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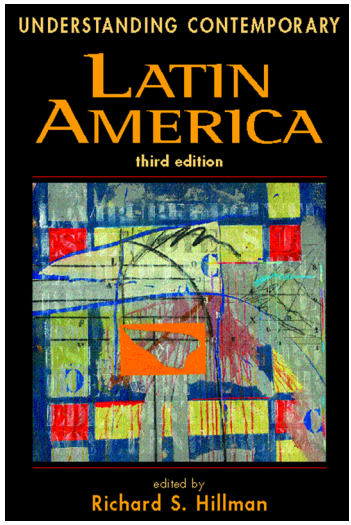
Understanding Contemporary Latin America

3RD EDITION



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Introduction

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Two basic questions constitute a point of departure for our study: first, What constitutes Latin America, and second, Who are the Latin Americans? Responses to these questions are far more complicated than they may appear at first. Latin America can be defined as a region in a variety of ways. Some definitions are based on geopolitical and strategic concerns, others on common languages and cultures. Some include only Hispanic countries, excluding the Anglo-Caribbean, the Francophone countries, and Brazil; whereas others include these areas, as well as French Canada, part of Louisiana, southern Florida, and the southwestern United States because of their "Latin" influence and cultural connections.

Similarly, many theories have been advanced regarding the inhabitants of the Americas. The most widely accepted view holds that, initially, groups of Asians crossed the Bering Straits, migrated south, and settled in North and South America. Another suggests that these groups crossed the Pacific Ocean on rafts. Yet others maintain that human life originated in South America. José Vasconcelos, a Mexican intellectual, posited in 1948 that Latin Americans had become a "cosmic race," combining the strengths of different ethnic groups that have inhabited the region. Each theory is based on a plausible interpretation of certain aspects of the available evidence, and each definition has its own logic. Thus, a comprehensive approach is required to respond adequately to what are actually complex, rather than simple, questions about the nature of the area and the people we seek to understand.

Let us begin to formulate responses by considering one of the first encounters between a Native American and a European in the early sixteenth century. Montezuma, leader of the Aztec civilization, is reported to

have told Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés, "We have known for a long time, from the chronicles of our forefathers, that neither I, nor those who inhabit this country, are descendants from the aborigines of it, but from strangers who came to it from very distant parts" (Keen 1966:47). According to Cortés's account in his letters to the king of Spain, Montezuma then related an ancient story that legitimized Spanish sovereignty in the Americas. But Montezuma added a comment that would have portentous significance in subsequent history: "Look at me," he said, "and see that I am flesh and bones, the same as you, and everybody, and that I am mortal, and tangible" (Keen 1966:48). Since the first contact between Europeans and Native Americans, Latin Americans have been trying to define themselves and their region. Who would govern this New World inhabited by the progeny of "strangers"? What kind of world would it become?

The story of Latin America's Indian origins, conquest by European powers, struggles for independence, and twentieth-century search for political and economic stability is an action-filled drama, revealing protagonists whose cultural differences have brought about conflicts as well as coalitions. Contemporary Latin America's increasingly important role in world politics makes essential a comprehensive understanding of how its history is rooted in a complex and turbulent past. Popular discussions of Latin America and inter-American affairs, however, are generally charged with high levels of passion and scanty knowledge, resulting all too often in mutual misunderstanding, due to unfortunate stereotypes on both sides. For example, some North Americans argue vehemently about their need to protect themselves against violent Latin American revolutionaries who threaten political stability in their backyard, illegal immigrants who steal jobs from U.S. workers, and narcotraffickers who poison U.S. youth. And some Latin Americans fear the malevolent intentions of the "colossus of the North" that has seemed to intervene continuously in their domestic affairs.[1] They exhibit a strong tendency to resent U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and blame the violence occasioned by drug cartels on the demands of the U.S. market. Yet, many Latin Americans seek upward mobility by emigrating to the United States, thereby causing their "love-hate" relationship to confound many observers.

