SEMIOTICS OF POSTAGE STAMPS

Semiotics (the study of signs and the messages they contain) is a sub-field in the discipline of linguistics, and has acquired numerous adherents in the last hundred years as a scientifically-based approach to the myriad pieces of information we are bombarded with on a constant basis. There is a rich and complex theoretical component to semiotics and

9. Ibid, xii.

10. David Bushnell, "Postal Images of Argentine Proceres: Selective Myth-Making," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 1 (1982), 91–105. Also personal communication with Professor Bushnell, November 2002.

11. Hinds and Tatum, eds., "Instructions to Contributors," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 7 (1988), v.

12. Frank Nuessel, "Territorial and Boundary Disputes Depicted in Postage Stamps," in *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 11 (1992): 121–41.

13. J. Bryant, "Stamp & Coin Collecting," *Handbook of American Popular Culture*, vol. 3, 470.



Figure 1. Arévalo/Arbenz



Figure 2. Castillo Armas



Figure 3. Commemorating the fall of Allende in Chile



Figure 4. Argentine 1997 stamp honoring Che Guevara



Figure 5. Revolutionary stamps of Cuba and Nicaragua



Figure 6. Peruvian revolutionary stamp of 1968



Figure 7. Mexican 1968 Olympic Stamp



Figure 8. Dominican Republic 1900 stamp



Figure 9. Guatemalan stamp claiming Belize



Figure 10. Venezuelan and Guyanese map stamps



an equally rich and diverse field of applied semiotics, which attempts to relate these theoretical aspects to concrete fields of human activities such as advertising, propaganda, popular culture, and cultural studies generally. In this section we will apply some basic semiotic notions to the study of Latin American postage stamps, following the work on the semiotics and designs of European stamps pioneered by Scott.

At the simplest level of definition, signs are things which stand for other things. Thus, they have meanings and combinations of meanings derived from the things they stand for and the way they are presented. Words are the most basic and common signs, but they are not the only kind of signs. For example, a theatrical performance (or a movie) relies on many semiotic signs beyond words: there is scenery, music, and costuming. The Western villain's black hat is a sign with a certain meaning, as is the white hat worn by the hero.<sup>14</sup>

The father of semiotics is an American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). A graduate of Harvard, Peirce did not pursue an academic career, preferring instead to work for many years in the U.S. Government's Geodetic Survey. His contributions, however, encompassed many fields, including philosophy, psychology, engineering, and logic. He published relatively little, and it was only after his death that his major essays were collected in one multi-volume book. His writings are dense, theoretical, and hard for the layperson to grasp. Nevertheless, his basic ideas regarding semiotics and signs were to have a wide-reaching impact. Peirce's view of the world was pan-semiotic, and he believed that "the entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs."<sup>15</sup> This pervasive presence of signs meant to Peirce that any field he studied could, and indeed must, be approached through the discipline of semiotics and the search for the signs which gave it meaning. As part of his approach to semiotics Peirce created a comprehensive and complicated typology of signs. Starting with a relatively simple three-class typology (his "trichotomy"), Peirce multiplied the categories until he ended up first with ten major classes of signs, then sixty-six, and finally almost sixty thousand. In our approach to the semiotics of postage stamps we will limit ourselves to his original trichotomy, as Scott did in his semiotic study of European stamps.

The first semiotic message a postage stamp delivers is self-referential: it must identify itself as a postage stamp. The conventional way of doing this, and establishing that a postage stamp is indeed a postage stamp, has to do with its relatively small size and the perforations that usually border it to permit easy separation. If it is affixed to an envelope

14. Arthur Asa Berger, *Signs in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Longman, 1984), 1–2.

15. Winfred North, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 41.

in its accustomed place in the upper right-hand corner we further confirm its identity. And if it arrives as part of a mail delivery and has been cancelled with a date/time/city black ink marking, then the message is clear and firm.

The next semiotic message is the identification of the country of origin. As we will see below when we apply Peirce's typology, there are a number of ways of delivering this message, starting with a simple typographical statement spelling out the name of the country. Most mail we receive is from our own country, so this important function is sometimes overlooked. The next message is a quantitative one: has the correct amount of postage been paid? This is confirmed by a number on the stamp specifying the prepaid value of the stamp, and presumably the weight of the letter or package delivered is covered by its value. This seemingly everyday function is crucial because the basic postal purpose of the stamp (leaving aside the various political and other purposes we will be exploring) is to carry the mail. Indeed, the invention of the adhesive postage stamp was due to the inconveniences of the earlier system under which the recipient of the letter had to pay the cost of delivering it. Rejection by the recipient meant a financial loss to the postal system.

At deeper levels of semiotic meaning, messages common to most stamps are carried by features of design, to include color, typography, layout and, of singular importance to our study, any representational drawings, engravings, photographs or other graphics, which can deliver increasingly sophisticated messages of a cultural, historical, political or economic nature.

Peirce called his three-part typology "The Trichotomy of Signs," in which he classified a sign as either an index, an icon, or a symbol. Signs that combined these features were also possible, and indeed Peirce argued that most signs were complex blends of these three categories. In simple terms the three elements of the typology can be defined as follows:

*An Index:* a pointer taking the viewer somewhere. An example would be smoke, which is an index to the fire that created it.

*An Icon:* a graphic pictorial representation such as a picture, a design, or a photograph. It can be observed for its own esthetic sake or, more importantly for our semiotic approach, analyzed to see what the message of the picture is.

*A Symbol:* a conventional sign in which elements stand for something else. Thus the symbol "\$" stands for dollars, and the post horn is a common symbol for postal service.

We will explore the application of Peirce's semiotic typology to Latin American postage stamps below, but to illustrate how this semiotic analysis works, here are some examples.

The first example concerns the indexing semiotic function of a postage stamp by which the viewer is given the message concerning the country of origin. The simplest solution to this requirement is to use

typography (print) to identify the country, and most postage stamps today carry the name of the country as text. However, the first postage stamp produced (by England in 1840) did not carry the name of the country. Instead, a profile of Queen Victoria was used, since it was assumed that everyone would recognize it and identify it as British. The only typographic elements were the words “postage” and the spelling out (“One Penny”) of the amount or prepaid postage. To this day British stamps do not carry the name of the country. Instead, the head of the reigning monarch is used, sometimes dominating the design (and thus becoming an icon in Peirce’s typology), and sometimes discreetly placed in one of the upper corners, and thus functioning only as an index.

The earliest Latin American stamps, those of Brazil in the year 1843, carried no index sign, and consisted simply of a numeral indicating the postage paid, along with an abstract ornamental design intended to make it difficult to counterfeit the stamp. The lack of a semiotic index sign was due to the assumption that the stamps would be used only for internal mail within Brazil. However, the reasons given for not placing the head of Emperor Dom Pedro of Brazil on early stamps included the argument that it would be undignified to blacken the royal face with an ink cancellation. It was not until the issues of 1866 that the visage of Dom Pedro appeared on Brazilian stamps.

