



A HISTORY OF MODERN LATIN AMERICA

1800 TO THE PRESENT

Second Edition

TERESA A. MEADE

WILEY

A History of Modern Latin America

Concise History of the Modern World

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Teresa A. Meade

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

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Preface to the Second Edition

This book covers well over 200 years of Latin American history, and while the history of the early centuries has changed little in these pages since the first edition appeared in 2010, the account of recent events reflects the considerable changes that have taken place since that edition was published. The December 17, 2014, announcement of the opening of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba after over 50 years of embargo and isolation illustrated three significant changes. First, the United States was ending the last vestiges of a failed Cold War policy. As President Barack Obama noted, “I do not believe we can keep doing the same things for over five decades and expect a different result.”¹ Secondly, many Latin Americans were aware, if most people in the United States were not, that Cuba enjoyed a warm relationship with the left-of-center, and even moderate, governments of the hemisphere. At the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, the Latin American and Caribbean heads of state voted to invite Cuba to the 2015 meeting in Panama. Opposed only by the United States and Canada (a country that nonetheless has long held relations with Cuba), the vote indicated that the rest of the Americas were prepared to hold the meeting without the hemisphere’s most powerful member. This was a considerable departure from America’s “Big Stick” wielding days of not so long ago. And finally, both Obama and Raúl Castro, who spoke simultaneously in Cuba on December 17, credited Argentine Pope Francis, the first Latin American pope, with pushing each side to an agreement. The late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, Cuba’s most outspoken defender in the last few decades, may have smiled from his grave at this turn of events, but the rest of Latin America relished the signs of a new era.

The history of Latin America in this text begins with a brief summary 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. Moreover, textbooks such as this one inevitably experience a crucial conflict. While the

text 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 historical events build on and grow out of whatever comes before, and lead into and influence that which comes after, it is very difficult to extract a happening from its context, especially given the many cultural, social, economic, and political contexts surrounding every historical moment.

Historians must always grapple with this dilemma of presentation: the author can stick to certain themes and relay a general analysis fitted roughly into a chronology or, alternatively, can relate the history of one country, or group of countries, one at a time. The country-by-country approach is often more precise, but difficult to use in the standard history class, while covering many nations in one full sweep can become confusing. Ultimately neither approach succeeds if the end product is stripped of the fascinating stories of people and events that make up the overall narrative.

In this text modern Latin American history is viewed through the prism of social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Specific historical events and trends – such as the slave revolt in Haiti, the patriarchal rules governing marriage in Brazil, construction of the Panama Canal, or the Mexican Revolution – are explained according to this interpretive approach. The seemingly unconnected events in the histories of Latin American societies make up an account that is more than the sum of its parts; rather the parts, selected for their explanatory value, help us understand the whole. Thus I present examples of what transpired in a single nation at a specific time as representative of wider phenomena that serve as a window into the ideas, conflicts, social movements, cultural trends, and ascribed meanings that have made an appearance on Latin America's historical landscape.

This book relies on many texts, monographs, document sets, and journalistic and fictional portrayals of Latin America's rich history; however, it was necessary to allow one event to serve as the archetypical illustration of wider trends. For example, a discussion of Argentina's labor movement is used to reflect the struggle between workers and owners that unfolded under specific conditions but also took place in many countries. Labor in other areas is then covered in broad strokes, with the assumption that readers and instructors will draw on other examples to fill in the historical blanks. I settled on this approach after more than 20 years of teaching, mainly in a small liberal arts college, where it soon became apparent that students are better able to grasp the big picture when given smaller, concrete incidents to illustrate broader interpretations. Relying solely on "big theories" and moving from country to country and event to event, makes students' eyes glaze over, and note-taking turns to doodling. Blame could be placed on poor training in geography, the ethnocentrism of US society, the Internet, or what have you, but the truth remains that we often develop our understanding of history by building out from a specific example or single historical event.

Finally, history is based on original sources. The particular interpretation historians elicit from those sources, even the conflicting conclusions they derive after looking at the same or similar documents, is the heart and soul of the enterprise. Interspersed throughout this narrative are first-hand accounts, documents, and excerpts from fiction,

displayed in boxes. These boxes have two purposes: on the one hand, they can serve as the basis of discussion in a class; on the other hand, they demonstrate the kinds of materials historians draw on to construct the most informed version of what transpired. Although I am well aware that readers sometimes skip over this additional material, seeing it as extraneous to the text, I am hopeful that instructors and students will pause to examine an original document, a quirky historical fact, or a literary reflection.

