Latin America: A Geographic Preface

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The popular image of Latin America as a major world region has existed for well over a century. The boundaries of the region are relatively unproblematic, beginning at the Río Grande (called the Río Bravo in Mexico), usually including the Caribbean, and ending at the southern tip of South America, its shared history of Iberian colonization, more than the current economic status of individual states, provides the region’s social and historical integrity. The imprint of over 300 years of Iberian rule is still evident. Roughly two-thirds of the nearly 600 million people who live in the region speak Spanish; most of the rest speak Portuguese. Catholicism is the dominant religion, although as Hannah Stewart-Gambino explains in Chapter 12, Protestant faiths have made inroads and African religious practices have long been present. Likewise, since much of Latin America lies within the tropics, its verdant forests, exotic wildlife, and balmy weather distinguish Latin America from the temperate and subarctic climates of North America. (See Map 2.1.)

Historically, the Spanish and Portuguese who settled much of the region never referred to the area as Latin America. The term was used first by French politicians in the 1860s in an effort to suggest their own “Latin” links with the Western Hemisphere. Other labels, such as Ibero-America, the Indies, and the Americas, have all been applied. Yet the term Latin America seems to be the most popular, perhaps because it is vague enough to be inclusive of different colonial histories, but specific enough to distinguish it from Anglo-America (Price and Cooper 2007). The idea of Latin America gained support during the latter half of the nineteenth century among intellectuals in the former Spanish colonies who were grappling with a way to build political and ideological unity among the new republics. They, too, stressed a distinct “Latin” identity separate from the “Anglo” North (Ardao 1980).
Map 2.1 Latin America: Countries and Capitals
Like all world regions, Latin America is diverse, and generalizations are inherently problematic. Considering the disparate levels of economic development among Latin America countries, as well as their diverse ethnic compositions, it would be easy to emphasize division over commonality. Consonant with the theme propounded by Richard S. Hillman in Chapter 1, however, the geographic perspective clearly illustrates unity in diversity. There is little dispute, for example, that the region’s human geography was completely reworked with the arrival of Europeans. The number of indigenous peoples declined by as much as 90 percent during the course of the conquest, but their presence remains strong in many parts of Latin America. Large numbers of African slaves were also added to the cultural mix of Europeans and indigenous peoples through the slave trade. Today, the African presence throughout the Caribbean, Brazil, and coastal Venezuela and Colombia is quite notable. Other immigrant groups arrived—from Italy, Japan, Germany, and India—from the late nineteenth century onward, adding to the cultural complexity of the region.

In terms of physical geography, much of the area is tropical, with a mixture of grasslands and forest as well as mountains and shields (large upland areas of exposed crystalline rock). An impressive array of natural resources includes the planet’s largest rain forest, the greatest river by volume, and substantial reserves of natural gas, oil, tin, and copper. Since Christopher Columbus’s journey of exploration more than five centuries ago, Latin America has provided the world with many valuable commodities. The early Spanish Empire concentrated on extracting precious metals, namely silver and gold, from Mexico and the Andes. The Portuguese became prominent producers of sugar products, gold, and (later) coffee. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, natural resource exports to Europe and North America fueled the region’s growing economies. Countries tended to specialize in one or two commodities: wool and wheat from Argentina, coffee and sugar from Brazil, coffee and bananas from Costa Rica, tin and silver from Bolivia, and oil from Mexico and Venezuela. Although the national economies of Latin America have diversified since the 1950s, they continue to be major producers of primary goods for North America, Europe, and East Asia.

In the first part of this chapter, I provide a sketch of the physical environment of Latin America, drawing attention to its topographical features, climates, natural resources, and environmental issues. In the second part, I discuss the basic demographic and cultural patterning of the region, developing the concept of the Columbian Exchange as a way to understand the ecological and cultural impact of the New World’s encounter with the Old World. Iberian colonization, the African slave trade, and later waves of immigrants from Europe and Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a multiethnic and multiracial society. Current patterns of Latin American and Caribbean emigration to North America, Europe, and Japan are creating complex transnational networks that are conduits for the diffusion of Latino culture into other world regions.
Each modern state of Latin America therefore has a diverse indigenous and migrant profile that contributes to its distinct national culture. Yet in this chapter, I reveal the common experiences shared by the nations in the region.

