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Henry (Chip) Carey

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1

Introducing Latin America

*Henry (Chip) Carey and
Stacey M. Mitchell*

Latin America is a region that defies easy generalization. It mixes civilizations from colonizing powers and Indigenous and enslaved peoples with globalized economic, cultural, and political influences to produce one of the most diverse and fascinating areas on the planet.

Two decades into the twenty-first century, the region reflects the dramatic changes of the post–Cold War shift to market-driven economies. Many of Latin America’s economies are now functioning better than the debt-driven, state models of the Cold War era. Yet, growing inequality and political delegitimation continue to bedevil many countries attempting new political and economic policies, as they find themselves unable to devise satisfactory replacements for the semisuccessful neoliberal policies of the past. Expectations of Latin America leaving the ranks of the “peripheral world” have not materialized. Massive slums, poverty, corruption, racism, organized crime, gang violence, and state-sanctioned murder continue to plague it.

Latin America has a population of some 600 million. Over a third of that number live in Brazil, and more than a sixth in Mexico. In this book, we are examining Mexico and the countries of Central and South America.

Outsiders unfamiliar with Latin American culture and politics may think first of football (*fútbol* in Spanish, soccer in North America) when they think of the region. Another common perception comes from music and dance: reggaeton, reggae, bachata, salsa, and cumbia. Music represents the richness and mutual symbiosis of the interrelationships of Latin American life, as well as the major influence of the United States,

even if in this case it is hip-hop and imported Caribbean and Latin American musical forms that evolved from and then returned to Latin America. So, the next time you hear Shakira sing Colombian cumbia—she was born outside the Colombian Caribbean region in Barranquilla—you are probably listening to an eclectic salad of multiple influences, not only tropical music, but also classical forms and African forms from Brazil and Argentina.

Those living outside Latin America have varying impressions of the continent. Some in North America draw inferences about all Latinos, even when Latino immigrants and their communities are diverse politically, racially, religiously, and in their multiple identities. Some may think of the three world famous Mexican film directors who have achieved success with mainstream Hollywood movies: Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Birdman* and *The Revenant*), Alfonso Cuarón (*Roma*, *Gravity*, and *Y Tu Mamá También*), and Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Shape of Water*). Robert Rodriguez, a US citizen, born to Mexican parents in San Antonio, Texas, has also had a huge impact filming Latino themes for markets outside Latin America, as well as inside it, including *El Mariachi* and two sequels: *Desperado* and *Once upon a Time in Mexico*; together they make up the *Mexico Trilogy*. Rodriguez is a best friend, co-investor, and collaborator of US director Quentin Tarantino. Others would cite the world-class slums, perhaps only rivaled in South and Southeast Asia in size, Brazil's *favelas*.

The metaphor of complex interdependence in music and movies helps our understanding of Latin America and its cultures, including its cuisines. Tacos al pastor are a taco of spit-grilled sliced pork heavily marinated in a combination of cumin, cloves, Guajillo chili peppers, achiote paste, pineapple, and vinegar, and commonly served atop a corn tortilla with a garnish of cilantro, onion, and fresh salsa. It is perhaps Mexico's, and the world's, favorite taco. The history of its origin is almost as deep, and unique, as its flavors. It all starts in the Ottoman Empire with the beginnings of globalization.

In 1869, following the seizure of Egyptian land by British and French colonial powers and a decade of construction by enslaved laborers, the Suez Canal opened. It connected the Mediterranean and Red seas, offering a path of transit between Europe, Africa, and Asia quicker than any before it. The ease of transportation brought on by the Suez Canal enabled the rapid and unprecedented expansion of colonial power by European nations over millions in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. A primary method of projecting this power was via global commodity markets, which, when dominated by large sellers, contributed to the collapse of small manufacturers.

Mount Lebanon, a historic mountain range in the Levant region of the Middle East, was transformed by these changes. Silk producers in the area could no longer sustain a livelihood in the post-Suez globalized market and, despite their long-standing ties to the region, sought to emigrate. From the 1870s to the 1930s, an estimated 340,000 people emigrated from the Levant westward to the Americas. About 120,000 migrated to the United States and 220,000 to locations throughout Latin America (Khater 2017).