During the Cold War, many U.S. citizens excitedly propounded the merits of military incursions or covert operations in places like Grenada, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. When asked to locate these countries on a map, name their major cities, account for their economic status, or place them in historical context, however, they were clueless. Far too many North Americans are apt to locate Cuba in Central America or Argentina in the Caribbean and to assume Brazilians speak Spanish. Moreover, public opinion on many issues in both

the United States and Latin America has become profoundly divided in the post–Cold War era. The plight of Cuba is a case in point. To many observers, the U.S. economic embargo and diplomatic isolation of Cuba have constituted a misuse of power to the extreme detriment of masses of Cubans, who, as a result, must endure suffering and hardship.[2] Many others believe Cuba's development problems should be attributed solely to Fidel Castro's adoption of the socialist model. In either case, ideological dogmatism has been reinforced by insufficient understanding and vilification of U.S. foreign policy on the one hand or of Castroism on the other. Could it be that this is not a mutually exclusive proposition, that, in fact, both sides have contributed to the dilemma?

Unfortunately, stereotypes and myths that have fostered public impressions, as well as political actions, are deeply embedded in popular culture. Frederick Pike (1992) has amply documented the pervasiveness of this type of thinking, from the speeches of early statesmen, like Thomas Jefferson and Simón Bolívar, to virtually continuous references in literature, art, cinema, and the media. According to Jefferson, for example, the superior U.S. culture would supplant the inferior Latin American culture. He held that "it is impossible not to look forward to distant times when our rapid multiplication will expand itself . . . and cover the whole northern, if not the whole southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws" (Pike 1992:19). Such thinking has fueled historical U.S. imperialism, as well as contemporary reactions to waves of Hispanic immigrants, such as the "English only" movement. Ironically, Bolívar predicted the United States would "afflict Latin America in the name of liberty" (Pike 1992:18), leading Pike to conclude that "the degree to which American stereotypes of Latin Americans are reinforced by—and perhaps sometimes even originate in—Latin Americans' stereotypes of themselves [is impressive]" (Pike 1992:116).

Impressions reflected in advertising and the popular media perpetuate myths. In a free association of ideas, what are the first images that come to mind when identifying Latin Americans? If you think of the silly Frito Bandito or *el exigente*, whose favorable judgment of a coffee bean results in an instant fiesta for a whole village, you are not alone. Nor would you be unique in conjuring up the idea of the "Latin lover" or the romantic revolutionary. Regarding politics, a U.S. traveler in Latin America reported that "the value of stability in government is something they [Latin Americans] cannot be made to understand. It is not in their power to see it, and the desire for change and revolution is in the blood" (Pike 1992:68). Similarly, *machismo* is equated with the oppression of women, the *siesta* with laziness, music and dancing with today, work and planning with *mañana* (Hillman 2003).

Many Latin Americans also hold distorted perceptions of the United

States and its citizens. These views vary from the vulgar notion that all *gringos* carry guns and walk on gold-paved streets to the more sophisticated analysis of the United States as a materialistic, mercenary culture of acquisition, devoid of the higher virtues of family loyalty, honor, and personalism. In this regard, José Enrique Rodó of Uruguay wrote *Ariel* in 1900 as a glorification of Latin America's superior cultural sensitivity. His ideas influenced other Latin American critics of the United States, such as José Martí of Cuba and Rubén Darío of Nicaragua, thus contributing to an anti-yanqui sentiment. Hence, mutual misperceptions, stereotypes, and myths abound, making a more penetrating and realistic portrayal of the region particularly important in an era of global change. The basic problem, according to Pike (1992:364), is that "Americans remain reluctant to accept the fact that their country has become a frontier for Latin Americans. For generations, after all, Americans had assumed that Latin America was their frontier. Old myths, like hoary stereotypes, die hard."

Recognition of the highly misleading and counterproductive nature of portrayals of Latin America as somehow more "natural" and less civilized than the developed North is essential for understanding the region. This book is an attempt to promote such recognition through exploration of basic ideas and information that will contribute to debunking various myths about contemporary Latin America. The fundamental theme of "unity in diversity" provides a comprehensive organizing concept. Using this approach, the authors emphasize the significance of the area as a whole, along with ample references to the individual countries within the region and their history, geography, and political culture. Our examination encompasses all territory in the Western Hemisphere south of the United States. (Latin American enclaves within North America can be understood in the context of their ties to the region.) Hence, areas within Latin America include Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Countries within these areas form part of Ibero-, Luso-, Indo-, Afro-, and Hispano-America. Subareas such as the Anglo, French, and Dutch Caribbean are also included because of underlying similarities that transcend apparent differences.[3]