**Physical Setting**

The movement of tectonic plates explains much of Latin America's basic topography. As the South and North American plates slowly drifted westward, the Nazca, Cocos, and Pacific plates were subducted below them. In this contact zone, deep oceanic trenches exist along the Pacific coasts, such as the Humboldt trench along the coast of Chile and Peru, producing surprisingly cool ocean temperatures for a tropical zone. The submerged plates have folded and uplifted the mainland's surface, creating the geologically young western mountains, such as the Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico, the highlands of Central America, and the Andes. The Andes, the most dramatic of these highland areas, run the length of the South American continent for 5,000 miles, with some thirty peaks reaching over 20,000 feet. Created by the collision of oceanic and continental plates, the Andes are a series of folded and faulted sedimentary rocks with intrusions of volcanic and crystalline rock. Consequently, many rich veins of precious metals and minerals are found there. From Colombia to Chile, the initial economic wealth of these Andean territories came from mining. Yet the movement of plates also unleashes environmental hazards such as the earthquakes in 2010 that devastated Haiti (measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale) and seriously debilitated Chile (8.8 on the Richter scale). (See Map 2.2.)

The Andes are typically divided into the northern, central, and southern components. In Colombia, the northern Andes actually split into three distinct mountain ranges before merging near the border with Ecuador. High-altitude plateaus and snow-covered peaks distinguish the central Andes of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The Andes reach their greatest width here. Between Peru and Bolivia is a treeless high plateau called the altiplano. Averaging 12,000 feet in elevation, it has limited grazing potential, but important mineral resources. The southern Andes are shared by Chile and Argentina. Much of this highland region was an important zone of settlement for native peoples, who exploited the diverse ecological niches of the mountains and domesticated a tremendous variety of native crops such as potatoes, hot and sweet peppers, and quinoa (Gade 1999). In Peru, the magnificent mountaintop city of Machu Picchu is an example of the remains of a pre-Columbian settlement. Today, most of the people of the Andean states still live in or at the base of the mountains. Major cities, such as Bogotá, Quito, and La Paz, are in the mountains. The Andean states of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia are home to the majority of native peoples in South America.
Aconcagua, located in Argentina, is the highest peak in the Americas.

The Mexican plateau is a massive upland area ringed by the Sierra Madre Mountains and tilted so that the highest elevations are in the South—about 3,000 feet near Mexico City and just 4,000 feet at Ciudad Juárez. The southern end of the plateau, known as the Mesa Central, supports Mexico’s highest population density, including the cities of Mexico City, Puebla, and Guadalajara. The Mesa Central was historically Mexico’s breadbasket, but water shortages due to urbanization and rapid population growth threaten the region’s productivity (Ezcurra et al. 1999). Throughout the Mexican plateau are also rich seams of silver, the focus of economic activity during the country’s colonial era. Today, the Mexican economy is driven more by petroleum and gas production along the Gulf Coast and less by the metals of the plateau.

The Caribbean plate contains most of Central America, the islands of the West Indies, and part of Colombia. As the Caribbean plate moves slowly to the east, it triggers volcanic activity and earthquakes in both the Central American highlands and the islands of the Caribbean. The Central American highlands are composed of a volcanic chain that stretches from Guatemala to Costa Rica, producing a handsome landscape of rolling green hills, elevated basins with lakes, and conical peaks. Hugging the Pacific Coast, the legacy of some forty volcanoes is fertile soil that yields a variety of domestic and export crops. Most of Central America’s 43 million people are concentrated in this zone, either in the capital cities or the surrounding rural villages. Yet the hazards associated
Map 2.2 Climates and Vegetation
with the movement of the Caribbean plate were plainly evident on January 12, 2010, when a 7.0 earthquake leveled many of the buildings and severely damaged the infrastructure of the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, a metropolitan area of over 2 million people. The tragic event affected nearly 3 million and resulted in the death of over 200,000 people, making it one of the worst natural disasters in the region's history. The tragedy of the Haitian earthquake was compounded by the state's poverty and the failure of buildings to be designed to withstand earthquakes.

Another important landform of the region is the shields. These large rocky outcroppings vary in elevation from 600 to 5,000 feet and are remnants of the ancient landmass of Gondwanaland, which began breaking apart 250 million years ago. Consequently, most shields are not noted for their agricultural potential because they lack volcanic and sedimentary soils. The Guiana and Patagonia shields are lightly settled and have limited agricultural potential. In terms of natural resources and settlement, the Brazilian shield is the largest and most important shield. It covers much of Brazil but, in the southeastern portion of the country, a series of mountains protrude from the shield. In between these mountains are elevated basins with fertile soils, excellent for agriculture. This is where many Brazilians live and Brazil's largest cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, are located.