In addition to these first-hand accounts, I have woven in both historical and sometimes fictional asides from various authors, including the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano. Galeano compiled a three-volume “based on fact” fictional interpretation of major events in the history of the Americas from the pre-Columbian period to the late twentieth century. He did this, he anthropomorphized, because “Poor History had stopped breathing; betrayed in academic texts, lied about in classrooms, drowned in dates, they had imprisoned her in museums and buried her, with floral wreaths, beneath statuary bronze and monumental marble.”² As a historian and teacher, I naturally beg to differ a bit with his conclusion, since those of us who teach and write strive to present history as a lively narrative, not dull facts drowned in dates. However, Galeano is right when he exhorts us to rescue history from hero worship and to question the sources, since neither they, nor the facts they present, “speak for themselves.” In his trilogy, *Memory of Fire*, Galeano freely and provocatively writes the history of the Americas and creates a fanciful narrative of the past, which sometimes misses the mark but more often nails it precisely.

In the end, we are all interpreters of history, trying to make sense of our own past and our place within the era in which we are living; and for that we rely on books and the explanations contained within them. Although this *History of Modern Latin America* is a very small contribution to that daunting enterprise, I hope readers will find this chronicle of Latin America’s past interesting, the explanation of that history understandable and enlightening, and the interpretation challenging. History should be nothing less.

Notes

- 1 “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes,” Office of the Press Secretary, December 17, 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed June 15, 2015).
- 2 Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: 1 Genesis*, Cedric Belfrage, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. xv.

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Because the process of writing a textbook draws on the expertise of an entire profession, I have benefited from the research of the many scholars who have explored, analyzed, photographed, mapped, and charted the history of Latin America. Compiling a narrative from so many fine books, articles, web pages, newsletters, blogs, and news articles was both an inspiring and a humbling experience. The scholarship on Latin America is truly impressive; I hope this book conveys in a small way the wealth of contributions from scholars in the United States, Europe, and throughout Latin America.

On a more personal level, I want to thank my son and daughter, Darren and Claire, and my husband and best friend, Andor Skotnes, for their expertise with web pages, photographs, and other technical assistance. Andor helped me update illustrations and more than once left his own work as a historian to answer my cry of distress when my computer tried to sabotage this whole enterprise. Finally, it is with great sadness that I acknowledge the premature death of my sister Martha. Having worked for years in an urban high school teaching history to students who traced their roots to, and spoke the languages of, Latin America and many lands of the world, my sister used this knowledge to provide excellent comments on the first edition. The carelessness of a highway driver robbed the world of a dedicated history teacher, and for those of us who knew her well, of a wonderful friend and family member. I dedicate this book to her.

1 Introduction to the Land and Its People

Latin America is a vast, geographically and culturally diverse region stretching from the southern border of the United States to Puerto Toro at the tip of Chile, the southernmost town of the planet. Encompassing over 8 million square miles, the 20 countries that make up Latin America are home to an estimated 600 million people who converse in at least five European-based languages and six or more main indigenous tongues, plus African Creole and hundreds of smaller language groups.

Historians disagree over the origin of the name “Latin America.” Some contend that geographers in the sixteenth century gave the name “Latin America” to the new lands Spain and Portugal colonized, in reference to the Latin-based languages imposed on indigenous people and imported African slaves in the newly acquired territories. More recently, others have argued that the name originated in France in the 1860s under the reign of Napoleon III, as a result of that country’s short-lived attempt to fold all the Latin-language-derived countries of the Americas into a neocolonial empire. Although other European powers (Britain, Holland, and Denmark) colonized parts of the Americas, the term “Latin America” generally refers to those territories in which the main spoken language is Spanish or Portuguese: Mexico, most of Central and South America, and the Caribbean countries of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. The former French possessions of Haiti and other islands of the Caribbean, French Guiana on the South American continent, and even Quebec in Canada, could be included in a broadened definition of Latin America. However, this book defines Latin America as the region that fell under Spanish and Portuguese domination beginning in the late fifteenth and into the mid-sixteenth centuries. The definition also encompasses other Caribbean and South American countries such as Haiti and Jamaica among others, since events in those areas are important to the historical trajectory. This definition follows the practice of area scholars, who have generally defined Latin America and the Caribbean as

a socially and economically interrelated entity, no matter what language or culture predominates.

