Skidmore et. al. Modern Latin America. Oxford: New York, 2010.

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Why Latin America?

"The U.S. will do anything for Latin America, except read about it." So wrote the late James Reston, for many years the legendary dean of U.S. political journalists. Are there reasons why we should try to prove him wrong?

There are several. First, our nation's economic interests are deeply involved in the region. Latin America is one of our major trading partners. It is the site of much U.S. investment and a source for oil and other critical raw materials. An acceleration of growth in key countries—such as Mexico and Brazil—may soon produce significant new powers on the world scene.

We have close political links. Revolutionary upheavals and anti-American movements in Latin America have posed significant challenges for U.S. foreign policy. They have raised serious questions about how best to define, protect, and promote our national interests. U.S. presidents of both political parties have consistently acknowledged the importance of the region. President George H. W. Bush, a Republican, sought a special relationship with Mexico and in 1990 proposed a free trade agreement that would tighten economic bonds between all of Latin America and the United States. Bill Clinton, a Democrat, followed up in 1994 by hosting a hemispheric "Summit of the Americas." George W. Bush, Republican, selected Mexico as the site for his first foreign visit in 2001. And as president-elect, Barack Obama, Democrat, held a private meeting with Mexico's chief executive before taking office in 2009.

There is another consideration here at home. Large sections of our country have become Latinized by the influence of migrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central America, the Caribbean, and even Brazil. This is in addition to the Hispanic descendants of the original Spanish-speaking population of what was once part of Mexico. Migration, both historical and recent, has brought peoples and customs from Latin America to the American Southwest (from Texas to California), Florida, and New York. Many major U.S. cities now have more children from Spanish-speaking families than from any other group. Bilingualism has become a political issue forcing us to rethink the meaning of Spanish-speaking America, both within our borders and beyond.

Most U.S. citizens (or "North Americans," as we are commonly called in Latin America) know little about our neighboring societies to the south. Many believe that the United States can impose its will on the region through "big-stick" diplomacy or military might. Others do not even care. Still others entertain obsolete stereotypes about the peoples of the region: the "Latin lover," the "Frito Bandito," the soulful Che Guevara, the Brazilian mulatta carnival queens—these are the images that often first come to mind.

When we move beyond these caricatures, we find Latin America to be a complex region. It is not an easy place to understand. Geographically, it includes the land mass extending from the Rio Grande (between Texas and Mexico) to the southern tip of South America, plus a number of Caribbean islands: a total area two and one-half times the size of the United States. Physical features present sharp differences: from the Andean mountain range, stretching the full length of western South America, to the tropical forest of the Amazon basin, from the arid deserts of northern Mexico to the fertile grasslands of the Argentine pampa.

It is a land of great ethnic and demographic diversity. The people of Latin America contain elements and mixtures of varied racial groups—native Indians,

U.S. Stereotypes of Latin America

Some time ago, a prominent agency for public opinion research conducted a nationwide poll in which respondents were given a card with nineteen words on it and asked to indicate which words best described the people of Central and South America. The results were as follows:

Dark-skinned	80%	Imaginative	23%
Quick-tempered	49%	Shrewd	16%
Emotional	47%	Intelligent	15%
Religious	45%	Honest	13%
Backward	44%	Brave	12%
Lazy	41%	Generous	12%
Ignorant	34%	Progressive	11%
Suspicious	32%	Efficient	5%
Friendly	30%	No answer	4%
Dirty	28%	No opinion	0%
Proud	26%		

Since respondents were asked to pick as many descriptive terms as they liked, percentages add to considerably more than 100.

From John J. Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), p. 18.

white Europeans, black Africans, Chinese, Japanese, and immigrants from all over the world. Nations differ importantly in population size (Brazil being nearly five times larger than Argentina, for instance, and more than ten times larger than Chile). By 2007 the total population of Latin America came to more than 550 million, compared with 300 million in the United States.

As an expression of this cultural mosaic, languages abound. Spanish is spoken almost everywhere, one might think—except in Brazil (Portuguese), part of the Andes (Quechua, Aymara, and other indigenous languages), the Caribbean (French, English, and Dutch), Mexico (scattered pockets of indigenous languages), and Guatemala (over twenty Indian languages).