Historically, the most important areas of settlement in tropical Latin America were not along the region's major rivers, but across its upland plateaus and
intermontane basins. In these areas, the combination of soils, benign climates, and sufficient rainfall produced Latin America's most productive agricultural areas and its densest settlements. Examples of four such areas are the Brazilian shield, the Mexican plateau, the Central American highlands, and the Andes.

Major River Basins
In contrast to the western highlands, humid lowlands characterize the Atlantic side of Latin America. Across these lowlands meander some of the great rivers of the world, including the Amazon, Plata, and Orinoco. The Amazon, draining some 2.4 million square miles, is the largest river in the world by volume and area and the second longest in length. The scale of this watershed is underscored by the fact that 20 percent of all freshwater discharged into the oceans comes from the Amazon. Everywhere throughout the basin, more than 60 inches of rain falls each year and many places receive more than 80 inches. This is home to the largest tropical rain forest in the world and, thus, a treasure for genetic diversity. The Plata Basin begins in the tropics and discharges its water in the midlatitudes near the city of Buenos Aires. This basin has three major rivers—the Paraná, Paraguay, and Uruguay—that drain an area from central Bolivia and southern Brazil to northern Argentina. On the Paraná River is Latin America's largest hydroelectric project, the Itaipu Dam, which produces all of Paraguay's electricity and much of the energy used by industrial southern Brazil. The other great river of the region is the Orinoco of Venezuela and Colombia. Although just one-sixth the size of the Amazon watershed, the Orinoco's discharge roughly equals that of the Mississippi River.

Within these watersheds are vast lowlands of less than 600 feet elevation. From north to south, they are the Llanos, the Amazon lowlands, the Pantanal, the Chaco, and the Pampas. With the exception of the Pampas, which is a major center of grain and livestock production, most of these lowlands are sparsely settled and offer limited agricultural potential except as grazing lands for livestock. Long thought of as static frontiers (open lands unsuitable for permanent settlement), areas such as the Chaco and the Amazon have experienced marked increase in resource extraction in the past thirty years, especially the booming soybean market. The pressure to open new lands for agribusiness and export production is transforming much of lowland South America. Likewise, since the 1970s, the Amazon has witnessed a dramatic increase in population, with over 15 million people settling in the Brazilian Amazon alone, bringing about accelerated levels of timber and mineral extraction.

The Mexican and Central American river basins cannot match the scale of the South American ones, but they are important nonetheless. Mexico's Río Bravo (called the Rio Grande in the United States) delimits the boundary between Mexico and Texas. With headwaters in the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Río Bravo and its tributaries carry the snowmelt from the mountains through
Arid northern Mexico. Dams have been built on some of the watershed’s major tributaries to produce electricity and to supply water to cities, towns, and farms. The rise of industrialized border cities, such as Ciudad Juárez, has contributed to the degradation of this watershed. Surface water in the lower Río Bravo is scarce, and what does exist is badly polluted. The largest watershed by volume in Central America is the Grijalva-Usumicinta Basin, which flows through a sparsely populated tropical forest zone in southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. In the Mexican state of Tabasco, the Usumicinta joins the Grijalva and flows into the Bay of Campeche, accounting for nearly half of Mexico’s freshwater river flow. Political interest in the basin has intensified over the years because the watershed may be critical for satisfying the water and energy demands of Mexico.
Human Geography of Latin America

Today, nearly 600 million people live in Latin America. This is a striking figure when one considers that in 1950, Latin America comprised 150 million people, which equaled the population of the United States at that time. Now, Latin America’s population is double that of the United States. Like the rest of the developing world, Latin America experienced dramatic population growth in the 1960s and 1970s. It outpaced the United States because infant mortality rates declined and life expectancy soared. In 1950, Brazilian life expectancy was only forty-three years; by the 1980s, it was sixty-three; and by 2009, it was seventy-three. In fact, most countries in the region have experienced a twenty- to thirty-year improvement in life expectancy between 1950 and today, which
pushed up growth rates. Today, the average life expectancy for the entire region is seventy-three years, compared to seventy-eight for the United States. Four countries account for two-thirds of the region’s population: Brazil, with 192 million; Mexico, 110 million; Colombia, 45 million; and Argentina, 40 million (Population Reference Bureau 2009).