The iconographic semiotic message is the one which is more subtle and complex in postage stamps, and will be the main focus of our analysis. It is in the selection of the icon that a government makes a conscious choice of what message is to be delivered, and how. The challenge of selecting meaningful icons is compounded by the extremely small surface area involved and technical limitations such as printing methods (engraved vs. lithograph, etc), inks, colors, and paper.

#### THE POLITICS OF LATIN AMERICAN POSTAGE STAMPS

A note on stamp identification: in the following sections a stamp is identified by its country of origin (the index) and the number it is assigned in the *Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalog* produced by the Scott Publishing Company of Sidney, Ohio. To see the stamp design and other details, the interested reader should go to the appropriate volume (there are six), find the country, and then the stamp corresponding to the number.

#### *Political Messages on Stamps*

In the preceding sections we argued that the semiotic approach to postage stamps would emphasize the iconographic function and the various messages this iconography might deliver. As might be expected, totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, with their tight control

over the political process and its propaganda efforts, have made ample use of their postage stamps for this purpose. The long dictatorships of the Somoza family in Nicaragua and Stroessner in Paraguay were accompanied by multiple series of these stamps, twelve in the Somoza case and sixteen in Stroessner's. Guatemala provides an example of how two authoritarian regimes (sandwiching a democratically elected reform government) used iconographic elements for political purposes. We start with the long dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico (1931–1944.) As his second presidential term began in 1937 the government issued a long set of stamps (#280–291) celebrating the accomplishments of the regime, and featuring as its highest values Ubico in uniform on horseback and a formal portrait of Ubico. The following year, on the occasion of a philatelic exhibit in Guatemala, the government issued a set of stamps (#C93–C99) showing the Central American presidents, with President Ubico on the highest value stamp; other stamps in the series featured President Somoza of Nicaragua and Martínez of El Salvador. After Ubico resigned, two elected reformist presidents (Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz) led the Guatemalan Revolution of 1945–1955. Their administrations issued stamps (#312, 320–3, C128–131, C136, C185–187) with allegories of the 1945 Revolution, and honoring democracy and labor. The transfer of power from Arévalo to Arbenz by free elections in 1950 gave rise to a stamp series with the icons of a national flag and the constitution being passed from the hand of Arévalo to that of Arbenz (see figure 1).

The Arbenz regime was brought down by a coalition of right-wing forces led by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, with support from the CIA, in 1954. The Castillo Armas regime promptly issued stamps (#363–4, C210–218) with a Mayan warrior holding the dagger and cross symbol of the "Liberation Movement" of 1954, and an axe destroying the hammer and scythe symbols of Communism. The stamps also carried the Liberating Revolution's slogan of "Dios—Patria—Libertad." Castillo Armas himself was assassinated in 1957, and the event was commemorated with stamps (#C223–9) showing his portrait framed in black (figure 2).

The long years of the Pinochet regime in Chile produced many examples of postage stamps supporting the military and celebrating the removal of Marxist Salvador Allende from power on 11 September 1973. That September date was frequently used by the regime to issue a stamp noting the anniversary (see #656, fig. 3). Typical themes featured an allegorical figure of liberty or the icon of Chilean Independence, General Bernardo O'Higgins, in a heroic horseback pose. The legend on the stamps would celebrate the "years of liberty" since 1973.

As we noted above in the example of the Guatemalan democratic revolution, authoritarian regimes are not the only ones using stamps for

political purposes. When the military regime that ousted Juan Perón in 1955 turned power over to an elected civilian regime in 1958, stamps were issued to celebrate the occasion (#673–675). The decree authorizing the stamps noted that the incoming civilian president was the result of “an absolutely democratic and exemplary election,” and that for this reason it was appropriate to “issue commemorative postage stamps that would remember and recall the event.”<sup>16</sup>

In Nicaragua, soon after taking power from the Sandinistas, the elected government of Violeta Chamorro (1990–1996) issued a stamp commemorating the president’s late husband, journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who had been assassinated by the Somoza regime in 1978. The stamp (#1844) featured a portrait of the murdered Chamorro, with the notation “Martyr of public liberty.”

More recently, the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe authorized a stamp to commemorate the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group’s assassination of Colombia’s Minister of Culture, Consuelo Araujo-Noguera, during the prior regime of Andrés Pastrana. The decision to issue the stamp, along with other commemorative acts, was interpreted as a sign that the Uribe regime would be a lot tougher on the guerrillas than the Pastrana regime, which was characterized by fruitless attempts to negotiate with the guerrillas.

Reactions to some of the more controversial stamp issues also provide an insight into their political impact. In 1985, for example, Vice President George Bush referred to Nicaraguan postage stamps honoring Karl Marx (#1182, C1026) as an indicator (or an index-icon, as a semiotician would say) of the Marxist nature of the Sandinista regime. The *New York Times* pointed out, however, that the Nicaraguan government had issued many stamps honoring world leaders, including George Washington and Pope John Paul II.<sup>17</sup>

Another example of the political reaction that postage stamps can sometimes produce is the response to an Argentine stamp honoring Ernesto “Che” Guevara on the thirtieth anniversary of his death in 1997. A number of countries commemorated this anniversary in a variety of ways, to the point that a Spanish news source spoke of the prevailing fever of “Chemania” in which the arts were recreating a human being and converting him into a myth.<sup>18</sup> President Carlos Menem justified the decision to issue the stamp on the basis that Che was a universal figure and that the stamp was “a way of moving forward towards peace and

16. Argentina, Provisional Presidency, *Decree of 17 July 1957*, quoted in *Revista de la Sociedad Filatélica Argentina* (1958), 30.

17. *New York Times*, 30 March 1985, 5.

18. *El Nacional*, 9 October 1997, <http://www.el-nacional.com/>.

understanding among Argentines." The official decree expressed the wish that "this stamp would show an Argentina which excluded no one for ideological reasons," and that it represented the "philosophy of concord" inspired by such events as the repatriation of the remains of Juan Manuel de Rosas and the social revindication of Eva Perón, without neglecting such established figures as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Other sources were not as charitable: the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín* quoted Radical party politician Juan Manuel Casella: "this is an election maneuver by President Carlos Menem which appeals to the commercial fetishism of the image of Che to compensate for the lack of support from the right." *Clarín* also quoted the conservative "Tradition, Family and Property" group as saying that this official homage "favors the revolutionary dynamism which already had bloodied the country in the decade of the 1970s."<sup>19</sup>

### *Stamps as Instruments of Good Citizenship*

In Latin America governments can (and do) use postage stamps and their cancellation messages as vehicles for promoting good citizenship. Sometimes this takes the form of supporting a worthy organization, such as the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, Lions Club, Rotary Club, hospital *beneficencias*, etc. These stamps are also sometimes issued with a face value plus a surcharge which is then presumably passed on to the organization involved. Other stamp issues urge the population to adopt healthy lifestyles by quitting smoking, by exercising, and by practicing safe sex. The sight of a condom (humorously portrayed) on an Argentine stamp warning about AIDS (#1786) must have come as a shock to many conservative (and Catholic) traditionalists.