Furthermore, Latin American society displays startling contrasts—between rich and poor, between city and country, between learned and illiterate, between the powerful lord of the hacienda and the deferential peasant, between wealthy entrepreneurs and desperate street urchins. Politically, Latin America includes twenty nations, large and small, whose recent experience ranges from military dictatorship to electoral democracy to a socialist regime.* Economically, Latin America belongs to the "developing" world, beset by historical and contemporary obstacles to rapid economic growth, but here too there is diversity—from the one-crop dependency of tiny Honduras to the industrial promise of dynamic Brazil.

Throughout their modern history Latin Americans have sought, with greater or lesser zeal, to achieve political and economic independence from colonial, imperial, and neo-imperial powers. Thus, it is bitterly ironic that the phrase *Latin America* was popularized by mid-nineteenth-century French, who thought that since their culture, like that of Spanish and Portuguese America, was "Latin" (i.e., Romance language–speaking), France could claim imperial leadership throughout the continent.

CONTRAST AND PARADOX

As these observations suggest, Latin America resists facile categorization. It is a region rich in paradox. This insight yields a number of instructive clues.

First, Latin America is both young and old. Beginning in 1492, its conquest by the Spanish and Portuguese created a totally new social order based on domination, hierarchy, and the intermingling of European, African, and indigenous elements. The European intrusion profoundly and ineradicably altered indigenous communities. Compared with the ancient civilizations of Africa and Asia, these Latin American societies are relatively young. On the other hand, most nations of Latin America obtained political independence—from Spain and Portugal—in the early nineteenth century, more than 100 years before successful anticolonial

* This is a conservative count. It does not include Belize, French Guiana, Suriname, Guadeloupe, Martinique, English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, or the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The official tally of all entities in Latin America and the Caribbean comes to 41.

Map 1 Contemporary Latin America

movements in other developing areas. By the standard of nationhood, therefore, Latin America is relatively old.

Second, Latin America has throughout its history been both tumultuous and stable. The Conquest began a tradition of political violence that has erupted in coups, assassinations, armed movements, military interventions, and (more rarely) social revolutions. Ideological encounters between liberalism, positivism, corporatism, anarchism, socialism, communism, fascism, and religious teachings of every doctrinal hue have sharpened the intensity of struggle. Despite the differing forms of political conflict, old social and economic structures have persisted. Even where modern revolutions have struck, as in Mexico (1910), Bolivia (1952), and Cuba (1959), many aspects of traditional society survive. While the advent of political democracy in recent years might look like an abrupt departure from the past, underlying continuities nonetheless persist. The pull of history continues to be strong.

Third, Latin America has been both independent and dependent, autonomous and subordinate. The achievement of nationhood by 1830 in all but parts of the Caribbean basin represented an assertion of sovereignty rooted in Enlightenment thought. Yet a new form of penetration by external powers—first Britain and France, then the United States—jeopardized this nationhood. Economic and political weakness vis-à-vis Europe and North America has frequently limited the choices available to Latin American policymakers. Within Latin America, power is ironically ambiguous: it is the supreme commodity, but it has only a limited effect.

Fourth, Latin America is both prosperous and poor. Ever since the Conquest, the region has been described as a fabulous treasure house of natural resources. First came the European lust for silver and gold. Today the urge may be for petroleum, gas, copper, iron ore, coffee, sugar, soybeans, or for expanded trade in general, but the image of endless wealth remains. In startling contrast, there is also the picture of poverty: peasants without tools, workers without jobs, children without food, mothers without hope. An aphorism oft repeated in Latin America summarizes this scene: "Latin America is a beggar atop a mountain of gold."

One can easily think of additional contrasts, but these should illustrate the difficulty—and fascination—in trying to come to grips with such complex and contradictory realities. To understand Latin American history and society requires a flexible, broad-gauge approach, and this is what we offer in this book. We draw on the work of many scholars, presenting our own interpretation, but also acquainting the reader with alternative views.

Interpretations of Latin America

For generations most analysts of modern Latin America stressed the area's political instability, marked frequently by dictatorship. North American and European observers were especially fascinated by three questions: Why dictatorships? Why not democracy? Why so much disorder? In 1930, a prominent American social scientist observed, "The years roll on and there arise the anxieties and disappointments of an ill-equipped people attempting to establish true republican forms of government." A British scholar also noted that "the political history of the republics has been a record of alternating periods of liberty and despotism." Implicitly assuming or explicitly asserting that their style of democracy is superior to all other models of political organization, foreign writers frequently asked what was "wrong" with Latin America. Or with Latin Americans themselves.