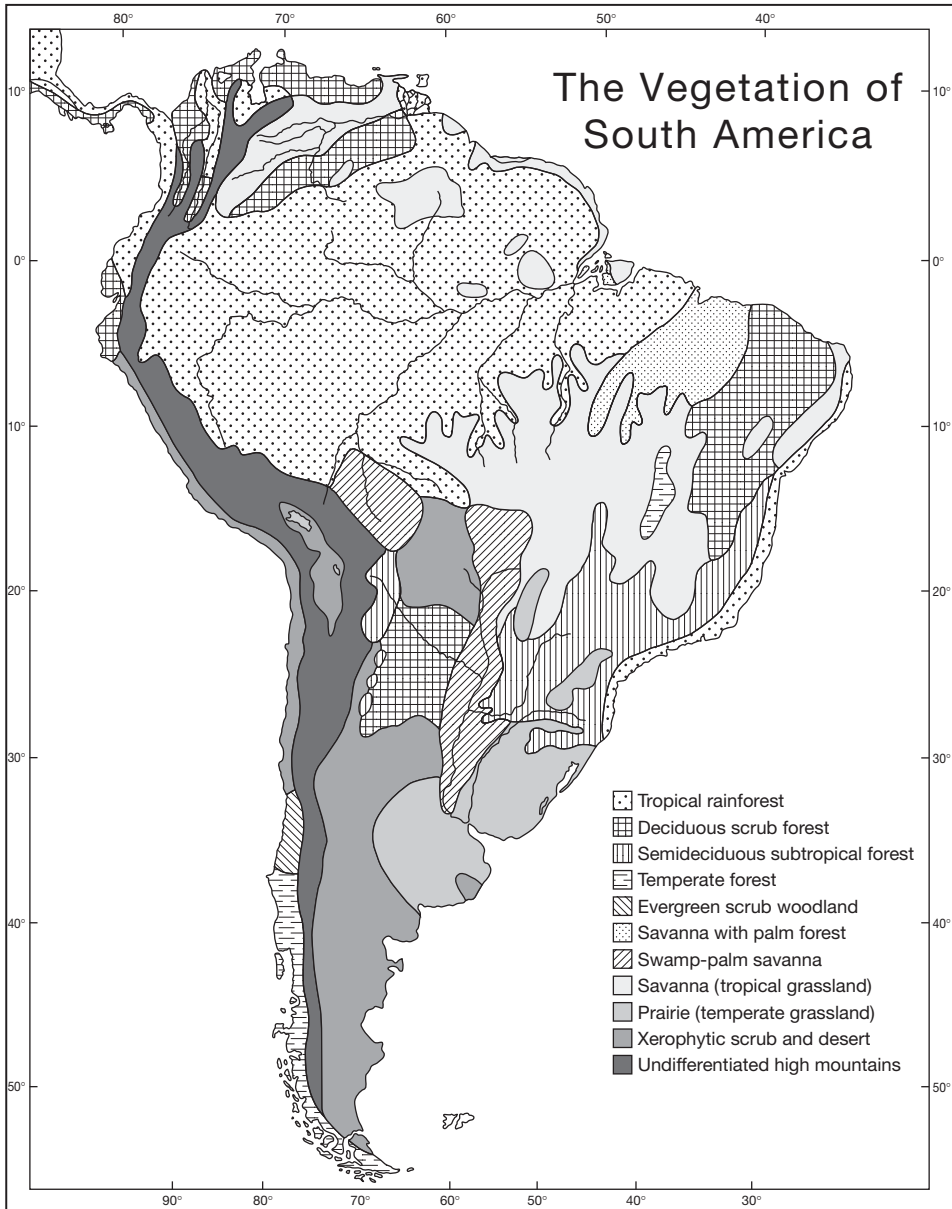
Geography

Latin America boasts some of the largest cities in the world, including São Paulo (Brazil), Mexico City, Buenos Aires (Argentina), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Lima (Peru), and Bogotá (Colombia). Population figures, however, are controversial since most of these gigantic urban centers include, in addition to the housed and settled population, transitory masses of destitute migrants living in makeshift dwellings or in the open air. It is hard for census takers and demographers to obtain an accurate count, or offer a more precise estimate, under those circumstances.