During the 1980s, population growth rates suddenly began to slow and, during the 1990s, most countries reported growth rates of less than 2 percent. The region is still growing, but at a slower pace of 1.4 percent. In the 1960s, a typical Latin American woman had 6 or 7 children. By the 1980s, the average woman had 3 children and today the average is 2.3 children. A number of factors explain this, including more urban families, which tend to be smaller than rural ones; increased participation of women in the workforce; higher education levels of women; and state support of family planning and better access to birth control. Only two countries, Guatemala and Haiti, average 4 or more children per woman (Population Reference Bureau 2009).

The distribution of population away from rural areas and into cities is the other major demographic change for the region. A staggering 77 percent of Latin Americans live in cities, which is a rate comparable to Europe and North America. This makes Latin America the most urbanized region within the developing world. The cities in the region are noted for high levels of urban primacy, a condition in which a country has a primate city that is three to four times larger than any other city in the country (Gilbert 1998). Examples of primate cities are Lima, Caracas, Guatemala City, Havana, Santo Domingo, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Santiago. In Brazil and Ecuador, two cities dominate all others in the country in terms of size and economic importance: Guayaquil and Quito in Ecuador and São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil are examples of dual primacy. Primacy is often viewed as a liability because too many national resources are concentrated into one urban center. In an effort to decentralize, governments have intentionally built cities far from primate cities such as Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela and Brasília in Brazil. Despite these efforts, the tendency toward primacy remains strong. In order to appreciate the magnitude of population growth and the dominance of cities, it is important to address the demographic consequences of Iberian conquest in the Americas.

Conquest and Settlement
The Iberian colonial experience imposed a political and cultural coherence on Latin America that makes it a distinguishable region today. Yet this was not an uncontested transplanting of Iberia across the Atlantic. As a result of the papal-decreed Treaty of Tordesillas in 1493, Spain received the majority of the Americas, and Portugal received a small portion of eastern South America that eventually became Brazil. Through the course of colonization, Spain shifted
its attention to the mainland colonies centered on Mexico and Peru. This left the Caribbean and the Guianas vulnerable to other European powers, most notably England, France, and the Netherlands, and each of these countries established colonies.

Nevertheless, Spain was able to conquer and administer an enormous territory in less than 100 years. The prevailing strategy was one of forced assimilation, in which Iberian religion, language, and political organization were imposed on the surviving fragments of native society. In some areas, such as southern Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Peru, native cultures have shown remarkable resilience as evidenced by the survival of native languages—Maya, Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani. Later, other European, African, and Asian peoples, arriving as both forced and voluntary migrants, were added to the region's cultural mix. Yet perhaps the single most important factor in the dominance of Iberian culture in Latin America was the demographic collapse of native populations in the first 150 years of settlement.

**Native Population Decline**

It is hard to grasp the enormity of human and cultural loss due to this catastrophic encounter between Europe and the Americas. Throughout the region, archaeological sites are poignant reminders of the complexity of precontact (i.e., pre-European arrival) civilizations (Mann 2006). Dozens of stone temples found throughout Mexico and Central America attest to how Mayan and Aztec civilizations flourished in the area's tropical forests and upland plateaus. In the Andes, farmers still use stone terraces built by the Incas; earthen platforms for village sites and raised fields for agriculture are still being discovered and mapped. Ceremonial centers, such as Cuzco (the center of the great Incan Empire), and hundreds of miles of Incan roads are evidence of the complexity of Amerindian networks. The Spanish, too, were impressed by the sophistication and wealth they saw around them, especially in the incomparable Tenochtitlan where Mexico City sits today. Tenochtitlan was the political and ceremonial center of the Aztecs, which supported a complex metropolitan area with some 300,000 residents. By comparison, the largest city in Spain at the time was considerably smaller. (See Map 2.3.)

The most telling figures of the impact of Iberian expansion are demographic. It is widely believed that precontact America (the Western Hemisphere) had 54 million inhabitants; in comparison, Western Europe in 1500 had a population of 42 million. Of the 54 million people, about 50 million lived in Latin America and the Caribbean (Denevan 1992). There were two major population centers: one in central Mexico, with 14 million people, and the other in the central Andes (highland Peru and Bolivia), with nearly 12 million. Virtually all of the estimated 3 million indigenous peoples who inhabited the islands of the Caribbean were gone within fifty years of contact with Europeans. By 1650,
Map 2.3 Indigenous Peoples' Migration Routes and Empires
after 150 years of colonization, the indigenous population was one-tenth its precontact size. The relentless elimination of 90 percent of the indigenous population was largely caused by epidemics of influenza and smallpox; however, warfare, forced labor, and starvation due to a collapse of food production systems also contributed to the death rate.