What passed for answers was for many years a jumble of racist epithets, psychological simplifications, geographical platitudes, and cultural distortions.

According to such views, Latin America could not achieve democracy because dark-skinned peoples (Indians and blacks) were unsuited for it; because passionate Latin tempers would not stand it; because tropical climates somehow prevented it; or because Roman Catholic doctrines inhibited it.

Each charge had its refutation: dictatorial rule flourished in predominantly white countries, such as Argentina, as well as among mixed-blood societies, such as Mexico; it appeared in temperate climes, such as Chile, not only in the tropics, such as Cuba; it gained support from non-Catholics and nonpracticing Catholics, while many fervent worshippers fought for liberty; and, as shown by authoritarian regimes outside Latin America, such as Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union, dictatorship is not restricted to any single temperament. Such explanations did not merely prove to be inadequate. When carried to extremes, they helped justify rapidly increasing U.S. and European penetration—financial, cultural, military—of the "backward" republics to the south.

The scholarly scene improved in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when North American social scientists formulated "modernization theory." As applied to Latin America, this approach held that economic growth would generate the social change that would in turn make possible more "developed" politics. The transition from a rural to an urban society would bring a change in values. People would begin to relate to and participate in the voluntary organizations that authentic democracy requires. Most important, a middle class would emerge—to play both a progressive and moderating role. Latin America and its citizenries were not so inherently "different" from Europe and North America. Instead they were simply "behind."

Modernization adepts thought the historical record showed this process was well under way in Latin America. One optimistic U.S. scholar maintained in the 1950s that the "middle sectors" had "become stabilizers and harmonizers and in the process have learned the dangers of dealing in absolute postulates." Similarly, the author of a late 1970s history textbook saw "Latin American history since independence . . . as modernization growing slowly against the resistance of old institutions and attitudes."

Reality, however, proved harsher. Instead of spreading general prosperity, economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s generally made income distribution more unequal. The gap in living standards between city and countryside grew. The middle strata, relatively privileged, forged a sense of "class consciousness" which, in critical moments of decision, led them to join the ruling classes in opposition to the popular masses. Politics took an authoritarian turn, producing military governments. And in stark contradiction of modernization theory, these patterns emerged in the most developed—and most rapidly developing—countries of the continent. What had gone wrong?

Two sets of answers came forth. One group of scholars focused on the cultural traditions of Latin America and their Spanish and Portuguese origins. These analysts argued, in effect, that antidemocratic politics was a product of a Roman Catholic and Mediterranean worldview that stressed the need for harmony, order, and the elimination of conflict. Latin America's constitutions were never as democratic as they appeared, party politics was not as representative as it might have looked. The North American and European academic community, afflicted by its own myopia and biases, had simply misread the social facts.

A second group of scholars accepted modernization theory's linking of socio-economic causes with political outcomes but turned the answer upside down: Latin America's economic development was qualitatively different from that of North America and West Europe, and therefore it produced different political results. Specifically, these scholars argued, Latin America's experience was determined by the pervasive fact of its economic dependence. "By dependency," as one exponent of this viewpoint has explained,

> we mean a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected. The relation of interdependence between two or more economies, and between these and world trade, assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and be self-sustaining, while other countries (the dependent ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion, which can have either a positive or a negative effect on their immediate development.

By its intrinsic character, "dependent development" generated social inequities, allocating benefits to sectors participating in the global economy and denying them to other groups. In a country with abundant land, for example, the upper-class elite might reap large profits from agricultural exports while workers and peasants would gain little or nothing at all. Because of their interest in maintaining the status quo, landowners would have little reason to invest in diversification of the local economy—thus creating a situation characterized as "growth without development." When growth occurred, moreover, it would be vulnerable to substantial risk: if overseas markets contracted or prices declined, the entire economy would suffer. In other words, prosperity was dependent on factors and decisions well beyond the control of national authorities.

The proponents of "*dependencia* theory," as it quickly came to be known, maintained that economic dependency led to political authoritarianism. According to this view, the "dependent" location of Latin America's economics placed inherent limitations on the region's capacity for growth, especially in industry. The surest sign of this economic trouble was a crisis in the foreign accounts—the country's ability to pay for needed imports. Exports lagged behind imports, and the difference could only be made up by capital inflow. But the foreign creditors—firms, banks, international agencies such as the World Bank—denied the necessary extra financing because they believed the government could not impose the necessary "sacrifices." Political strategy fell hostage to the need to convince the foreign creditors.