Not only does Latin America have some of the largest population centers in the world, but its countryside, jungles, mountains, and coastlines are major geographical and topographical landmarks (see Map 1.1). The 2.6-million-square-mile Amazon Basin is the largest rainforest in the world. Spanning the far north of Brazil, stretching into Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname, and Venezuela, it is home for approximately 15 percent of all living species on the planet. South and to the east of the Amazon Basin in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso lays the Pantanal, the world's largest wetlands. Other superlatives include the Andes as the highest mountain range of the Americas and the longest range in the world, stretching nearly the entire length of the continent. This geologically young and very seismically active range includes Aconcagua in Argentina on the border with Chile, the highest peak in the Americas, which at 22,841 ft exceeds Denali (Mt McKinley) in Alaska by over 2,000 ft. The Atacama Desert, spanning Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, is the driest place and the largest depository of sodium nitrates on the planet. Elsewhere in the Andean region is Lake Titicaca, the most elevated navigable body of water in the world. This huge lake forms the boundary between Peru and Bolivia, and the Bolivian city of La Paz is the world's highest-altitude capital city. Angel Falls in Venezuela is the highest waterfall in the world; at 3,212 ft it is almost 20 times higher than Niagara Falls. Angel Falls connects through tributaries to the world's largest river (in volume), the Amazon. In its 25,000 miles of navigable water, this mighty "River Sea," as the Amazon River is called, contains 16 percent of the world's river water and 20 percent of the fresh water on Earth.

People

The sheer diversity of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean has made the region extremely interesting culturally, but has also affected the level of economic and political equality. Latin America is exceedingly diverse, a place where the interaction, cross-fertilization, mutation, interpenetration, and reinvention of cultures from Europe, Asia, Africa, and indigenous America has produced a lively and rich set of traditions in