In Mexico, long plagued by corruption among officials ranging from the policeman on the corner to the highest levels of government, a campaign launched in 2002 by the new Vicente Fox administration included postage stamps calling for a more honest administration, with no more *mordidas* (the petty bribes demanded by police and other low-level bureaucrats). The stamps also proclaimed a "Code of Ethics for Public Services of the Federal Administration."<sup>20</sup>

Another postal mechanism for promoting good citizenship is the message which can accompany the cancellation marking on an envelope. These can be quickly and easily changed, and do not have to go through the lengthy design process which a stamp does. Some examples:<sup>21</sup>

"A peso saved is a peso won"

19. *Clarín*, 8 October 1997, "Una estampilla para el Che" ([www.clarin.com.ar](http://www.clarin.com.ar)).

20. *Novedades EMEDIA on line*, 13 September 2002.

21. Centro Filatélico Dr. Gray. *Boletín Informativo*, #55, March 1965.

- "World campaign against hunger. Support it"  
 "Lions Club—peace is possible"  
 "Don't waste potable water"  
 "Save a life, Give blood"  
 "We need to make the whole Republic a school"  
 "Rehabilitated persons place their faith in the future"  
 "Help epileptics by collaborating with the Anti-epilepsy Association"  
 "Contribute to the country—pay your taxes on time"  
 "Water and energy—factors for progress"  
 "14 September—mail carrier's day"  
 "People's Library Week"

### *Stamps as Icons of National Identity*

Well-designed postage stamps are a natural semiotic vehicle for circulating symbols and icons of national identity and unity. Because they are so ubiquitous, they are seen and handled by the general population, along with money, more than any other instrument of government. But the iconic features of the postage stamp, in contrast to the design of coins and paper money, frequently change, and this permits a variety of images and messages.

The simplest icon of national identity is the country's flag, which appears on many stamps of almost all countries. Sometimes the appearance is subtle, simply using the national colors instead of the flag itself. An example of the significance of the elements of the national flag on a stamp comes from the period of transition from empire to republic in Brazil. With the departure of the last emperor in 1889, the newly formed republic had to design new symbols of national identity which linked to the past without too overt a relationship to the symbols of empire. Obviously, the stamps of the new republic could no longer bear the image of Dom Pedro II. The green and yellow national colors of Brazil did carry over, however, with this official explanation: "(the colors) commemorate the victories and achievements of our army and navy, in the defense of our fatherland, and these colors, independently of the form of our government, represent the perpetuity of our fatherland among the other nations."<sup>22</sup> In the following years stamps of the new republic would carry these green and yellow colors of the flag, with the addition of the positivist slogan "Ordem e Progresso," and twenty-one stars representing the twenty states of the republic and the special municipality of Rio de Janeiro. The decree setting out the guidelines for these designs specified that all previous stamps, and stamps which did not conform to these norms, were illegal and could not be used for postage.

22. *American Philatelist*, "Brazil: Designation of Republic Flag," 4, no. 4 (1899), 108.

Related symbols used on stamps to assist in the forging of national identity included national crests (which frequently involved complex combinations of icons and symbols), *escarapelas* (boutonnieres with the national colors), and simply the colors of the national flag itself. Additional themes of national identity to be found on the postage stamps of Latin America include national flowers (e.g., the orchids of Colombia); other flora and fauna typical of the country; folk dances; patron saints (such as Santa Rosa de Lima and the Virgin of Luján in Argentina); art (most notably the Mexican muralists); and literature.

In this latter category Colombia issued a stamp (#245) honoring not so much the author (Jorge Isaacs) of the famous nineteenth-century romantic novel *María*, as the main character herself, as portrayed in a monument in Cali, near the site of the principal episodes of the novel. Nicaragua's principal poet, Rubén Darío, is also seen as a contributor to the Nicaraguan self-image as a land of poets, and several stamp series have honored the poet, including one that carried allegorical scenes from some of his most famous poems (#C598-605). The swan, icon of the modernist literary movement which Darío led, figures prominently in these series.

Heroic feats and national heroes, usually of the Independence period but sometimes from later epic events, provide another theme for national unity. Since these are events and people which every schoolchild learns to identify and which are also commemorated with public statuary and art, the postage stamp serves to reinforce the impact of the icon. For example, the official decree authorizing a stamp (#662) commemorating the centennial of the death of Argentine independence hero Admiral Guillermo Brown carried this explanation: "Considering: That it is the inescapable duty of the people to exalt the personality of the men who have forged their nationality, selflessly, and with disinterest and sacrifice . . . and in that sense, the figure of Admiral Guillermo Brown, the creator of our Navy, projects itself through time in the memory of Argentine generations, and constitutes a true symbol which must be remembered as an example and stimulus for all of us who bask in the warmth of the Fatherland."<sup>23</sup>

Latin American nations which have undergone a violent and profound revolution, such as Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua, incorporate themes from these struggles into their post-revolutionary postage stamps. In Mexico the portrayal of revolutionary heroes in the murals of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco have provided many graphics for its stamps. Cuba's first stamp after the 1959 victory of Castro's forces portrayed a triumphant bearded guerrilla brandishing a rifle (#613). The Sandinistas in Nicaragua followed much of the same pattern, issuing a commemorative stamp almost each year

23. *Revista de la Sociedad Filatélica Argentina*, "Noticias (Decreto del 2 de enero de 1957)," (January-June 1957), 35.



(#1111, 1163, 1261, 1701), as well as many others in between, extolling the achievements of the revolution.

In those countries with a rich pre-Columbian heritage, this ethnic aspect is also important in forging national unity via the postage stamp. The heritage is especially strong in those nations which once included the major civilizations: Mexico for the Aztecs; Guatemala and Mexico for the Maya; and Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia for the Inca and related groups. In both Mexico and Bolivia twentieth-century revolutions included a deliberate search for pre-Columbian roots after many years of slavish nineteenth-century imitation of European cultural models.

Peru is a special case. The inland city of Cuzco was the center of the Inca empire, but during the colonial period it was the Spanish coastal city of Lima that predominated. The nation's official cultural identity for many years was defined by the white elites of Lima, who looked down on the indigenous and mestizo middle and lower classes. And so when a mestizo middle-class revolutionary government (led by a rather unique group of reformist military officers) took power in 1968, there was a determined effort to reach back to the pre-Columbian roots in search of icons of national identity. A revealing if complicated design appears on a 1970 stamp (#534) whose theme is "The people and the armed forces forging a new Peru." The central iconic figure is a man, but the design is split down the middle. The right side of the man is dressed in Incan clothes and features a sprig of wheat as symbol of agriculture. The left side of the man wears a military helmet and uniform, and the background shows oil wells, symbols of the Peruvian revolution's search for economic independence.

The oil well icon was repeated in another Peruvian stamp of the period (#513–516) which shows a bare-chested worker with an oil well and a large Peruvian flag (figure 6). The stamp is titled "Day of National Dignity" and celebrates the nationalization of the La Brea oilfields which were taken from foreign investors in 1968. The bare-chested figure is perhaps a reference to the Peronista *descamisados* of Argentina, workers who were too poor to own a shirt. Another Peruvian stamp of the period (#519, C246–7) celebrates the Agrarian Reform Law, and shows a *campesino* wearing an Inca-style hat and breaking the chains of economic oppression; the legend is "Land for he who tills it."