The most frequent solution in the 1960s and 1970s was a military coup. The resulting dictatorship could then take its "hard" decisions, usually highly unpopular

anti-inflation measures. Hardest hit were the lower classes. Implementation of such policies therefore required a heavy hand over the popular sectors. Thus, the coups and repressive authoritarian regimes that emerged in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile came about not in spite of Latin America's economic development, but because of it.

Within this overall context, the still-ongoing cycle of democratization throughout the region caught many observers—and experienced scholars—by surprise. Starting in the late 1970s, country after country replaced authoritarian regimes with civilian leaders and elected governments. Explanations for this trend took many forms. Once thought to be dominant and monolithic, authoritarian regimes came to display a good deal of incoherence and fragility. Everyday citizens rose up in protest movements, formed civic organizations, and demanded popular elections. Confronted by severe economic crisis, people from Argentina and Chile to Central America sought to express their political rights. Whether or not these new electoral regimes were fully "democratic," a point that led to much debate, they represented considerable improvement over the blatantly dictatorial patterns of previous eras.

Scholars approached these developments with intellectual caution. Instead of launching grand theories, such as modernization or dependency, political analysts stressed the role of beliefs, ideas, and human conviction. Some interpreted the turn toward democracy in Latin America and elsewhere as a global triumph of U.S. values, especially in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union (and the discrediting of Marxist ideology). Others emphasized the importance of leadership and tactical maneuvers at the elite level. Still others stressed the emergence of "civil society," especially the networks of grassroots organizations that gave shape and coherence to anti-authoritarian sentiments. And it was noted, too, that ideological traditions had ever since the 1820s enshrined the ideal of democracy as a widespread *aspiration* throughout Latin America, even if it had been systematically denied for decades on end.

Economic prospects brightened as well. Under pressure from international creditors throughout the 1980s, Latin American leaders imposed far-reaching measures designed to "liberalize" their national economies—reducing tariffs and other barriers to trade, selling state-supported companies to private investors, and curtailing deficit spending. Inflation declined and foreign investment increased. As a result, average growth in Latin America rose from a scant 1.5 percent per year in 1985–89 to 3.2 percent in the 1990s. But the unexpected onset of financial crisis in Mexico in late 1994 and in Brazil in early 1999, and Argentina's disastrous economic collapse in 2001, led to disenchantment and confusion. Hopes for economic development picked up from 2004 through 2007, when overall growth rates exceeded 5 percent, but the global economic crisis of 2008–09 brought this positive phase to a sharp and sudden end. Once again, the economic outlook for Latin America was plagued by uncertainty and doubt.

Within the economic realm, some experts regarded the growth spurt of the early 1990s as vindication for pro-capitalist, free-market policy reforms. Others noted that the surge tended to reflect the ebb and flow of international investments, and that capital promptly vanished in the face of crisis—leaving Latin

America just as "dependent" as before. Of continuing concern, for many, was the problematic relationship between economic and political transformation. Does economic liberalization lead to political democracy? Or might it be the other way around? Recent developments in Latin America thus raise new questions and pose continuing intellectual challenges.

Analytical Themes in This Book

This book is a survey of Latin American history, not a formulation of social theory, but we cannot escape the need for a conceptual framework in approaching our material. From modernization theory we borrow two central ideas:

- the causal premise that economic transformations induce social changes which, in turn, lead to political consequences; and
- the related idea that shifting alliances among social class groups give shape to changing patterns of political conflict over time.

For these reasons, each of our case study chapters includes an overview section on "economic growth and social change" that precedes the discussion of politics.*

While the original *dependencia* approach has long since disappeared from academic fashion, we still regard its basic framework as a useful heuristic device. Accordingly, we adopt the notions that:

- a country's place in the international division of labor defines the shape of available paths to economic growth;
- functional location on the "periphery" of the world system, as distinct from the commercial-industrial "center," and development at a stage when the North Atlantic system was already far advanced, meant that economic transformations in Latin America would be different from patterns traversed earlier in Europe and North America;
- these differences in economic processes would produce different forms of social change—with respect, for example, to the nature of the "middle classes," the urban and rural working classes, and the relationship among these classes;
- this combination of social and economic forces would define the options available to political leaders and help explain the alteration of democratic and authoritarian regimes;
- within these constraints, some Latin American countries did much better than others in exploiting their own resources (especially agricultural) for economic development.