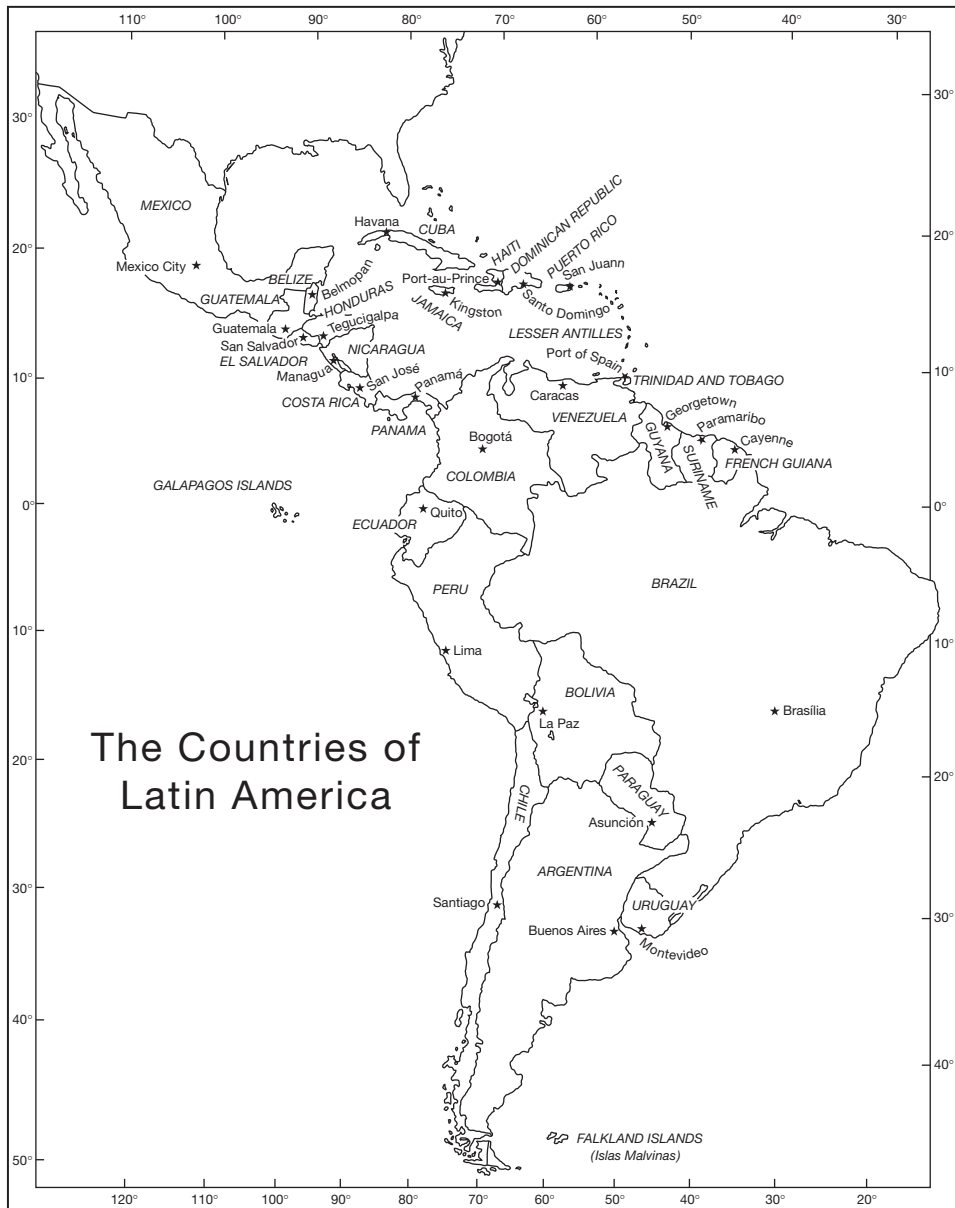


Map 1.1 The vegetation of South America. (Courtesy Cathryn L. Lombardi and John V. Lombardi, *Latin American History: A Teaching Atlas*, © 1993 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted by permission of The University of Wisconsin Press)

music, art, literature, religion, sport, dance, and political and economic trends. Bolivia, for example, elected an indigenous president in 2005 who was a former coca leaf farmer. President Evo Morales won easily with the backing of poor and indigenous Bolivians but met hostility from wealthy and middle-class citizens who worry about the effects of his socialist redistribution proposals and follow more “Western” traditions. Morales defeated a recall in 2008 and went on to be re-elected by landslides in 2009 and 2014. In a situation reflecting growing tensions in other countries over extractive development projects, Morales in subsequent terms in office has come under fire from environmentalists and even some indigenous supporters for his embrace of foreign oil and natural gas exploration in formerly protected areas. Thus ethnic and racial strife has accompanied the push to develop resources more than 500 years past the original fifteenth-century encounter. (See Map 1.2.)

In Bolivia, Guatemala, and Peru, people who trace their ethnicity back to the pre-Columbian era constitute the majority, or near majority, while in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela, people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry, known as *mestizos*, or in parts of Central America as *ladinos*, comprise the majority. Africans were imported as slaves from the sixteenth until the mid-nineteenth centuries, and their descendants still comprise over half of the population in many areas. People in the Caribbean islands of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, as well as in many South American nations, especially Brazil, are descendants of a mixture of Africans and Europeans, called mulattos or Afro-descendants, a more appropriate term that implies heritage rather than skin color. Blacks, or Afro-descendants, are in the majority in Haiti and in many of the Caribbean nations that were in the hands of the British, Dutch, French, or other colonial powers. Everywhere in Latin America there is evidence of racial mixture, giving rise to the term *casta*, which the Spaniards used to denote any person whose ancestors were from all three major ethnic groups: indigenous, European, and African. Although this has a pejorative connotation in some regions, the creation of such a term suggests that racial mixture in Latin America is so extensive as to make it often awkward, and imprecise, to list each combination. This book uses all of these designations, including indigenous and Indian interchangeably, since that is yet the standard practice in the literature of the major languages of the region.

Large numbers of Europeans immigrated to Latin America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to the majority who came from Spain, Portugal, and Italy, immigrants arrived from France, Germany, Poland, Russia, and the Middle Eastern countries of Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon; a large number of Eastern European and German Jews sought refuge in Latin America both before and in the years immediately after World War II. Many European migrants settled in the Southern Cone countries of Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and the southernmost region of Brazil. Japanese also immigrated to Brazil, especially to São Paulo, where they were resettled on coffee plantations and eventually moved into urban areas to form the largest community of Japanese outside Japan. In addition, Japanese moved in large numbers to Peru, while Koreans and Chinese migrated to every part of Latin America. Chinese and East Indians were brought



Map 1.2 The countries of Latin America. (Courtesy Cathryn L. Lombardi and John V. Lombardi, *Latin American History: A Teaching Atlas*, © 1993 by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted by permission of The University of Wisconsin Press)

as indentured servants to many of the countries of the Caribbean region beginning in the nineteenth and extending into the twentieth century.