The tragedy of conquest did not end in 1650, the population low point for indigenous peoples, but continued throughout the colonial period and, to a much lesser extent, continues today. Even after the indigenous population began its slow recovery in the central Andes and central Mexico, there were small tribal bands in southern Chile (the Mapuche) and Patagonia (Araucania) that experienced the ravages of disease three centuries after Columbus landed. Even now, the isolation of some Amazonian tribes has made them vulnerable to disease.

At present, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia have the largest indigenous populations. Not surprisingly, these are the areas that had the most dense native populations at contact. Indigenous survival also occurs in isolated settings where the workings of national and global economies are slow to penetrate. The Caribbean coast of Panama, home to the Kuna, or the Gran Sabana of Venezuela, where the Pemon live, are two examples of relatively small groups that have managed to maintain a distinct indigenous way of life despite pressures to assimilate.

The Columbian Exchange

Historian Alfred Crosby likens the contact period between Europe, Africa, and Asia (Old World) and the Americas (New World) to an immense biological swap, which he terms "the Columbian Exchange" (1972). According to Crosby, Europeans benefited greatly from this exchange, and native peoples suffered terribly from it, most notably through the introduction of disease. The human ecology of both sides of the Atlantic, however, was forever changed through the introduction of new diseases, peoples, plants, and animals. Take, for example, the introduction of Old World crops. The Spanish, naturally, brought their staples of wheat, olives, and grapes to plant in the Americas. Wheat did surprisingly well in the highland tropics and became a widely consumed grain over time. Grapes and olive trees did not fare so well; eventually, grapes were produced commercially in the temperate zones of South America. The Spanish grew to appreciate the domestication skills of native agriculturalists who had developed valuable starch crops such as corn, potatoes, and bitter manioc as well as exotic condiments such as hot peppers, tomatoes, pineapple, cacao, and avocados.

Tropical crops transferred from Asia and Africa reconfigured the economic potential of Latin America. Sugarcane became the dominant cash crop of the Caribbean and the Atlantic tropical lowlands of South America. With
labor-intensive sugar production came the importation of millions of African slaves. Coffee, a later transfer from East Africa, emerged as one of the leading export crops throughout Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil in the nineteenth century. And pasture grasses introduced from Africa enhanced the forage available to livestock.

The movement of Old World animals across the Atlantic had a profound impact on the Americas. Initially, these animals hastened indigenous decline by introducing animal-borne diseases and by producing feral offspring that consumed everything in their path. Over time, native survivors appreciated the utility of Old World animals. Draft animals were adopted, and so too was the plow, which facilitated the preparation of soil for planting. Wool became an important fiber for indigenous communities in the uplands. And slowly, pork, chicken, and eggs added protein and diversity to the staple diets of corn, potatoes, and cassava. Ironically, the horse, which was a feared and formidable weapon of the Europeans, became a tool of resistance in the hands of skilled indigenous riders who inhabited the plains of the Chaco and Patagonia. With the major exception of disease, many transfers of plants and animals ultimately benefited both sides of the Atlantic. Still, it is clear that the ecological and material basis for life in Latin America was completely reworked through this exchange process initiated by Columbus.

**Repeopling the Americas**

The dramatic and relatively rapid decline of native peoples simplified colonization in some ways. Spain and Portugal were able to refashion Latin America into a European likeness. And as rival European powers vied for power in the Caribbean in the mid-sixteenth century, the islands they fought over were virtually uninhabited. Yet instead of creating a tropical neo-Europe, a complex ethnic blend evolved. Beginning with the first years of contact, unions between European men and native women began the process of racial mixing that became a defining feature of the region over time. The Iberian courts officially discouraged racial mixing, but not much could be done about it. Spain became obsessed with the matter of race and of maintaining racial purity in its colonies, which had a far larger native population than the Portuguese colony of Brazil. Yet after generations of intermarriage, four broad categories resulted: **blanco** (European ancestry), **mestizo** (mixed ancestry), **indio** (Amerindian ancestry), and **negro** (African ancestry). The **blancos** are still well represented among the elites, yet the vast majority of the people are of mixed racial ancestry.

For the Caribbean islands and the Atlantic coast of South America, the scarcity of indigenous labor hastened the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Beginning in the sixteenth century and lasting until the nineteenth century, at least 10 million Africans landed in the Americas and an estimated 2 million perished en route. Nearly two-thirds of all African slaves were first
sent to the islands of the Caribbean and Brazil, creating a neo-Africa in the Americas (Curtin 1969). In absolute numbers, more Africans landed in Latin America than Europeans in the first three centuries after contact. Yet because Africans were brought in as slaves, their survival rates and life expectancy were much lower than those of Europeans, which undermined their overall demographic impact (Sánchez-Albornoz 1974).