Great diversities of peoples, institutions, and geography in Latin America coalesce in common historical, social, political, and developmental patterns. Various combinations of these patterns, similar socioeconomic problems, and analogous cultural expressions permit a unified vision of Latin America. Therefore, each chapter in this volume draws examples from several countries within the various areas of Latin America, thus allowing the text as a whole to offer a balanced representation of the entire region. The authors use a variety of specific cases to illustrate their general overviews of the geographic setting, historical context, political evolution, and political issues; the role of the military; the ways in which economic

systems function; the impacts of urbanization, demographic trends, and the environment; the influences of ethnicity, class, and nationalism; the role of women; the relationship between education and development; the impact of religion and of cultural and literary expressions; and the ways international relations have contributed to new trends and prospects for the future. In sum, the book is designed as a core text that introduces students to Latin America as a diverse yet inclusive region facing crucial issues at the advent of the twenty-first century.

Among the major issues discussed in the text, the most prominent are those related to socioeconomic and political development, debt, immigration, narcotics trade, and inter-American affairs. These are understood in the context of a background strongly influenced by European, Native American, African American, and the "fused" cultures of the New World, as well as by the legacies of colonialism and the predominant impact of the United States. We introduce the reader to the area by providing basic definitions, outlining major issues, discussing relevant background, and illustrating these considerations in countries within the region. Thus, the text employs both thematic and case study approaches. Each chapter contains general discussions, key concepts, ongoing questions, and bibliographic resources.

Rather than attempting to bring these issues and considerations to closure, this text is designed to advance knowledge and stimulate interest and discussion. Therefore, the contents are neither all-inclusive nor deterministic. They are selective and exemplary, based on the premises that (1) common themes tie diverse countries together in a vital region, (2) misunderstanding can be overcome through awareness of other cultures, and (3) a need exists for innovation in domestic and international policymaking, as well as in education. As stereotypes are based on partial truths distorted by ignorance and bias, a more adequate comprehension of contemporary Latin America requires that distortions be overcome and that the region be appreciated as a distinctive set of cultures, encompassing great diversity, unique amalgamations, and increasing global importance.

Latin America's more than 540 million people accounted for approximately 10 percent of the world's population and outnumbered North Americans by two to one at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Latin Americans live in a geographic region that encompasses 15 percent of the world's land surface with vast differences in terrain and climate—ranging from tropical rain forests, swampy lowlands, grassland plains, and deserts to mountainous highlands, island chains, and cays. Increasingly, demographic concentration in urban areas, especially in very large cities, has reaffirmed some cultural traditions and torn down others. European-style central cities have become surrounded by shantytowns occupied mostly by migrants displaced from rural agrarian society. These and other demographic trends have presented a variety of difficult socioeconomic challenges.

Issues relating to the environment, economic growth and distribution, and political and developmental concerns also must be understood in historical perspective. The area has an extremely interesting past in which three major ethnic groups have simultaneously clashed with each other while forming unique fusions. Much of the Latin American story is one of confrontation and accommodation among Native Americans—the Aztecs, Maya, Inca, Taino or Arawak, Carib, Aymará, and Quechua; Europeans—the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, and Dutch; and Africans—Yoruba, Mandingo, Fulani, Hausa, and other groups. The interaction among the European conquerors, Indian civilizations, and imported African slaves during the colonization period left a legacy that has profoundly influenced subsequent development. Later, immigrants from many nations contributed to the multiplicity of groups interacting in the region.

The conquerors, who sought adventure and wealth in the New World, transferred a peculiar system of agrarian feudalism that was derived primarily from the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula after eight centuries of Moorish domination. The land and the Indians were divided among the colonizers, who created a hierarchical social order in which the landed aristocracy was supported by the church and protected by the military. Significantly, after initial settlement, the second generation of colonizers were no longer native Europeans but creoles (*criollos*), Europeans born in the Americas. Although they were thoroughly "Spanish," "English," or "French," for example, the creoles had often never even been to Europe. Similarly caught between two cultures were the *mestizos*, offspring of Europeans and Indians. Later, the offspring of Africans and Europeans identified themselves more with the *haciendas*, large socially self-contained ranches, than with the homelands of their forebears.