Because race in Latin America was from the earliest days of the arrival of Europeans identified along a continuum from indigenous and black at one end to white Europeans at the other, any discussion of racial categories has been very complicated. By contrast, the United States largely enforced a system of bipolar identity inherited from British colonialism, which then solidified in the late nineteenth century after the Civil War. Nonetheless, race everywhere is socially constructed – for example, it is estimated that nearly half of those who identify in the United States as African American have some white ancestors – and in Latin America race is a conflicted category. Many Latin Americans who identify as white, and are seen as white because of their social status, education, and physical features, might not be considered white in the United States and vice versa. There are any number of stories of black South American diplomats who were outraged when they encountered discrimination in Washington, DC, not because they objected to racial profiling, but because they considered themselves white. It is estimated that of a total population of 589,107,173 in the countries of Latin America, a third define themselves as white; a bit over a quarter as mestizo (mixed white and Indian); 15 percent as mulatto/Afro-descendant (mixed white and African); 11 percent as indigenous/Indian; 5 percent as black; less than 1 percent as Asian; with the remaining 7.7 percent as other/unknown. This very substantial number, including Garifuna of Central America, some South Asians, and mixtures of some or all races, indicates the fluidity of racial categorization. (See Table 1.1).

While exact figures are hard to determine, we can draw several conclusions, the most salient of which is that people who are wholly or partially of indigenous, African, and Asian ancestry predominate in Latin America. Certainly no discrimination against a minority should be tolerated anywhere, but in Latin America it bears remembering that the history of discrimination is against the *majority* population, not the minority. Secondly, whereas indigenous people constitute a minority in most countries, people of

Table 1.1 Racial origins of the population of Latin Americans.

<i>Identified as</i>	<i>Number (million)</i>	<i>Percent of total</i>
White	197.4	33.5
Mestizo	162	27.5
Mulatto	84.8	14.4
Indigenous	65.4	11.1
Black	30	5.1
Asian	4.1	0.7
Other/Unknown	45.4	7.7

(Venezuela no longer tabulates ethnic/racial categories; however, its population is 26,749,000. Applying to this the country's 1998 ratios [mestizo 67%, white 21%, black 10%, indigenous 2%] the yields for the entire region would change very slightly.)

Source: *World Factbook*, 2011.

whole or partial indigenous ancestry comprise the single largest ethnic/racial group in Latin America as a whole.

Economies

Nature has graced Latin America with plentiful natural resources and stunning natural landmarks, but the gains achieved through human interaction are not all positive since huge numbers of its people are impoverished, while a small group in each country is extremely wealthy. The World Bank calculates that most of the population lacks basic services such as water, sanitation, access to health care and vaccinations, education, and protection from crime. Roughly 80 million Latin Americans live on less than \$2.50 a day. Although Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Paraguay rank as the countries with the greatest inequality, the sheer numbers of poor in Brazil and in Mexico pose some of the greatest challenges to those nations' resources. According to United Nations development reports, lack of access to basic infrastructure serves as a major impediment to anti-poverty initiatives since 30 percent of extremely poor people are concentrated in rural areas far from the reach of public and private resources.

Historians argue over the source of Latin America's inequality, some tracing it back to the days of European conquest over large indigenous populations and centuries of exploitation of imported African slaves. Others note that Latin American leaders have failed to promote the type of policies for the efficient exploitation of the continent's vast natural resources that would be required to raise the standard of living of the majority of its people. Another group points to the need to improve Latin America's commercial relations with the rest of the world, or to build ties among themselves, as through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which links Canada, the United States, and Mexico; the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA); MERCOSUR or MERCOSUL (Spanish: *Mercado Común del Sur*; Portuguese: *Mercado Comum do Sul*; English: Southern Common Market) which currently includes Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela; and the Andean Community of Nations (CAN, *Comunidad Andina de Naciones*), encompassing Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. A few nations, especially Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, have pursued bilateral trade agreements with the United States, the European Union, and nations in Asia. Similar initiatives by the Peruvian and Panamanian governments to enter into trade pacts with the United States have met with stiff opposition from their local labor unions and farmers.