When much of Latin America gained its independence in the early nineteenth century, the new leaders of the region sought to develop their territories through immigration. Firmly believing in the dictum, “to govern is to populate,” many countries set up immigration offices in Europe to attract hard-working peasants to till the land and “whiten” the mestizo population. Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, southern Brazil, and Cuba were the most successful in attracting European immigrants from the 1870s until the Great Depression of the 1930s. During this period, some 8 million Europeans arrived (more than came during the entire colonial period), with Italians, Portuguese, Spaniards, and Germans being the most numerous. Some of this immigration was state-sponsored such as the nearly 1 million laborers (including entire families) brought to the coffee estates surrounding São Paulo at the turn of the century. Other migrants came seasonally, especially the Italian peasants who left Europe in the winter for agricultural work in Argentina and were thus nicknamed “the swallows.” Still others paid their own passage, intending to settle permanently and prosper in the growing commercial centers of Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Montevideo, and Santiago.

Less known are the Asian immigrants who arrived during this same period. Although considerably fewer in number, they established an important presence in the large cities of Brazil, Peru, and Paraguay as well as throughout Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, most of the Chinese and Japanese who settled in Latin America were contracted laborers brought in to work on the coffee estates in southern Brazil and the sugar estates and guano (waste from seabirds used as fertilizer) mines of Peru. The Japanese in Brazil are the most studied Asian immigrant group. Between 1908 and 1978, a quarter million Japanese immigrated to Brazil; today the country is home to 1.3 million people of Japanese descent. Initially, most Japanese were landless laborers, yet by the 1940s they had accumulated enough capital so that three-quarters of the migrants had their own land in the peripheral areas of São Paulo and Paraná states. Increasingly, second- and third-generation Japanese have taken professional and commercial jobs in Brazilian cities; many of them have married outside their ethnic group and are losing their fluency in Japanese. South America’s economic turmoil in the past two decades resulted in many ethnic Japanese emigrating to Japan in search of better opportunities. Nearly one-quarter of a million ethnic Japanese left South America in the 1990s (mostly from Brazil and Peru) and now reside in Japan (Kent 2006).

In the Caribbean, sugar estate owners who feared labor shortages with the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century sought indentured labor from
South and Southeast Asia. Because Guyana and Trinidad were British colonies, most of the contract labor came from India. Today, half of Guyana’s population and 40 percent of Trinidad’s claim South Asian ancestry. Hindu temples are found in the cities and villages, and many families speak Hindi in their homes. In Suriname, a former Dutch colony, more than one-third of the population is South Asian, and 16 percent are Javanese (from Indonesia).

**Emigration and Transnational Networks**

Movement within Latin America and between Latin America and North America has had a significant impact on Latino settlement patterns. Within Latin America, shifting economic and political realities have shaped immigrants’ destinations. Venezuela’s oil wealth, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, attracted between 1 million and 2 million Colombian immigrants, who worked as domestic or agricultural laborers. Argentina has long been a destination for Bolivian and Paraguayan laborers. And sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic have relied on Haitian labor, just as farmers in the United States have depended on Mexican laborers. Political turmoil has also sparked waves of international migrants and refugees, such as the Cuban flight from Fidel Castro in the 1960s, the Chilean exodus during General Augusto Pinochet’s reign in the 1970s, and the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s.

One of the largest migrant flows continues to be Mexicans to the United States. In 2007, 28 million people in the US claimed Mexican ancestry according to the US Census Bureau and, of those, approximately 12 million were immigrants. Mexican labor migration to the United States dates back to the late 1800s, when relatively unskilled labor was recruited to work in agriculture, mining and railroads. Today, roughly 60 percent of the Hispanic population (both foreign born and native born) in the United States claim Mexican ancestry. Mexican immigrants are most concentrated in California and Texas, but increasingly they are found throughout the United States. Although Mexicans continue to have the greatest presence among Latinos in the United States, the number of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil has steadily grown. The US Census Bureau estimates there were 48.4 million Hispanics in the United States (both foreign and native born) in 2009. Most of this population has ancestral ties with peoples from Latin America.