* Our sole exception is Mexico (Chapter 3), where the Revolution of 1910 exerted such a strong influence on the nation's development that we chose to employ a different format.

In this context, it is essential to acknowledge the great variations in resources, capacities, and circumstances of nations in the region. Those with large populations and diversified natural resources (Mexico and Brazil) were eventually able to undertake substantial programs of industrialization. Those with essential raw materials, such as petroleum (Venezuela) and natural gas (Bolivia), managed at times to benefit from rising prices on world markets. Elsewhere, the presence of copper and other industrial metals (Chile and Peru) led foreign companies to establish large-scale mining operations. And in tropical and semitropical areas, conditions of climate and soil encouraged the cultivation of sugar (especially in the Caribbean) that gave rise to what we refer to as "plantation societies." A key challenge for all countries of the region has been how to transform the earnings from commodity exports into processes of economic diversification and self-sustaining development.

In other words, we intend to examine the relationship between society, culture, economics, and politics within an international context. We believe that this approach can be applied to the entire modern era. We shall be looking for such connections throughout the book.

We acknowledge limitations in this (or any) approach. We believe that historical transformations are complex processes, and to understand them we need to adopt a multicausal approach. Ideas and ideology, for example, are not merely adornments or superstructures; they have important effects on the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of the people who make history. Anyone who has ever tried to compare the political traditions of Argentina and Brazil can vouch for this truth. Demographic factors, such as rapid population growth, also have far-ranging social and political effects. In our portrait of Latin American society, we hope to integrate an "international political economy" approach with consideration of cultural and other noneconomic forces.

Our narrative begins by describing first the Conquest and the colonial period, 1492–1825, when Latin America entered the periphery of the capitalist world-system through subordination to Spain and Portugal. We then describe how the disruption of this connection led to independence, followed by a phase of economic and political consolidation between 1830 and 1880.

The core of the book presents in-depth case studies of long-term transitions from the nineteenth century to the present. We have deliberately adopted a longitudinal focus on individual nations (or clusters of nations) in order to facilitate the detection and analysis of historical change over time. In addition, the material in this section provides empirical evidence for testing, evaluating, and creating broad conceptual frameworks (any theoretical framework, we insist, not only the ones that we employ here). Chapters appear in the following order:

- Mexico, a close neighbor to the United States, the scene of a major popular upheaval in 1910;

- Central America and the Caribbean, areas characterized by plantation economies and American domination (such geographical units are properly regarded as "subregions," since we often refer to all of Latin America as a "region");
- Cuba, an island so dependent on sugar and so close to the Florida shore, the one Latin American society that has undergone a full-fledged socialist revolution;
- The central Andes (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador), a subregion with strong indigenous traditions and uncertain steps toward stability and nationhood;
- Colombia, a nation where political democracy coexists with extensive drug trafficking in an atmosphere of systemic violence;
- Venezuela, a world-class producer of oil with a formerly stable two-party democracy that has given way to authoritarian rule;
- Argentina, a country blessed by fertile and productive pampas, wracked by internal strife and military intervention before the recent resumption of democracy;
- Chile, a leading source of nitrates and copper and the site of an abortive socialist experiment; and
- Brazil, an expansive nation so well known for its traditional emphasis on coffee and, more recently, its rapid industrial growth amid a democratic political transition.

We give full consideration to social and political themes in every one of the case studies, and each chapter can be read independently.

A subsequent section offers analytical syntheses and summaries. One chapter reviews economic strategies and policies; another locates patterns of political transformation within comparative perspective; the third and final essay concludes the book with an examination of national cultures, intellectual trends, and forms of artistic expression.

This book offers a picture of Latin American society, not a definitive catalog of facts. Our goal is to trace patterns and trends that help us to understand the complexities and variations in Latin America's paths to the present. We hope our presentation will stimulate discussion and debate, and we expect that students and colleagues will disagree with many of our interpretations. Above all, we want to introduce our readers to the excitement and fascination of the history of an area that is intriguing in its own right and has a vital role to play on the world stage.