The debates these agreements have generated do not focus on trade per se, but on the long-term impact of entering into compacts with larger, more developed, and technologically more advanced nations. Critics charge that Mexico has benefited little from NAFTA; in fact, NAFTA has resulted in a flood of agricultural commodities into the Mexican market from the United States and Canada, where they are produced far more efficiently and cheaply. As a result, Mexican farmers have been driven off the land and into urban squalor, or across the border to the United States, in order to survive. Too often the free flow of capital that these trade agreements were designed to foster has benefited the rich nations and the wealthy classes of the poorer and emerging economies,

even accelerating income inequalities within Latin America and, through investment transfers, in the United States and Europe as well. Contained within the trade debate is the larger issue of neoliberalism, sometimes called the “Washington Consensus,” referring to the push from the United States to keep markets in developing nations open and available for investment and trade agreements favorable to the United States. The real impact of foreign investment, and disagreements among and between Latin American governments over the impact of earlier liberal and recent neoliberal policies, is a topic that weaves through this text.

Although critics point to the detrimental impact of free-trade deals on agricultural production, especially in Mexico, the fact is that most people throughout Latin America live in cities. By 1970 the majority of the population was involved in non-agricultural production; that is, in the service sector, manufacturing, private and public bureaucracies, and the informal sector. The common assumption is that people making a living in the informal sector – selling what they can on the street, engaged in casual and day labor, or peddling “illegal” wares and services – are very poor. That may be true, with the exception of certain illegal activities such as prostitution, trading in contraband, and so on, in which case it is hard to make any overriding assumptions. Yet some entrepreneurs selling homemade crafts, foodstuffs, and other objects in local markets earn a very good living – comparable to, or even better than, those employed in manufacturing and the formal economy. The national economy, however, suffers because of the difficulty of collecting taxes on informal-sector earnings.

A sizeable middle class has emerged in most of the continent’s large cities, concentrated in growing domestic and transnational manufacturing sectors, financial and commercial institutions, government bureaucracies and service sectors, and traditional professional occupations. Probably owing to the precariousness of its position, the middle class historically has not been a strong voice in the political arena. By the late twentieth century, however, this previously timid group had become a more sustained and consistent actor in many emerging democracies, as well as active participants in street demonstrations in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela, to name a few.

Politics

The Latin American political landscape has been as diverse as its geography and culture. Since the end of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the nineteenth century, the region has been host to monarchies, local strongman (*caudillo*) rule, populist regimes, participatory democracy of parliamentary, socialist, and capitalist varieties, military and civilian dictatorships, and bureaucratic one-party states, to name a few. The United States has played a strong role, especially during the twentieth century. The lament of Mexico’s autarchic leader, Porfirio Díaz, could be said to apply to the continent as a whole: “So far from God, so close to the United States.” The late British historian Eric Hobsbawm once remarked wryly that Latin America’s proximity to the United States

has had the effect of it being “less inclined than any other part of the globe to believe that the USA is liked because ‘it does a lot of good round the world.’”¹

Modern Latin America’s history is replete with conflict resulting from the unequal distribution of resources among and between nations, classes, racial and ethnic groups, and individuals. In the nineteenth century, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay went to war against Paraguay from 1864 to 1870 in the War of the Triple Alliance (sometimes called the Paraguayan War). This devastating conflict wiped out over half of Paraguay’s population, more than 80 percent of its men. The most extensive war, the Mexican Revolution of 1910–21, resulted in the death of an estimated 1 million people both on and off the battlefield, of a population of 15 million. Other twentieth-century conflicts considered highly costly in terms of human life were the War of the Chaco between Bolivia and Paraguay (1932–5), in which an estimated 150,000 people died, and the civil conflict in Guatemala (1960–96), in which at least 200,000 Guatemalan Indians and mestizos were killed at the direction of a series of brutal military regimes. The country whose history has been most associated with violence is Colombia. From 1948 to 1966 an estimated 200,000–500,000 Colombians (the number varies widely) died in a war between political parties and factions that is known as *La Violencia*. According to Human Rights Watch, nearly 100,000 people have been killed since 2006 in relation to the Mexican drug war, a situation that will only worsen so long as the United States remains a major consumer of illegal drugs.

