



# A HISTORY OF MODERN LATIN AMERICA

1800 TO THE PRESENT

Third Edition

TERESA A. MEADE

WILEY Blackwell

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A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present, Third Edition

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*Albert S. Lindemann*

# **A History of Modern Latin America**

## **1800 to the Present**

THIRD EDITION

Teresa A. Meade

**WILEY** Blackwell

This third edition first published 2022

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*Edition History:* John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (2e, 2016), Blackwell Publishing Ltd, (1e, 2010)

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*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

*Editorial Office*

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Name: Meade, Teresa A., 1948– author.

Title: A history of modern Latin America : 1800 to the present / Teresa Meade.

Description: Third edition. | Hoboken, NJ : Wiley, 2022. | Series: Concise history of the modern world | Wiley-Blackwell published first edition in 2011 and second edition in 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022017474 (print) | LCCN 2022017475 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119719168 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119719212 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119719243 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Latin America--History--19th century. | Latin America--History--20th century. | Latin America--History--21st century.

Classification: LCC F1410 .M433 2022 (print) | LCC F1410 (ebook) | DDC 980/.02--dc23/eng/20220413

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022017474>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022017475>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © Natural disasters caused by climate changes in Guatemala © 1988–2015 Arte Maya Tz'utuhil

*For the best sister ever*  
*Martha G. Meade (1957-2012)*

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## Preface to the Third Edition

In the painting on the cover of this third edition of *A History of Modern Latin America: 1800 to the Present*, Mayan artist Diego Isaias Hernandez Mendez shows desperate people clinging to rooftops, trees, floating sheets of corrugated tin, scraps of debris, and each other as floodwaters engulf them. While fictional, the painting could as easily be depicting a real life event, and maybe it is. Entitled “*Disastres Naturales por Cambios Climaticos en Guatemala*” (Natural Disasters Caused by Climate Changes in Guatemala), the painting is one in a series from Isaias whose “subjects cover the small mishaps of daily life to horrific natural disasters” ([artemaya.com/galisa.php](http://artemaya.com/galisa.php)). Ironically, natural disasters have become nearly as commonplace in Central America as the mishaps of daily life. Isaias’s gallery features works depicting the destruction from tropical storms Stan in 2005 and Agatha in 2010, and torrential rains caused by the short-lived but devastating 2011 cyclone 12E in Guatemala, interspersed among scenes of an accident involving a dog, a scene of road kill resulting from opossums in the road, and an image of joyful children in a game of sliding. His most elaborate painting is a chaotic mélange of adults, children, animals, and buildings being tossed about on land and sea, entitled “Natural Disaster Signaling the Changing Climate in the Maya World.”

In his art Isaias shows a reality that many in the United States seek to ignore: climate change is real and its effects are killing and displacing some of the poorest people in the hemisphere. Given no other recourse, and for the most part having contributed little themselves to warming the planet, the people of Central America are forced to leave their

homelands and head north. The effects of climate change are not new; reports exist back into the twentieth century that show mass migrations due to drought and inclement weather episodes. Migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean are following a historical playbook. Many European immigrants came to America in the nineteenth century because of disastrous climatic events at home: drought in Southern Italy, crop failures in Northern Europe, and, most spectacularly, the potato famine in Ireland that forced millions of Irish peasants to emigrate, the majority to the United States. Interestingly, the Irish – Catholic and impoverished – were met with hostility from the dominant Protestant elite, just as the current batch of refugees from the poorest countries of the hemisphere, and the world, are finding the doors of Europe and the United States slammed in their faces.

After two devastating hurricanes, Eta and Iota, in late 2020, over 10,000 people attempted to migrate north. The hurricanes struck the coast of Nicaragua within 15 miles of each other, two weeks apart. The storms displaced 600,000 Hondurans and, along with rains and flooding, affected 6 million people. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, the decade-long drought that has destroyed 80 percent of the crops in the “Dry Corridor” that stretches from southern Mexico to Costa Rica has caused 3.5 million people to live in food insecurity. Migrants interviewed on the road to Mexico and the US border report that they have no means of supporting their families or keeping them safe. The effects of climate change have driven them off the land and into cities where drug gangs and violence leave few untouched. In 2019 the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that climate-change-based disasters have displaced 24 million people across the globe, affecting Latin America, southern Africa, and south Asia the most. Weather conditions that have always existed have

worsened. For example, 2020 had the largest number of Atlantic hurricanes on record, striking areas of the Caribbean and the Central American isthmus that were already enduring poverty, crime, and hunger.