Another common theme which involves national icons on postage stamps is the recognition of famous citizens with accomplishments in a number of fields: literature, art, science, medicine, technology, and diplomacy. These people are frequently honored on special anniversaries, but at times there seems to be no special occasion. Some countries (Argentina, for example) issue such series every year or so, and the figures involved are sometimes rather obscure citizens whose accomplishments are little known, even within their own country.

Bushnell notes that there is one category of person severely underrepresented in the postage stamps of Latin America: women.<sup>24</sup> This is curious in light of the fact that the icon personifying many nations is a female figure, such as Britannia for England, Ceres and Marianne for France. No Latin American country has developed a female icon personifying the nation in this same way. Bushnell has made a detailed study of the phenomenon and provides statistical data showing that the percentage of female figures on the stamps of the United States (11 percent) exceeds that of all the Latin American countries, although Argentina during the Perón years, Colombia since 1960, and Revolutionary Cuba come close. Evita Perón is by far the most frequently appearing Latin American woman, thanks to the obligatory Argentine issues shortly after her death, and again when Perón was restored to the Argentine presidency in 1973. In the Colombian case the honor goes to independence heroine Policarpa Salvarrieta and in Cuba the Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova and, more recently, Princess Diana. In U.S. stamp issues the most honored woman has been Spanish Queen Isabel (seven times), followed by Martha Washington (five times.)

### *Economics*

Related to the theme of politics on Latin American postage stamps is the economic theme, especially on stamps intended for circulation abroad, which usually were the higher values, especially on air mail. A letter from the Argentine Postal Director to the Minister of the Interior expressed policy guidelines concerning postage stamps, arguing that economic themes should be stressed because this would serve as free propaganda of unquestioned value, inasmuch as the postage stamp, circulating throughout all the countries of the world, will bring to mind the country of origin and its products and will thus awaken new markets. The same letter goes on to explain that the lower values of a new definitive series, which would be used for over fifteen years (#418–450), would carry nationalistic and internal patriotic propaganda while the higher values (most likely to be used on international mail) would carry economic themes.<sup>25</sup>

Carlos Stoetzer notes that relatively underdeveloped nations whose exports consist of a few primary materials or agricultural and mineral products display these on their international postage stamps, while

24. David Bushnell, "Feminismo Filatélico," *Boletín Americanista*, 37 (47) 77–89 (1997).

25. Antonio Deluca, *Sellos y otros valores postales y telegráficos argentinos: Origen y desarrollo de cada emisión*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Dirección General de Correos y Telegráfos, 1939-1941), 299.

European and other developed countries tended to publicize their industrial fairs and exhibitions.<sup>26</sup> Thus we have the examples of Argentine agricultural products, Chilean and Bolivian mineral wealth, Venezuelan oil, and coffee among the major producers (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and several Central American nations). The coffee stamps are unusually competitive, frequently stressing that “our coffee is the best.”<sup>27</sup>

Postal themes stressing industrialization and modernization can also carry a message of the economic pride a country has in its status as an emerging developed country. And so, along with stamps showing raw materials and commodities for export, we also see themes of factories (especially steel mills), airports, and national airlines. The years of the first Perón administration in Argentina (1945–1955) are notable for the replacement of traditional agricultural themes by themes stressing industrial exhibits, nationalization of the British-owned rail system, shipping, communications, and Aerolíneas Argentinas, the national state-owned airline.

Nationalization of key economic resources which had previously been under foreign control is frequently the object of postal issues and cancellations, such as this one when the Perón Administration nationalized the rails in 1948: “The Railroads are now Argentine! They now form part of the national patrimony.” Other examples of nationalizations which were celebrated with postage stamps include Allende’s nationalization of the Chilean copper industry, and nationalization of oil holdings in Peru (noted previously), Venezuela, and Brazil.

Stamps have also frequently been used internally to stimulate economic production. The Peronista Five-Year Plans were the subject of a series of attractive and well-designed stamps and cancellation slogans, which included this item: “An Argentine who knows the Second Five-Year Plan can carry it out under all circumstances—Perón.”

At times postage stamps can get caught up with rather unusual attempts to promote certain products. In 1998 Brazil issued a stamp (#2693) which promoted a mango juice drink produced under the brand name “Frisco.” The iconography of the stamp shows both raw mangos and the finished Frisco drink in a glass. The stamp was labeled “Promoção Frisco,” and involved a raffle described on a popular television program. To enter the raffle, entrants were to send a letter (using the mango stamp), and the winners would be drawn from those received in a given time period.

26. Carlos Stoetzer, *Postage Stamps as Propaganda* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs, 1953), 7–8.

27. H. D. Mitchell, “Philatelic Coffee Advertising in Costa Rica, 1921–23,” *Nineteenth American Philatelic Congress Book* (Yorktown, VA: American Philatelic Congress, 1953), 115–124.

Brazil also had a unique entry in the philatelic competition to advertise its coffee internationally: a stamp that smelled like coffee and timed to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rio de Janeiro Coffee Center of Commerce.<sup>28</sup> The design features a spoon loaded with coffee beans, and the aroma is conveyed with coffee resins added during the printing process. This was not the first time a Brazilian stamp featured an aroma: in 1999 a series of four stamps (#2717–2720) featuring animals and a burnt tree trunk were released to draw attention to the importance of preventing forest fires. The aroma used in this series was burnt wood.

Also unusual was the Colombian experience with a United Nations stamp and first day cover envelope in 1986. The project involved honoring each member state of the UN with a stamp and commemorative envelope noting the principal exports of that nation. The envelope's notation stated that Colombia's main industry was agriculture, "with coffee, cocaine and marijuana being the principal crops."<sup>29</sup> The Colombian UN delegation protested vigorously, and the envelope was cancelled. It had been prepared by a commercial first day cover cachet company by someone with a peculiar sense of humor, and the UN Secretariat officially disavowed responsibility for the offending item.

A series of six Argentine postage stamps in 1998 (#2006–2011) had a clear international political message as well as an economic one. The six stamps featured the principal Argentine breeds of beef cattle, and all carried the slogan "Argentine Republic: A country free of hoof-and-mouth disease" (*aftosa* in Spanish). The significance was that for many years frozen Argentine beef, reputed to be the best in the world, could not enter U.S. and other markets because the U.S. Department of Agriculture (with some lobbying from the U.S. cattle industry) argued that it was contaminated with the highly infectious hoof-and-mouth disease. By 1998, Argentina had finally managed to convince U.S. authorities that the country was free of the disease, and the importation of Argentine beef was ultimately authorized.

Probably the most prolific category of economic stamps is that involving tourism. These stamps have multiple purposes. The most obvious is to advertise tourist attractions nationally and abroad in the hopes of stimulating that industry. But they also serve to strengthen national pride in the natural beauties of one's country and presumably create a positive image of the nation abroad. In the philatelic collectors' market they are also a source of income for the producing nation since they are usually well designed, attractive, and with high face value.

28. *Linn's Stamp News*, "Brazilian stamps to smell like coffee," 24 December 2001, 2.