The plantation economy and *hacienda* life produced interactions and traditions that have continued to influence Latin American society. Moreover, the region is rich in many natural resources that have contributed to the global economy. Latin America has produced large percentages of the world's supply of crops, such as coffee, bananas, linseed, meat, cocoa, sugar, cotton, and others. Significant percentages of the world's oil, nitrates, bauxite, tin, copper, gold, and silver, among other sources of wealth, have also been found in the region. Nevertheless, even after the colonial period ended with independence for the countries within Latin America, foreign capital predominantly exploited and foreign interests largely profited from these resources—until they were partially displaced by attempts to promote national development and social equity through state planning and governmental enterprises.

The forging of new national identities and liberation from oppressive colonial structures did not result in the rapid redefinition of political and social institutions leading to stable self-governance; nor did the region's

economies develop self-sufficiency. On the contrary, confusion and disorder were manifested in *caudillo* rule, control of the people by military strongmen. Initially, authoritarian solutions to this anarchic and unstable situation prevailed, despite the democratic tradition of *cabildo abierto* (town meeting) and Bolívarian ideals of independence and order. To this day, the appeal of authoritarian populism in the face of destabilizing political, economic, and social problems can be traced to the way the Catholic kings consolidated Spain under unified control. These traditions are reflected in ongoing Latin American culture—in literary themes; in gender roles; in relations among ethnic groups, belief systems, and educational systems; and in political institutions and practices.

Latin American culture has been in transition. The combinations of strong legacies of the past, many of which are worthy of preservation, and modern challenges to the traditional order have been explosive at times. Although the multiple forces operating in Latin American societies are complicated and the overarching political cultural context is far from constant, ignoring these legacies and influences is just as naive and misleading as accepting the myriad myths surrounding the area. Evolving fusions of religious beliefs, political and social forms, and even ethnic groups have yielded a whole that is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

After the end of the Cold War, the new world order that began to emerge in the last ten years of the twentieth century set into motion a process of realignment among the developed and developing nations. Latin America has not been immune to the emergence of competitive regional economics and the apparent collapse of authoritarian regimes that came to characterize the new international dynamics. Termination of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, the end of military rule in Brazil and Argentina, the negotiated truces that ended the wars in Central America, the restoration of an elected leader who had been ousted by a coup in Haiti, and fairly free elections in the Caribbean, Venezuela, and elsewhere seemed to indicate a trend toward democratization and the eventual amelioration of debilitating problems, such as political corruption, massive poverty, monetary inflation, foreign debt, illiteracy, crime, and disease.

The complex dynamics on which these hopeful interpretations are based, however, raise a series of difficult questions: How are the legacies of colonialism and nationalism being transformed in contemporary Latin America? What are the prognoses for further democratization, economic and social development, stability, and amelioration of serious crises of governance? Is a hemispheric free-trade zone inevitable? Will regional integration help to resolve or exacerbate the problems facing Latin America? In short, where has this vital region been, and where is it going? The story is far from complete. Each chapter of this book focuses on a different, yet

interrelated, aspect of these open-ended questions. If we are to understand Latin America, we will continue to seek answers to these questions; develop new insights, empathy, and appreciation; and raise new questions. While to many observers the region and people are perplexing and unfathomable and their differences profound, we, as scholars, need to keep clearly in mind Montezuma's observation that, ultimately, we are all "flesh and bones, the same as you, and everybody . . . mortal, and tangible" (Keen 1966:48). This book is designed to clarify that proposition as it applies to Latin America and Latin Americans.

* * *

Much has occurred since publication of the second edition of *Understanding Contemporary Latin America*. The process of democratization has faced complicated challenges, globalization has accelerated, and the threat of global terrorism since the attacks on September 11, 2001, has impacted international relations. Yet, now the questions formulated in this introduction to previous editions emerge as even more significant.