Some of these early migrants moved to Puebla, Mexico, a community just southwest of Mexico City. They, like all immigrants, brought with them customs and practices that they soon introduced to their new home. Among these were shawarma, a traditional Levantine method of cooking meat (usually lamb) on a vertical spit and the equally delicious parent of modern-day al pastor. Vendors, as the story goes, began selling the roasted Middle Eastern lamb on pita bread (*pan árabe* in Spanish) in Puebla, and before long the vertical-broiler method of cooking was applied to pork. Tacos al pastor, thus, were born.

Today, tacos al pastor are a hallmark of Mexican cuisine. Their popularity extends far beyond the country of their birth. Like the processes that made it, they are now enjoyed around the world—perhaps one of the most delicious representations of globalization. The story of tacos al pastor is one of transnationalization, and a story common to the development of food, goods, and technologies all over the world (Khater 2017).

Not all aspects of globalization are positive. With the increase of human contact through travel, migration, and commerce, societies are vulnerable to disease and other environmental factors (or negative externalities, like carbon dioxide emissions). One example of this is the Covid-19 crisis. The most catastrophic initial experience of the coronavirus pandemic in Latin America was in the coastal city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, where there were not enough coffins and burial sites in April 2020, leaving hundreds of rotting bodies on the streets. Moreover, many countries have done poorly because of the continent's crowded housing and working conditions, particularly for those who work in the informal economy, who do not eat if they cannot work on a given day.

What did not help the situation was the prevalence of populism and demagoguery in Latin America (as elsewhere), which allowed policies to be formulated based on emotion and the political interest of the ruler, not rational decisionmaking using scientific expertise. Rulers like Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico, and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil all initially denied or played down the severity of the virus and took no careful measures after the lockdowns. This disregard was followed by failed

attempts to expand testing, enforce social distancing and masking, use contact tracing, or require social isolation.

With their high levels of poverty and inequality (ECLAC 2019, Isaacson 2020a), Latin American countries were more vulnerable to the pandemic than were wealthier nations. An estimated one-fifth of people in Latin America and the Caribbean had at least one of the health conditions that make someone more susceptible to severe symptoms from Covid-19, as well as being at higher risk of infection. In many countries, more than half of employees work in the informal sector. Working in street and market sales, gardening, and construction generally means earning barely enough to survive. Social distancing at work and home and on buses was nearly impossible. A high percentage of people wore masks in public because they realized that their very lives, and those of whom they contacted, depended on that often homemade protection.

Some countries, like El Salvador in mid-2020, instituted urban patrols to arrest those who were not masked. Brazil and Mexico reopened their economies too quickly, before the virus had been suppressed and before proper testing and tracing infrastructures had been put in place. They faced a surging exponential growth in infections as a result. Countries with more demagogic leaders who politicized public health decisions faced much higher rates of community spread and deaths among their populations. Overall, the vaccination rates in the region were lagging behind the rates in most developed countries. As of September 2021, of the world's then 4.8 million Covid deaths recorded, Brazil had the second highest rate of cumulative deaths, with more than 600,000, compared to more than 700,000 in the United States. Mexico had the fourth highest total deaths in the world (280,000) behind India, and Peru had the sixth in the world at 200,000. Relative to their countries' population, Peru has the worst total in the world, as well as the highest rate in the world of excess deaths regardless of cause of death. The vaccination rates in Latin America lag behind the rates in most developed countries, mostly due to other countries' unwillingness to share their vaccines (Worldometer 2021). The lack of rapid response in Brazil and Mexico, evidenced by the slow pace at which testing was implemented, created near-crisis conditions for the countries. Consequently, Mexico was forced to expand its hospital system in order to receive more patients, hiring thousands of medical professionals.

Another issue related to globalization is that of racial injustice, particularly that involving the official use of force against persons of color. The outrage that followed the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was not confined to the United States.

The subsequent Black Lives Matter protests that occurred in the United States spread both countrywide and globally. A similar incident occurred in São Paulo, Brazil. A video surfaced in early July 2020 on a major national television program depicting a military police officer subduing a Black female bar owner in her sixties by standing on her neck, while also breaking her ribs and leg. The governor of the state of São Paulo was outraged and fired the two officers involved. However, in Brazil there was no overwhelming response, as police violence remains a major subtext with strong racial undertones. Brazil's record of police killings of civilians under custody is quite dismal, with an average of seventeen occurring daily in Brazil in 2019 and 6,000 deaths in police actions occurring in 2018 (Ahmed 2019). Seventy-five percent of the victims were Black, a striking overrepresentation given the fact that they compose only about 55 percent of the country's population (Torres 2020).