29. *Los Angeles Times*, "Colombia Stamp Tribute Too Candid – U.N. Rejects It," 1 November 1986, sec. I, page 4.

At times, tourism stamps border on the commercial, and one must wonder about the motives and lobbying behind a particular issue, such as the Dominican Republic or Venezuelan hotel issues, which featured the top tourist hotels of the country, readily identifiable by location and chain. Other stamps have shown specific and identifiable commercial tourist attractions and cruise ships, such as the Malvinas/Falkland Islands set of 1993 (#584–587.)<sup>30</sup> Tourist stamps, of course, always stress the positive, respectable, and beautiful side of the industry, becoming something like idealized miniature posters promoting the nation's principal attractions. Tourist stamps never show some of seamier aspects (such as the tourism sex industry), and rarely gambling. Monaco is an exception to the latter, and so was Argentina when it featured one of the world's major casinos in Mar del Plata.

An important subcategory of tourism philately is that involved in major sports events such as the Olympics and World Cup Soccer. As one might expect, the host country for any such event places major philatelic emphasis on the occasion for some time before the date in order to publicize it and hopefully draw national and international attention to its significance. Frequently countries which produce medal-winning teams or individuals honor them with stamps. Jumping on the bandwagon, even states with no real connection to the event (or no possibility of winning medals) produce a number of these stamps with the hope (frequently realized) that topical collectors of sports philately will purchase them. There are a number of specialized journals devoted to sport stamps, and several doctoral dissertations have been written on the subject. The stamps issued by Mexico for the 1968 summer Olympics (e.g., #981–985) and the 1970 World Soccer Cup games (C350–351, C372–374) in Mexico City are now considered classic issues because of their historic nature, and especially their original and highly stylized designs (figure 7). From a semiotic perspective, the use of stylized designs requires the reduction of an icon to its minimalist essentials. The images portrayed on these stamps are attractive to many collectors and sports enthusiasts because they tend to use action-filled and attractive graphics showing the sports, the athletes, their attire, sport facilities, awards, and tourist attractions. There is a considerable collectors' market for these stamps, most of which are never used in the mail and thus represent an important source of revenue for the issuing nation.

Stamps celebrating soccer, and especially the World Cup, are regularly produced by those Latin American nations such as Brazil and

30. On a personal note, the author traveled to the Falklands/Malvinas and Antarctica on two of the "expedition cruise tourist ships" shown in the series: *Explorer* and *World Discoverer*.

Argentina with some hope of reaching the end stages of the competition. And when a country hosts the World Cup, and wins it, the output is multiplied. The most politically significant sport stamp series was associated with the 1978 World Cup held in Buenos Aires, when a dictatorial military government, anxious to present a positive image to the world and also to distract its own people, used the games for political purposes. This included a large number of postage stamps and souvenir sheets (#1147–48, 1179, 1180–84, 1188–91, 1192), culminating in a rapidly issued overprint (#1193) proclaiming “ARGENTINA/CAMPEÓN.” The Argentine stamps and philatelic souvenir sheets of this period feature stylized soccer players, stadiums, and tourist views of each of venues where games were played. Politics intruded into the stamp production process: a preliminary design of the 1978 World Cup stamps had been prepared towards the end of the second Perón era in 1976, but when the military government examined the designs they felt the stamps contained Peronista political symbols and replaced them with a more nationalistic symbol showing cupped hands in blue and white holding a soccer ball.<sup>31</sup>

One final economic aspect with political implications concerns the way postage stamps reflect inflation, both to a national and international audience. The postage required to move a letter from one country to another is usually a fairly accurate and up-to-date indicator of inflation because these postal rates are set by international agreements, and are measured against a stable currency such as the dollar, pound, or mark. A country which is suffering from inflation must raise the face value of stamps or lose money in the international postal system.

Some of the rates of inflation suffered by Latin American nations are dramatic: Nicaragua, 36,000 percent in 1988; and for the same year Argentina 4,500 percent, Peru 2,800 percent and Brazil 1,800 percent. Michael Laurence describes how hyperinflation affected the Peruvian postage rate for a small newsletter: in late 1988, 75 *intis*; October 1989, 1,200 *intis*; February 1990, 7,000 *intis*; June 1989, 13,500 *intis*; August 1989, 230,000 *intis*. By this time the inflation rate had outpaced the stamps, and metered postage was used instead, with the newsletter requiring several passes through the meter because the metering system had only five digits for a maximum of 99,999 *intis*.<sup>32</sup>

One international aspect of hyperinflation reflected in postage stamps is the image it creates of economic instability and government irresponsibility.

31. For commentary on the stamps and political aspects of the soccer World Cup, see *New York Times*, 19 March 1978, II, p. 42, and Tom Ryder, “World Cup Soccer,” *Minkus Stamp Journal* XIII, no. 3 (1978), 6.

32. Michael Laurence, “Modern Inflation Covers,” *Linn’s Stamp News*, 15 October 1990, 3.

bility, sometimes with political implications. We can illustrate this with an Argentine stamp issued on the first anniversary (April 1983) of the disastrous invasion of the Malvinas/Falklands. The large-format stamp (#1411) features a map of Argentina and the South Atlantic Ocean, including the Malvinas/Falklands, South Georgia, and South Sandwich islands. In the center of the stamp there is an Argentine flag with the inscription "1982 – 2 April – 1983. First recovery of the Malvinas, Georgias, and South Sandwich islands." The implication of the "first recovery" comment was that a second (and presumably more successful) recovery would be forthcoming at some future date. Semiotic analysis suggests that this stamp uses powerful icons: an Argentine flag and map showing the disputed islands as being Argentine and linked by a provocative typographic slogan. The slogan was the object of some sarcastic commentaries, one of which noted that the face value of the stamp (20,000 pesos) was an indicator that Argentina had some grave economic as well as political and military problems which it had to resolve before it would be taken seriously on the world scene again.<sup>33</sup> A few months later the old peso was replaced by a new monetary unit and the postage rate was down to single digits.

#### INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND LATIN AMERICAN POSTAGE STAMPS<sup>34</sup>

This section presents a few illustrative examples of Latin American postage stamps which have had an impact on international relations. Omitted are the postage stamps of many nations with Antarctic interests in the South American quadrant of that continent, as well as the rich vein of postage stamps involved in the Anglo-Argentine Malvinas/Falklands dispute.

Many Latin American postage stamps with international themes are non-controversial, involving a nation's support of an international organization or a commemoration of the visit of a friendly head of state. Others, however, are linked to inter-state strains, usually over border and sovereignty issues. In these far more interesting cases the postage stamp frequently plays a political or propaganda role in favor of the country's position on the issue. The most dramatic and effective of these postage stamps involve maps showing the issuing country's claim and demonstrate the impact of a well-designed postage stamp, using a map as the iconographic sign illustrating the country's views and the semiotics of a powerful national symbol (the map of a country). Sometimes the

33. Discussions at the XI Latin American Studies Association Congress panel on "Power Politics and Geography in Latin America," Mexico City, September 1983.