Today, Latin America is seen as a region of emigration rather than one of immigration. Both skilled and unskilled workers from Latin America are an important source of labor in North America, Europe, and Japan. Many of these immigrants send monthly remittances to their home countries to sustain family members. In 2007, it was estimated that immigrants sent over $65 billion to Latin America, most of which came from workers in the United States. Through remittances and technological advances that make communication faster and cheaper, immigrants maintain close contact with their home countries in ways
that earlier generations could not. Scholars have labeled this ability to straddle livelihoods between two countries as "transnationalism." A cultural and an economic outcome of globalization, transnationalism highlights the social and economic links that form between home and host countries (Jackiewicz and Bosco 2008). Declining economic opportunities within Latin America have forced many individuals to emigrate in order to sustain their families. In the process, a new human geography is being created, one that extends well beyond regional boundaries.

Language
Roughly two-thirds of Latin Americans are Spanish speakers, and one-third speak Portuguese. These colonial languages were so prevalent by the nineteenth century that they were the unquestioned languages of government and instruction for the newly independent Latin American republics. In fact, until recently many countries actively discouraged, even repressed, native languages. Because Spanish and Portuguese dominate, there is a tendency to overlook the persistence of native languages. In the central Andes of Peru, Bolivia, and southern Ecuador, over 10 million people still speak Quechua and Aymara. In Paraguay and lowland Bolivia, there are 4 million Guarani speakers; in southern Mexico and Guatemala, at least 6–8 million speak Mayan languages. Small groups of native-language speakers are found scattered throughout the sparsely settled interior of South America and the more isolated forests of Central America, but many of these languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers.

Due to the more complex colonial history of the Caribbean, other languages are spoken there. Roughly 10 million people speak French (Haiti, French Guiana, and the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe); 6 million speak English (Jamaica, Belize, Guyana, Trinidad, and other smaller islands of the Lesser Antilles); and there are about half a million Dutch speakers (Suriname and several small islands). Yet these figures tell only part of the story. Typically, colloquial variants of the official language exist that can be difficult for a non-native speaker to understand. In some cases, completely new languages emerge; in the Dutch islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao, Papinamento (a trading language that blends Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and African languages) is the lingua franca, with usage of Dutch declining. Similarly, patois (French Creole) in Haiti has constitutional status as a distinct language. In practice, French is used in higher education, government, and the courts in Haiti, but patois (with clear African influences) is the language of the street, the home, and oral tradition.

Religion
Like language, the Roman Catholic faith appears to have been imposed on the region without challenge. As Hannah Stewart-Gambino shows in Chapter 12,
most countries report between 70 percent and 90 percent of their population as Catholic. Every major city has dozens of churches, and even the smallest hamlet maintains a graceful church on its central square. In countries like El Salvador and Uruguay, a sizable portion of the population attend Protestant evangelical churches, but the Catholic core of this region is still intact.

Yet exactly what native peoples absorbed of the Christian faith is unclear. Throughout Latin America, syncretic religions—the blending of different belief systems—enabled animist practices to be folded into Christian worship. These blends took hold and endured, in part, because the Christian saints were easy surrogates for pre-Christian gods and because the Catholic Church tolerated local variations in worship as long as the process of conversion was under way. The Mayan practice of paying tribute to spirits of the underworld seems to be replicated today in Mexico and Guatemala via the practice of building small cave shrines to favorite Catholic saints and leaving offerings of fresh flowers and fruits. One of the most celebrated religious icons in Mexico is Guadalupe, a dark-skinned virgin seen by an Indian shepherd boy. Thought to intercede on behalf of the poor, Guadalupe has become the patron saint of Mexico.

Syncretic religious practices also evolved and endured among African slaves. Millions of Brazilians practice the African-based religions of Umbanda, Macumba, and Candomblé along with Catholicism. In many parts of southern Brazil, Umbanda is as popular with people of European ancestry as with Afro-Brazilians. Typically, people become familiar with Umbanda after falling victim to a magician’s spell by having some object of black magic buried outside their home. In order to regain control of their life, they need the help of a priest or priestess. In the Caribbean, Afro-religious traditions have evolved into unique forms that have clear ties to West Africa. The most widely practiced are Vodou in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, and Obeah in Jamaica.