However, dominant depictions of Brazil held by Brazilians, like the nationalisms of many Latin American countries, promote the image of a post-racial society. The official discourse for many years has been of Brazil as a racial democracy, which ignores much of the economic and social discrimination that actually persists. Protests in Brazil until recently have not raised issues of racial confrontation. Instead, inequalities are often attributed to class differences. Racial injustice is muted. "No one in Brazil is racist" is a common refrain, even though police brutality, especially in the north, where the population of Afro-Brazilians is large, has often occurred in secret and with impunity.

Latin America offers students an opportunity for comparative analysis, not merely between states within the region, but also with other areas of the world. When trying to explain variation in democratic development, for instance, there are a number of focal points for comparison among Latin American countries, including economic growth, colonial rule, multiethnicity, political culture, and institutions of clientelism, all of which can be controlled for—and eliminated—as the actual causes of the variation in democratic development. Controlling for the similarities among these countries allows students to isolate whatever causal factors truly impact democratic development. Factors to consider may include the former colonial power (e.g., Britain versus Spain), the particular model of economic development used (import substitution or neoliberal), or even the particular leadership style of a president like Pinochet of Chile or Lula da Silva of Brazil.

Another interesting and insightful comparison could be made between the southern United States and the countries of Central and South America. They share a colonial past that has had substantial

implications for their social and political development, particularly regarding governmental treatment of groups with minority status, African Americans in the case of the United States and Indigenous persons in the case of Latin American countries. Moreover, the southern states in the United States and the countries of Latin America were for centuries agriculturally based economies, almost entirely dependent on forced or enslaved labor. Compared to Africa and Asia, the states of North and South America gained independence from colonial rule far earlier, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is not to say that independence from colonial rule was synonymous with the emergence of democracy, an observation that applies equally to the United States and Central and South America. And perhaps further research could focus on why, compared to many other countries, those of Latin America have emerged as a leader in the expansion of human rights and achieving justice, reconciliation, and accountability for past governmental misdeeds.

In many ways, the countries of South America benefited from a long period of liberalization under dictatorships. Central America, by contrast, had long guerrilla insurgencies of the left (El Salvador and Guatemala) and the right (Nicaragua). South American countries increased the rule of law before and especially after the military left power. In countries with higher standards of living, the middle class led public participation in opposition to corrupt and authoritarian regimes, such as in Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Argentina. Chile, which endured authoritarian rule under Pinochet in the 1970s and 1980s, still experienced some limited political liberalization, as well as economic growth under the neoliberal market-based policies pursued by the Pinochet regime.

Structure of the Book

In Chapter 2, Marie Price discusses the vast diversity of the region, which encompasses a wide assortment of landforms (from steep mountain ranges to deserts to vast jungles to one of the longest rivers in the world), as well as animal species, cultures, and peoples. It is a complex region, one that, as Price asserts, does not lend itself well to generalizations. At the same time, she contends that “unity in diversity” exists, exemplified by shared experiences with colonial rule, tropical climate and geography, slavery, and dependence on primary goods like agricultural products or minerals for economic survival. Price demonstrates how the geography and climate of the region influenced (and continues to influence) its development both economically and politically.

Chapter 3, by René De La Pedraja, examines the impact that conquest and colonization of the region had on the twin legacies of political and economic development. Students will gain an appreciation of varied legacies of colonial rule across the countries of Latin America.

In Chapter 4, Shelley McConnell traces the progress of democratic development in the region from the colonial era to the present. McConnell highlights the legacy of colonial rule with regard to the emergence of long periods of dictatorial rule, vast inequalities from wealth consolidation in the upper classes, and a relationship of dependency on Europe and the United States, both economically and militarily. At the same time, she illustrates how the spread of democracy has progressed in Latin America over the past few decades and in some cases has possibly consolidated.

In Chapter 5, Mark Ungar explains that the primary targets of crime in Latin America remain the more vulnerable segments of society: children, the poor, women, and the elderly. Ungar focuses much of his chapter on narcotrafficking and its detrimental impact on the well-being of citizens in the countries involved. Ungar associates the causes of crime in Latin America to inequality, social and economic marginalization, high rates of urbanization, and ready access to firearms—the latter a result of decades of civil wars that brought an influx of weapons into the region.