34. This section relies on the author's past work on conflicts in Latin America, especially *Geopolitics and Conflict in South America: Quarrels Among Neighbors* (New York: Praeger, 1985). The work of Nuessel, *op. cit.*, was also helpful.

problem arises through innocent mistakes in the drawing of maps, but the injured country in such circumstances is still likely to be suspicious and react accordingly. Some examples follow.

#### *Dominican Republic–Haiti*

For a variety of historical and ethnic reasons relations have never been particularly good between these two Caribbean countries which share the Island of Hispaniola. There has also been some confusion regarding the exact demarcation of the border between the two countries.

Therefore, when the Dominican Republic issued map stamps of the Island of Hispaniola in 1900 (#111–119) the Haitians were quick to notice that the boundary ran quite a bit further west across the island than they believed should be the case. The Haitian government protested via diplomatic channels, but the Dominican reaction was to send troops to the border area to push out any Haitian citizens in the disputed zone. Diplomatic pressure resulted in the Dominican's withdrawal of the stamp, but large numbers of the stamp had already circulated, so the impact was substantial. A few years later, in 1928, the Dominican Republic's first air mail stamp (#C1) also raised questions about the border shown on the map.

The borders of the 1900 Dominican map did have a historical basis: they roughly follow the line set by the Treaty of Aranjuez between Spain and France in 1777.<sup>35</sup> But later agreements moved the border to the East, and Haiti had legitimate reason to be concerned that the map stamp could be an attempt to reopen the issue. The border issue was finally resolved in a 1929 border treaty after arbitration by Brazil, Venezuela, and the United States (which had occupying troops in both countries at various periods in the early part of the twentieth century). Both countries promptly issued stamps commemorating the signing (DR #249–253; Haiti #321) but used portraits of their presidents as the stamps' icons, thus avoiding the more provocative icons of maps of the border.

#### *US–Panama–Nicaragua*

One of the most enduring philatelic myths (apparently partially true) is how a postage stamp helped change the location of the Isthmian canal from Nicaragua to Panama. After the disastrous French attempt to build a sea-level canal under the leadership of Ferdinand de Lesseps, there were two competing plans being considered by the U.S. Congress, and

35. Damilo A. Mueses, "Falsificaciones de la Serie del Mapita," *El Filotélico*, #85, 1991, 3.



supporters of each mounted an intense lobbying effort. The Panama route would roughly parallel the old French canal, but with locks to avoid the engineering problems de Lesseps encountered. The Nicaraguan route, although longer, relied on using an existing river and Lake Nicaragua, and was thus easier from a technical and engineering perspective. As the U.S. Senate and House neared a vote in mid-1902, it appeared the Nicaraguan lobby was going to be favored. One argument being used by the Panama advocates was the presence of active volcanoes in Nicaragua, in contrast to the more stable geology of Panama. Concern over volcanoes was heightened when Mount Pelée on Martinique erupted in May 1902, killing some 30,000 inhabitants of the city of Sainte-Pierre. The Nicaraguan lobby argued that this was not relevant to their country and that there were no active volcanoes which could endanger a possible canal. Unfortunately, a 1900 Nicaraguan postage stamp (#121-133) showed volcano Momotombo on Lake Nicaragua in eruption, and this was seized by Panamanian lobbyist Philippe Bunau-Varilla as a powerful weapon to be used against the Nicaraguan lobbyists.

Bunau-Varilla describes how he mounted his Momotombo volcano stamps on sheets of paper, writing at the top "Postage Stamps of the Republic of Nicaragua," and below the stamps, "An official witness of the volcanic activity of Nicaragua." He was pleased to note that the volcano was identified as Momotombo, and that the wharf pictured in the foreground was the one destroyed by Momotombo a month earlier. The stamps were distributed to the senators three days before the vote, and the effectiveness of Bunau-Varilla's bold stroke can be seen in the comment by one senator that it was unreasonable to put the canal "in a country which had taken as its emblem on its postage stamps a volcano in eruption."<sup>36</sup> The Senate vote was forty-two to thirty-four in favor of the Panama route. Semiotics would identify this as an illustration of the negative power of an icon (the volcano) and the index (the name of the country) when linked together and exploited for a political purpose.

A few days later Bunau-Varilla repeated his postage stamp effort with the House of Representatives. He had to go to New York to obtain enough Nicaraguan volcano stamps, but he eventually was able to round up 500 of them and had a brief pamphlet printed up explaining the significance of the erupting Momotombo. Upon returning to Washington Bunau-Varilla had the stamps distributed, and on the following day the Spooner Bill (favoring Panama) was adopted with only eight dissenting votes.

It is difficult to assess the effect of Bunau-Varilla's stamp lobbying effort. He was not a modest man, and he understandably claimed that it

36. Philippe Bunau-Varilla, *Panama: the Creation, Destruction and the Resurrection* (New York: McBride, Nast & Co, 1914), 247.

was decisive. David McCullough, in his authoritative history of the Panama Canal, has this to say:

How much the little postage stamp really mattered, whether it actually changed any votes, is impossible to say. Probably it did not, Bunau-Varilla's assertions notwithstanding. His diagrammatic pamphlet probably had a more telling effect. Still, the stamp was an inspired bit of propaganda . . .<sup>37</sup>

### *Belize-Guatemala*

Stamps were involved in the long-lasting dispute over Guatemala's claim to part (and sometimes all) of the former colony of British Honduras, independent since 1981 as the country of Belize. Documents available in the National Archives of the United States reflect concern by American embassy officials over the way Guatemalan postage stamps were being used for political purposes.<sup>38</sup> The principal architect behind this effort was Guatemalan President Ubico, who during his 1931–1944 presidency, made several attempts to pressure Great Britain to give up her colony as claimed by Guatemala. As part of this effort Ubico ordered the preparation of map stamps (#292–296) that showed Belize as part of Guatemala (figure 9). British Foreign Office protests led to the withdrawal of the stamp within months, but the stamp was to make a significant reappearance a decade later when it was reissued in 1948 as part of a renewed campaign to pressure the British. A less subtle philatelic renewal of the dispute took the form of a 1967 Guatemalan stamp (#396–8) in which the icon is a map of Guatemala (including Belize) with the blue-white-blue colors of the Guatemalan flag emblazoned on the "greater Guatemala" which would include Belize; the legend on the stamps reads "Belice es de Guatemala." As in the Argentine Malvinas/Falklands case we have the powerful combination of iconic and typographic semiotic symbols: the national map showing the disputed territory and carrying a provocative and nationalistic slogan.

### *Venezuela-Guyana*

This situation is somewhat analogous to that of Guatemala and Belize. The dispute goes back to differences between an independent Venezuela and the colony of British Guyana over the delimitation of the border in the so-called Essequibo Territory. The maximum Venezuelan claim is to all territory west of the Essequibo River, which Great Britain refused

37. David G. McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: the Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977), 325.

38. James G. Bradsher, "The Diplomatic Story Behind a 1939 Guatemalan Stamp," *American Philatelist*, October 1984, 1024–6.

to accept. In 1896 Venezuela issued a set of map stamps showing their Essequibo claim (#137–141.) This is believed to be the first use of a postage stamp map for propaganda involving disputed territories.<sup>39</sup> A few years later both sides accepted arbitration, which generally favored the British. Venezuela objected to the award based on a series of alleged irregularities, and the dispute continued.