**Race and Inequality**

There is much to admire about race relations in the Americas. The complex racial and ethnic mix that was created in Latin America fostered tolerance for diversity. Nevertheless, as Kevin A. Yelvington shows in Chapter 9, Amerindians and people of African ancestry are disproportionately represented among the poor of the region. More than ever, racial discrimination is a major political issue in Brazil. Reports of organized killings of street children, most of them Afro-Brazilian, make headlines. For decades, Brazil espoused its vision of a color-blind racial democracy that refused to address racism. Evidence from northeastern Brazil, where Afro-Brazilians are the majority, shows death rates approaching those of some of the world’s poorest countries. Throughout Brazil, Afro-Brazilians suffer higher rates of homelessness, landlessness, illiteracy, and unemployment. The past few years have seen dramatic changes in
Brazilians society as affirmative action measures have been implemented to open opportunities for Afro-Brazilians. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s government also launched a major poverty reduction program that has seen improvements in income and a reduction in income inequality.

Similarly, in areas of Latin America where indigenous cultures are strong, one also finds low socioeconomic indicators. In most countries, mapping areas where native languages are widely spoken invariably corresponds with areas of persistent poverty. In Mexico, the indigenous south lags behind the booming north and Mexico City. Prejudice is embedded in the language; to call someone an indio is an insult in Mexico. In Bolivia, women who dress in the native style of full pleated skirts and bowler hats are called cholas. This descriptive term, referring to the rural mestizo population, has negative connotations of backwardness and even cowardice. No one of high social standing, regardless of skin color, would ever be called a chola or cholo. But native people are mobilizing. The presidencies of Alejandro Toledo in Peru (2001–2006) and Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006–present), both of Amerindian heritage, is a hopeful sign of greater inclusion.

It is difficult to separate status divisions based on class from those based on race. From the days of conquest, being European meant an immediate elevation in status over the indigenous, African, and mestizo populations. Class awareness is strong. Race does not necessarily determine one’s economic standing, but it certainly influences it. These class differences express themselves in the landscape. In the large cities and their handsome suburbs, country clubs and trendy shopping centers are found. High-rise luxury apartment buildings with beautiful terraces offer all the modern amenities, including maids’ quarters. The elite and the middle class even show a preference for decentralized suburban living and dependence on automobiles, much like North Americans. Yet near these same residences are shantytowns where urban squatters build their own homes, create their own economy, and eke out a living.

**Geography of the Possible**

Latin America was the first region in the developing world to be fully colonized by Europe. In the process, perhaps 90 percent of the indigenous population died due to disease, cruelty, and forced resettlement. The slow demographic recovery of indigenous peoples and the continual arrival of Europeans and Africans resulted in an unprecedented level of racial and cultural mixing. It took nearly 400 years for the population of Latin America to reach 50 million again, its precontact level. During this long period, European culture, technology, and political systems were transplanted and modified. Indigenous peoples integrated livestock and wheat into their agricultural practices, but held true to their preference for native corn, potatoes, and cassava. In short, a syncretic process unfolded, in which many indigenous customs were preserved beneath
the veneer of Iberian ones. Over time, a blending of indigenous, Iberian, and African influences gave distinction to this part of the world. The music, literature, and artistry of Latin America are widely acknowledged.

Compared with Asia or Europe, Latin America is relatively lightly populated, yet still rich in natural resources. However, as population continues to grow along with economic expectations, there is considerable concern that much of this natural endowment could be squandered for short-term gains. In the midst of a boom in natural resource extraction, popular concern for the state of the environment is mixed. Latin Americans are more likely to mobilize around issues of clean water and air in urban environments than biological diversity in remote forest settings. But the creation and maintenance of large national parks and a growing tourism and ecotourism industry are likely to garner support for conservation.

In Latin America, the trend toward modernization began in the 1950s, and the pace of change has been rapid. Unlike people in other developing areas, most Latin Americans live in cities. This shift started early and reflects a cultural bias toward urban living with roots in the colonial past. Not everyone who came to the city found employment; thus, the dynamics of the informal sector were set in place. Even though population growth rates have declined, the overall makeup of the population is young. Serious challenges lie ahead in educating and finding employment for the cohort under the age of fifteen. Those who cannot find work often consider emigrating to other parts of Latin America, North America, Europe, or elsewhere to seek better economic opportunities, contributing to the so-called brain drain that adversely impacts societies struggling to promote socioeconomic development.

Latin America is one of the world regions that North Americans are most likely to visit. The trend, of course, is to visit the northern fringe of this region. Tourism is robust along Mexico’s border and coastal resorts. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to visit one area in the region and generalize for all of it. Although it is historically sound to think of Latin America as a major world region, extreme variations in the physical environment, levels of social and economic development, and the influence of indigenous society exist. Therefore, underlying the unifying factors, these differences add much to the texture and complexity of Latin America, making it one of the world’s most ecologically and culturally rich regions.

Bibliography