Turning to economic issues, in Chapter 6, Scott McKinney explains the twists and turns that Latin American countries have experienced in their attempts to develop their economies. At the time of independence, McKinney writes, in the former Spanish colonies, “there was a small elite of creoles, a small middle class, and a large poor class that included most of the mestizos, mulattos, Africans, and Indigenous peoples.” The combined effects of wealth consolidation in the hands of the few and a focus on mineral extraction and agriculture made Latin American economies extremely vulnerable to external impacts. McKinney discusses the various policies these countries have used over the years to address this vulnerability, as well as the varying results of their efforts.

In Chapter 7, Cleveland Fraser addresses the relationship of the Latin American countries with the rest of the world and with each other. Fraser outlines the theoretical concepts of international relations and their application to interstate relations within the Latin American region and without, both historically and at present. Like other authors in this text, he emphasizes the point that the past experiences of Latin American countries, including colonialism and US hegemony, continue to influence how they confront global and domestic issues of economic growth, climate change, regional security, migration, crime, and domestic instability.

In Chapter 8, Jacquelyn Chase and Susan E. Place examine the interrelationship between the people of Latin America and the environment. They demonstrate that, from the pre-Columbian period to the present day, the environment increasingly has become overexploited and misused to the detriment of societies within the region and beyond. Likewise, production for a global market and higher rates of urbanization in the region have contributed to a sharp increase in pollution. As McConnell discusses in Chapter 4, Chase and Place note that the expansion of agribusiness and oil and mineral production for the global market has not come without opposition, but that the impact of environmental degradation continues to be most acutely felt by the poor.

In Chapter 9, Kevin Yelvington examines the foundations of group identities and their continued importance in contemporary Latin America. Discourses of “racial” and cultural mixing that typify Latin American nationalisms have had the effect of denying structures of racism that exclude many Indigenous people and Afro-descendants. As Yelvington explains, the current scene is characterized by limited rights being ceded to identity-based movements and groups by the state and ruling sectors as long as they do not present serious challenges to established political and economic regimes by threatening a more widespread redistribution of wealth and power. Yelvington’s approach is from the perspective of historical political economy, placing economic structures and relationships centrally as causal forces and tracking their development over time, starting in the colonial period and understanding its enduring legacies.

In Chapter 10, Susan Tiano and Michael Shea demonstrate that women in Latin America are regularly challenging traditional gender-related norms and values. More broadly, exploring the role of women in Latin America across the decades, they highlight the crucial part that women from all walks of life have played in the course of political, social, and economic development.

In Chapter 11, Fernando Reimers looks at education in Latin American countries through the lens of the four waves of globalization that had an impact on who should have access to education and what education’s purpose is. Reimer associates the first wave with the European colonization of the region; the second wave with an expansion of the ideas of the Enlightenment; the third wave with the post–World War II period and the creation of the United Nations; and the fourth wave with the post–Cold War era. One consistent factor through all of these waves has been the expansion of educational opportunities. Now, however, Reimer is concerned that the Covid-19 pandemic “will undo much of

the progress made in closing gaps in access and learning in the past decade, if not more.”

In Chapter 12, Hannah Stewart-Gambino focuses on the important role that the Catholic Church has had and continues to have in the countries of Latin America, often assuming a large role in politics. She characterizes the successful inroads made in recent years by Evangelical churches as creating “an increasingly vibrant religious marketplace.” At the same time, Catholicism, while weakened from its once powerful stance as a political and social force, has not left the region. Rather it has weathered Marxism, the rise of Protestantism, brutal dictatorial military regimes, and more to act as an egalitarian institution that seeks to combat economic disenfranchisement and promote human and environmental rights, best exemplified by the work of Latin America’s first pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, better known as Pope Francis. Students may ask, Will Catholicism, as deeply rooted as it is, one day be replaced as the region’s dominant religion by the evangelical Protestant Christian churches?

In Chapter 13, David Bost, Angélica Lozano-Alonso, and David Marcus address the *mélange* of influences that have had a strong impact on Latin American literature, music, and the arts from the precolonial and colonial periods to the present. As the authors suggest, Latin American literature—from the accounts of the early explorers to contemporary “magical realism”—as well as film, music, and art, reflect and contribute to our understanding of the impact of politics and economics on society.

In the concluding Chapter 14, we (Henry F. Carey and Kathleen Barrett) address the prospects for future growth for the countries of Latin America. Our chapter ties together all of the various themes addressed by the contributors and suggests that the emergence of these countries as global forces remains linked to their pursuit of democracy and equitable economic and social progress.

Note

A thank-you to Rayan Semery-Palumbo, a DPhil candidate at Oxford University, for his contribution of the section above on *tacos al pastor*.