As Britain moved toward granting Guyana independence in the mid-1960s the Venezuelans intensified their diplomatic and philatelic efforts to validate their claim to the Essequibo region. In 1965 an impressively detailed and colorful set of six historic map stamps (figure 10), accompanied by fancy souvenir sheets (#886–888, C905–907) showed various boundary lines in the region which indicated how Great Britain had been expanding westward at the expense of first Spain and then Venezuela over the years. The stamps carried the legend “Venezuela. Claim to its Guayana.” Later Venezuelan stamps (#1056 in 1973) showed the Essequibo claim in striped shading to indicate that the territory was still being disputed.

Guyana’s independence in May 1966 was accompanied by stamps (#20–23) with the new flag set against a background map of the old maximum British claim, now converted into Guyana’s. The Guyanese never attempted to match the details of the Venezuelan map stamps, limiting themselves to a silhouette of the nation’s territory with the slogan “Essequibo is Ours” (#336–340, 341–349, 391.)

### *Peru-Ecuador*

This border dispute goes back to the colonial period, when the Spanish authorities were not particularly precise about the boundaries between the different administrative units that eventually became separate independent countries. In many cases laying out boundary markers on the ground was extremely difficult in key areas where mountainous jungle terrain predominates.<sup>40</sup> The region in dispute is the vast Oriente region which would double the size of Ecuador if it were to make its claim good; it would also give it access to the Amazon River and the possible oil fields in the region. Peru and Ecuador fought a brief but bitter war in 1941–42 in which Peru got the upper hand, and was able to persuade a number of hemisphere nations to support its claim, formalized in the 1942 Protocol of Rio de Janeiro. Ecuador has long argued that the 1942 Rio Protocol was forced on it by the larger nations of the hemisphere (including the United States and Brazil) because they wanted to

39. Ernest A. Kehr, “The Great Paper Wars,” *Scott’s Stamp Monthly* 1982, no. 1, 124.

40. Jack Child, *Geopolitics and Conflict in South America: Quarrels Among Neighbors* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 92–98.

quickly resolve the issue prior to involvement in World War II. In 1960 Ecuador formally proclaimed the Rio Protocol null and void, and a year later issued stamps (#C377–379) showing their maximum claim in the Oriente region, with the slogan “Ecuador ha sido, es y será país Amazónico.” Peru promptly issued large-format map stamps (#C175–177) showing the disputed border region with an echo of the Ecuadorean slogan: “Estas tierras y estos ríos han sido, son y serán peruanos,” and the added words: “Frontera fijada por el Protocolo de Rio de Janeiro de 1942.”

Each year around the time of the anniversary of the 1941 war, tensions increased between military units facing each other across the border, and fighting broke out in 1981 and more seriously in 1995. Both countries issued postage stamps honoring their fighting men. Peru’s was a large souvenir sheet featuring their soldiers in the conflict (#1194 in 1998.) In 1981 Ecuador’s “National Defense” stamp (#1010-11) a soldier is shown charging against a background map of Ecuador’s maximum territorial claim. After the 1995 fighting, Ecuador issued a dramatic series of stamps showing a soldier at the front writing to children, a hand holding the flag of Ecuador, and an infantryman on guard in the wilderness (#1363–65.)

After the 1995 series of clashes an intense negotiation and peace-keeping effort was launched by the “guarantor countries,” including the United States and Brazil. Their efforts reached fruition in a 1998 peace treaty, which appears to have settled the conflict. Both countries issued commemorative stamps, and the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry’s press release stated that “the issuing of these postage stamps attempts to let the world know of the fruits of peace and development which both countries are embarked on.”<sup>41</sup> The Peruvian stamp (#1202) also honored the guarantor countries by including their flags as philatelic icons.

### *Bolivia-Peru-Chile*

These three countries were involved in the “War of the Pacific” (1879–1883) in which a Peruvian-Bolivian alliance was decisively defeated by a numerically inferior but highly motivated and well-organized Chilean military force. The conflict proved disastrous for Peru, which lost two provinces (Tacna was later returned, while Arica stayed in Chilean hands), and especially for Bolivia, which permanently lost Antofagasta Province and thus its outlet to the sea.

Many of the military events of the conflict have been represented on postage stamps of the three countries, and even the losers in the War found solace in the heroic acts of their armies and navies as they went

41. “Ecuador-Peru emiten sellos,” Spanish Newswire Services, 23 May 2001.

down in defeat (see, for example, Peru's long series commemorating the centennial of the war, #687–698.) One of the most colorful episodes commemorated by stamps concerns the final words of Bolivian Colonel Eduardo Abaroa, who, when the Chileans demanded his surrender at the 1879 battle of Tapáter, answered “¿Rendirme? ¡Que se rinda tu abuela . . . !” (“Surrender? Your grandmother should surrender . . . !”) The ellipsis replaces a crude expletive, which has gone into Bolivian folklore.<sup>42</sup>

As the advancing Chilean forces moved into Bolivian and Peruvian territory, the conflict generated much postal history, that branch of philately which concerns itself with the letters and postmarks as well as the actual stamps. When the Chileans captured a city they frequently used Chilean stamps cancelled with the name of the captured city, and the progress of the Chilean army up the coast to Lima can thus be documented by this postal history.

Bolivia has made the most consistent use of postage stamps to press for a return of its lost territories, or at least for an outlet to the sea. In 1925 a Bolivian stamp (#155) shows a condor facing to the right (presumably to the west) and the legend “Hacia el Mar.” On the Centennial of the war (1979) Bolivia issued a commemorative series labeled “Centennial of our captive sea-coast.” One stamp featured Abaroa, a second the arms of the lost Littoral Province (with suggestive icons of a sailing ship, an anchor, and the sea). The third stamp had a complicated design featuring a woman dressed in the colors of the Bolivian flag and chained to a wall painted with a map showing Bolivia's lost coast. She struggles to break the chains, but is not successful. Once again we have the semiotic combination of several icons designed to evoke strong emotions: the Bolivian map and flag, a crude but respected popular hero (Colonel Abaroa), and a Bolivian woman seeking the outlet to the sea, but chained by Chilean intransigence.

### *Chile-France Easter Island (Rapa-Nui) Stamps*

The Chilean-French contretemps over stamps of Easter Island (or themes related to the Islands) has something of a comic-opera tone, but nevertheless reflects the use of postage stamps to assert and defend sovereignty claims.

Chile has often been somewhat defensive about its possession of Easter Island, in part because of the lack of real ethnic or cultural links between the native population (which is Polynesian) and South American Chile. The sensitivity is also compounded by the distance factor, since Easter Island (also known as Rapa-Nui) is about 2300 miles from the

42. Albert F. Kunfe, *Who's Who on the Postage Stamps of Bolivia* (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1959).

Chilean coast; Easter Island's closest neighbor is actually the British Pitcairn Island group, about 1000 miles away. Chile has issued an impressive number of stamps (over thirty) with Easter Island themes. They can be interpreted as a reflection of the sensitivity of Easter Island sovereignty, as well as a reminder to Chileans and foreigners alike that the island is a Chilean possession. For examples, see: #347; 413; 452; 587; 791–794.