While there have been transitions, there has also been durability. The elevated expectations for deeper democratization and hopes for amelioration of socioeconomic and political problems that were identified in the first and second editions have been tempered by new developments in the twenty-first century and constrained by legacies of the past. Therefore, this third edition presents a vision of the region that is the product of the new events as well as continuing patterns, building on the themes presented in earlier volumes.

Previous editions of *Understanding Contemporary Latin America* contained chapter analyses that were consistent in addressing strengths and weaknesses in confronting daunting challenges. Their general tones and conclusions reflected the great potential inherent in a region embarking on difficult transitions toward peaceful conflict resolution, social and economic equity, political democracy, environmental and cultural health, and the protection of human rights. Each chapter of this volume was updated, two contain extensive revisions, and one ("The Environment, Population, and Urbanization") was completely rewritten in order to take into account new developments and challenges. While some chapters, such as those on geography, literature, and history, are necessarily more constant in their themes and approaches, others, such as those on politics; international relations; economics; the changing roles of women; the environment, population and urbanization; and education must assess contemporary changes. Conclusions drawn from the chronicles of the past are thereby modified as contemporary history unfolds.

A common theme emerges in this third edition that is consonant with

the hopefulness of previous editions, yet less sanguine about the time frame projected previously. The complex processes of democratization and economic development have faced challenges that will continue to inhibit the full realization of free and open societies in many countries in the near future. Elections in several countries have challenged existing political solutions while raising further questions about historical tendencies and the ability to consolidate democracy in Latin America. Divisive partisan struggles have characterized politics in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. Although the Brazilian economy has attracted large amounts of foreign investment, poverty, malnutrition, and health issues have continued to challenge President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's populist appeal. Haiti's President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced into exile by gangs of dissidents. While Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez survived both an attempted coup d'etat and a recall referendum, his regime, nevertheless, continues to be fraught with controversy and the country with extreme class-based political polarization (Cardozo and Hillman 2003; Hillman 2002, 2004).

Instability still prevails in many areas of Latin America. The conflict in Chiapas, Mexico, continues, as does the near civil war in Colombia. Peace negotiations between the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the Mexican government faltered. Talks between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—also known as *la guerrilla*—and the Colombian government suffered a similar fate. Despite several major arrests of cartel kingpins, illicit trafficking of narcotics from northern South America through the Caribbean and Mexico into the United States continues practically unabated. Mutinies in the overcrowded jails of the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Venezuela draw attention to human rights problems in the region.

The love-hate relationship between Latin America and the "Colossus of the North" persists. The United States has been a leader in providing disaster relief to Caribbean countries devastated by hurricanes and providing upward mobility for multitudes of immigrants from the region. Yet, resentment and defiance continue to affect hemispheric relations. The U.S. embargo against Cuba persists despite failure to achieve its stated goals. Free trade in the hemisphere is welcomed by some as a vehicle for development and attacked by others in both the United States and Latin America as an expression of neocolonialism.

All of these considerations require renewed focus on the basic themes of this book and the new questions that they stimulate. Will countries struggling with socioeconomic development find a novel paradigm for political organization? Will the masses be integrated through populist leaders whose regimes devolve into authoritarianism? Or will the new paradigm deepen democracy?

Hence, the story of Latin American trends and developments remains

far from being completed. This new edition of *Understanding Contemporary Latin America* continues to seek answers and raise new questions about where the region has been and where it is going and treats these and many other questions by focusing on their particular significance in the context of specific subjects organized by separate chapters.

The editor and the authors are hopeful that our efforts contribute to increased understanding among people of different cultures who may find that they have much in common. Hence, we offer this volume in the spirit of constructive analysis that characterizes the highest aspirations of our respective academic disciplines.

Notes

1. An exception to this tendency is Mendoza, Montaner, and Vargas Llosa's (1996) vehement critique of theories that blame the United States, multinational corporations, and international institutions for development problems in Latin America.

2. Increased recognition of the mutually beneficial aspects of revising U.S. policy toward Cuba, as manifested in growing bipartisan efforts to normalize trade, was stultified in 2004 by the George W. Bush administration's stringent adherence to the embargo.

3. For a detailed examination of the Caribbean, see Richard S. Hillman and Thomas J. D'Agostino, *Understanding the Contemporary Caribbean*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

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