One erroneous stereotype, however, depicts Latin America as *exceptionally* violent, as a place of war, unstable governments, and social strife. In actuality, probably fewer Latin Americans have died as participants in wars and revolutions than is the case in other continents. This is due in large part to the relatively small role Latin American nations played in history’s major international conflagrations, especially World Wars I and II. Unfortunately, the number of casualties throughout the world has been tremendous: the 20–30 million who died in the Taiping Rebellion in China (1850–64), the massacre of an estimated 1.6 million Armenians in 1915–16, the World War II Holocaust, the millions killed and left to die as a result of Stalin’s policies, the Cambodians left to die in the “killing fields” of Pol Pot (1968–79), or the 1994 Rwanda Genocide in which anywhere from 600,000 to 1 million Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers were killed in 100 days. The fact that Latin Americans have not historically killed each other in rebellions nor carried out mass slaughters in any greater number than peoples in other parts of the world (and probably fewer) draws into question the cultural stereotyping to which the region has been subjected.

In recent times, progressive and moderate leaders elected to office in many countries of Latin America have attempted to find solutions to the longstanding problems of widespread poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, human rights abuses, and inequality. This political phenomenon, sometimes labeled the “Pink Tide,” refers to the election in the last decades of the twentieth and the early part of the twenty-first centuries of left and center-left governments in many Latin American countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Uruguay, Venezuela, and, disputably, Nicaragua. As opposed to the Cold War label, “the Red Tide,” that implied the

spread of communism from the Soviet Union and China to other parts of the world, this “Pink Tide” is a milder, “less Red,” political current. While many of these elected socialist and leftist politicians are sympathetic to their own country’s revolutionary past, frequently voiced open admiration for Cuba’s stubborn rejection of US hegemony, and personally suffered under the military dictatorships that dominated much of the region from the 1960s to the 1990s, they are at the same time proceeding cautiously. These new, pragmatic leftists do not follow a single political trajectory and have not attempted to forge a united front. In fact, most seem to be content to remain loosely affiliated ideologically, pursuing policies that benefit their own nations while seeking the broadest level of cooperation with like-minded, and even not so like-minded, neighbors. This pragmatism, some critics argue, is increasingly masking a shift to the right and an abandonment of former progressive reforms, especially as regards environmental policies, or resulting from an accommodation with international dictates. As if to prove the point, progressive presidents in Paraguay and Honduras won office in fair elections, only to be overthrown within a few years, notably with the backing of the United States and powerful multinational corporations. If anything, events in these small nations proved once again that powerful foreign interests remain as obstacles to deep social reform.

Among the elected leaders of the early twenty-first century, Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez was the most outspoken, and most polarizing, opponent of US policy in Latin America and the one who forged close ties with Cuba’s Marxist government. Chávez’s death in March 2013 coincided with a downturn in Venezuela’s oil revenues, leading to instability under the less charismatic Nicolás Maduro, who assumed office upon Chávez’s death and was subsequently elected. In Bolivia, President Evo Morales has supported the cultivation and sale of coca for medicinal and nutritional uses, much to the alarm of Washington. On the other hand, since Bolivia has the largest natural gas reserves in the hemisphere, the United States has moved cautiously in mounting a critique. Morales used the clout of Bolivia’s vital energy resources to bargain for better terms of trade with international bodies and for the political space to undertake a social reform agenda, despite objections from the country’s traditional ruling circles. The new wave of progressive leaders has faced powerful opponents inside their respective countries from the media, highly skilled and better paid workers, members of the traditional elite, and from the growing middle class who have felt threatened by policies directed at uplifting rural and urban indigenous and marginalized poor.

The changing political landscape is likewise marked by an unprecedented number of women in national and local offices. With women comprising roughly one in four legislators in the region, a ratio only surpassed in Scandinavia, and with more female heads of state than any other area of the world, Latin America on the surface has, in terms of political officeholders, achieved a greater level of gender equity than have the United States. In Chile, Michelle Bachelet, the second socialist president elected since the demise of the military dictatorship in 1990, served from 2006 to 2010, and then was re-elected in 2013 after an interlude under the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera proved unpopular with the electorate. In addition to Bachelet, the other women to head governments in the past as well as the present include, Isabel Perón in Argentina,