The philatelic dispute with France began with a set of French Polynesia stamps (#534–437) celebrating the Maohi people of the Pacific. One of the stamps shows a Maohi man of Easter Island (#535.) A press release from French Polynesia notes that it was the Maohi, not the Europeans, who settled the islands of the South Pacific; it then refers to “the famous Polynesian triangle, the corners of which are Easter Island, the Hawaiian Islands, and the two large islands of New Zealand.”<sup>43</sup> Apparently Chilean officials interpreted the stamps as a veiled challenge to Chilean sovereignty over Easter Island, and protested vigorously through press and diplomatic channels, sending three warships to the Islands; the stamps were withdrawn from sale by the French authorities. However, a year later French Polynesia issued another stamp (#560) with a Maohi theme showing a woman on Easter Island with Easter Island *moais* in the background. Again the Chileans protested and the French withdrew the stamp; the Chileans then issued a pair of stamps (#1010–1011) labeled “Isla de Pascua. Territorio Insular Chileno.” The semiotics of this exchange of iconic stamps included ethnic themes used by the French to possibly undermine the Chilean claim to Easter Island.

Some observers were unable to take the incident very seriously. The *London Daily Telegraph*, for example, noted that the Chileans had sent warships to the area, “apparently fearing an invasion of its Pacific paradise by a force of French postmen.” The French were not spared ridicule either: a French consumer organization said that if the French postal administration ever invaded Easter Island, they would, like the mail they deliver, probably get there late and in damaged condition.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Brazil-Bolivia (Acre) and the “Amazonia” Stamps*

A short-lived rebellion in the Acre region bordering Brazil and Bolivia led to postage stamps which circulated among the rebels and can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize their rebellion. The Acre area was in the heartland of the Amazon rubber boom in the late nineteenth

43. Zinn's *Stamp News*, 15 March 1993, 8. See also “La Filatelia al día,” *El Filotélico*, 1991, no. 85, 7.

44. Zinn's *Stamp News*, 23 December 1991, 20. The issue of the *London Daily Telegraph* was 2 September 1991.

century. Although part of Bolivia, the region had been penetrated by large numbers of migrant (and fiercely independent) Brazilian rubber tappers. The Bolivian government attempted to gain control over the rubber tappers by setting up a customs house and taxing rubber that was being shipped to Brazil. The rubber tappers, with covert Brazilian support, revolted and were able to successfully resist Bolivian military attempts to crush them. The end result was the annexation of the Acre region by Brazil following the payment of two million pounds to the Bolivians.<sup>45</sup> In the period between the outbreak of the revolt in 1899 and the Brazilian annexation in 1902, there was an attempt by the rubber tappers to set up an independent nation-state of Acre, to include the issuance of stamps denominated in Brazilian currency (reis), and labeled "Estado Independente do Acre."<sup>46</sup> The nation-state disappeared as an independent entity (along with the stamps) when Acre was transferred to Brazil in 1902; it was formally admitted into the Brazilian Union as a state in 1909.

#### *Bolivia-Paraguay (The Chaco War)*

The 1932–35 Chaco War was the bloodiest twentieth-century conflict in Latin America and involved the dispute between these two countries surrounding the border area of the Chaco. The roots of the conflict, as is true for a number of others, lie in the ill-defined Spanish colonial boundaries, fueled by the perception that a valuable resource (oil) might be found in the region. The conflict is also linked to two devastating nineteenth-century wars: the War of the Pacific, which left Bolivia resentful over the loss of its Pacific outlet, and the War of the Triple Alliance, in which Paraguay was devastated in a conflict against an Argentine-Brazilian-Uruguayan alliance. An apparent factor in this conflict was that Bolivia viewed the riverine system of Paraguay/Argentina as a possible Atlantic Ocean outlet which might replace its lost access to the Pacific.

As the *New York Times* noted, "the war between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Chaco district was not caused by stamps, but stamps with maps did grievously aggravate the situation."<sup>47</sup> The first of these stamps was a Bolivian map (1928, #1910), which clearly labeled the disputed area as "Chaco Boliviano." This combination of nationalistic semiotic icons also

45. Brian Moorhouse, "Bolivia and Brazil: The Two Sides of the Acre Dispute," *The Mainsheet*, November 1994, 8.

46. Jose J. Marques Marinho, *Amazonia: Nossos Sellos* (Manaus, Brazil: published by author, 1981), 14–23; Brian Moorhouse, "Bolivia and Brazil: The Two Sides of the Acre Dispute," *The Mainsheet*, November 1994, 8.

47. *New York Times*, 12 September 1937, Sec. 12, p. 8.

appeared in stamps of 1931 (#200–204) and 1935 (#219–232.) Paraguay's response was large-format map stamps in 1932 and 1935 (#323, 324) showing the same area as "Chaco Paraguayo," and carrying the slogan: "El Chaco Boreal ha sido, es y será del Paraguay," which is the same wording used on stamps in the Peruvian-Ecuadorian dispute. Once again the semiotic combination of maps tied to jingoistic and nationalistic slogans served the political purposes of the two warring nations.

After the war ended, thanks to intensive negotiating efforts by a number of countries, including the United States, Argentina, and Brazil, both sides (but especially Paraguay) issued stamps celebrating the peace and honoring the mediating nations. Paraguay's long series was especially well done and included portraits of the presidents of the nations involved (#355–361; C113–C21.) The high value of the series featured a map of the new boundaries, which generally favored Paraguay, and the slogan: "An honorable peace is more valuable than all military triumphs." Bolivia, which was once again feeling the sting of military defeats and territorial losses, was apparently less anxious to celebrate the peace with postage stamps.

#### CONCLUSION

This somewhat unorthodox use of an approach inspired by one sub-discipline of linguistics (semiotics) provides a different perspective which can make a contribution to the inter-disciplinary scholarly and pedagogical study of Latin America.

The esthetic element is present if one considers that many well-designed stamps can in and of themselves be seen as icons of popular culture. Popular culture as used here is broadly defined, since stamps are products of governments, and not the people. But the icons are seen and handled repeatedly by large numbers of people, and in that sense constitute "popular culture." New postage stamps, with an impressive range of subject matter, appear almost monthly in each of the hemisphere's thirty-five nations and a few colonies. Stamps of these colonies frequently have historic and political significance, such as those featuring the Malvinas/Falklands.

Many stamps illustrate what a given nation or culture thinks is of value. Because postage stamps are government documents and thus in the public domain, they offer the scholar, teacher, or illustrator of Latin American themes a large number of representative (although sometimes biased) icons of popular culture. Most can be inexpensively acquired and easily reproduced using a digital scanner. This technique permits considerable manipulation of the stamps' images (especially in size, focus, contrast, and color) and organization with presentation software such as PowerPoint.



The semiotic approach used here is based on a typology developed by the father of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, who classified symbols in a semiotic “trichotomy” of index, icon, and symbol. This classification, and combinations of all three, are applied here to a series of Latin American postage stamps to show what messages these stamps can carry, and what impact they can have.