Along with accelerated climate change, another difference in many Latin American countries has been a decline in state-sponsored welfare programs for the general population. These programs were the hallmark of the Pink Tide reform governments of the late twentieth century. In the past decade, a number of the progressive governments have been replaced by right-wing populists, most notably the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Bolsonaro's ultra-rightist rhetoric and incompetent handling of the coronavirus pandemic that has killed over 600,000 Brazilian people from early 2020 to 2022 (so far) has damaged his chances of winning re-election in late 2022. At this writing Bolsonaro's own health problems may prevent him from seeking another term. In two notable cases, Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega and Venezuela under Nicolas Maduro, progressive leaders adopted authoritarian methods, severely undercutting the leftist gains of the Sandinistas in the case of Nicaragua or the Bolivarian Missions of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) and Alberto Fernández in Argentina moderated their reform policies, especially as they compromised with the debt-servicing demands of international capital. Signs of popular discontent with authoritarian regimes are visible in several countries that have rejected conservative candidates for leftists: Xiomara Castro, the first woman president of Honduras, who has proposed a universal basic income for poor families; Luis Arce who won office in Bolivia as a candidate of the leftist MAS party founded by Evo Morales; and Gustavo Petro, a former member of the urban guerrilla movement is favored to become president of Colombia. The

most decided leftist victory was in Chile, where Gabriel Boric, a socialist, roundly defeated the far-right candidate, José Antonio Kast, in the December 2021 run-off. Capturing 56 percent of the vote, the 36-year-old former student leader set forth an ambitious program of attacking income inequality, advancing social programs and rights for women, and protecting Chile's natural environment. The contrast between Boric and Bolsonaro could hardly be starker.

In terms of future prospects, Latin American economies are facing the dilemma of economic dependency on the export of agricultural and mineral commodities to the insatiable Chinese market, while upholding environmental standards. Scientists point to the destruction of animal habitats, namely the depletion of the tropical rainforests (especially the Amazon), as a key factor in the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronaviruses spread in the jump from animals to humans, a process that has grown exponentially in the past few decades as tropical habitats have been decimated. Not only is the source of the pandemic fully understood as a part of human-caused climate change, but the solution as well relies on human agency. The future of Latin America, and indeed the planet, considering the immense forest and jungles in both countries, will hinge on whose vision wins out over the next decades. Climate change affects the poorer countries, and the poorest areas within those countries, far more than the wealthier, energy-squandering societies. The inequality is everywhere, and unless addressed, concertedly and intelligently, the balance between rich and poor, between the United States and Europe and the Global South, will become impossible to manage.

After an introductory summary of the history of the most recognizable features of Latin American politics, economics, culture, and society, we turn to a brief overview



of the state of affairs in Latin America on the eve of crucial wars of independence. Our understanding of the birth of the republics that today make up the hemisphere begins with a background of the wars of independence. It is the argument of this text that the struggle to win freedom from the colonial masters tore open the various societies and laid bare the disastrous state of inequality. Historians of the Americas in general have been grappling with the importance of various factors, including the emancipation of enslaved Afro-descendants, the ongoing suppression of the human and civil rights of indigenous peoples, and the push and pull of accommodating European settlers who sought to settle the land and build the towns and cities of the continents. This history has too often been viewed in static stages: colonization, defeat and containment of the indigenous people, the eventual struggle to emancipate the slaves brought from Africa, and then the struggle to accommodate the conflicting and fragmented societies and build a cohesive whole. Scholars are more recently reconsidering the role of the enslaved and the intersection of racial and ethnic cultures in the formation of multilayered societies.

The history of Latin America in this text begins with an overview of European colonialism, laying the groundwork for the succeeding chapters on the history of the independent nation-states. Presenting such a history is not easy: Latin America is immense and diverse; events that have a huge impact on one nation or region (such as the US war with Mexico in the 1840s) may affect others only tangentially, or not at all. While a textbook should present a broad, general interpretation that makes sense of many disparate details and events, it is impossible to explore fully each and every event undergirding the big picture. Another inevitable tension is chronology (time) versus topics, as well as time versus place (country or region). Since