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UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

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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 limits of the region are relatively unproblematic, beginning at the Rio Grande (called the Rio Bravo in Mexico), usually including the Caribbean, and ending at the southern tip of South America. The region's shared history of Iberian colonization, more than the current economic status of individual states, provides its social glue. The marks of over three hundred years of Iberian rule are still evident. Roughly two-thirds of the 540 million who live in the region speak Spanish; most of the rest speak Portuguese. Catholicism is the dominant religion, although 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. 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).
Barbados—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 Amerindian peoples declined by as much as 90 percent during the course of conquest, but the Amerindian presence remains strong in many parts of Latin America. Large numbers of African slaves were also added to the cultural mix of Europeans and Amerindians 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 on, 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 and 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 Americas' encounter with Europe. 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, this chapter reveals 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. (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 of 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 Amerindian people, 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 Amerindian peoples in South America.

  The Mexican plateau is a massive upland area ringed by the Sierra

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Madre Mountains and tilted so that the highest elevations are in the South—about 8,000 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
breadcrusket, 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 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 39 million people are concentrated in this zone, either in the capital cities or the surrounding rural villages. In the eastern Caribbean, the arc of smaller islands, known as the Lesser Antilles, exist within a subduction zone that also produces volcanic activity. In this area, the heavier North and South American plates go underneath the Caribbean plate, creating a chain of mountainous islands from St. Kitts to Grenada that are volcanic in origin. The latest round of volcanic activity began in 1995 on the island of Montserrat. Since then, a series of volcanic eruptions of ash and rock have forced most people off the island and the relocation of the capital, Plymouth (an interim capital was constructed at Brades Estate).

The shields are another important landform of the region. 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 very 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 state, 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 rivers. 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 in many places 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 Itaipú, 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 last 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 12 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 border cities and industrialization have combined to degrade the 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.

Climate and Vegetation
In tropical Latin America, the daily high temperatures (Fahrenheit) are in the 70s to 80s and the daily lows in the 70s to 60s (see Map 2.2). Moreover, the average monthly temperatures in localities such as Managua, Port-au-Prince, and Manaus change very little. Precipitation patterns, however, do vary and create distinct wet and dry seasons. In Managua, January and February are dry months, and June through October are the wettest months. The city of Manaus on the Amazon, however, is the reverse. June through August are relatively dry, and the long rainy season extends from October to April. The tropical lowlands of Latin America are usually classified as tropical humid climates that are covered in either forest or savanna (grassland with few trees), depending on the amount of rainfall. The largest remaining tropical forest is in the Amazon Basin, but much of the perimeter of this forest zone has been converted into pasture or farms. In contrast, much of the tropical forest in the Caribbean and in Central America was removed long ago for agriculture and human settlement.

Important areas of Latin America are desert. The region’s desert climates are found along the Pacific Coast of Peru and northern Chile, Patagonia, northern Mexico, and northeastern Brazil in an area called the Bahia (or the serdão). Desert areas are generally those that get less than 10 inches of precipitation a year. Thus, a city such as Lima, Peru, which is clearly in the tropics, averages only 1.5 inches of rainfall per year due to the hyper-aridity of the Peruvian coast. In fact, there are parts of the Atacama Desert in northern Chile that have never recorded rainfall, giving this desert the distinction of being the world’s driest. Such an inhospitable climate, however, hosts a rich assortment of phosphates and copper, so that resources from the Atacama buttressed the Chilean economy for much of the twentieth century.

Not all of Latin America is tropical. In the Southern Cone states, midlatitude climates with hot summers and cold winters prevail. Of course, the midlatitude temperature shifts in the Southern Hemisphere are the inverse of those in the Northern Hemisphere (cold Julys and warm Januarys). In the mountain ranges, complex climate patterns result, so that elevation becomes more critical than latitude. The temperate lands (tierra templada), at 3,000–6,000 feet in the tropics, have been described as having an eternal springtime climate with warm days and pleasant nights. The cooler lands (tierra fria) of the tropics are found at 6,000–12,000 feet. These tropical highlands support agriculture such as wheat, tubers, and even maize, but the daytime highs are cool, and the lows can reach freezing. These normal climate patterns and the human ecological systems they support are periodically disrupted by weather events that can dramatically impact Latin America. Two of these that deserve attention are hurricanes and El Niño.

Several hurricanes form each season, and the worst ones can devastate communities and agriculture in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and North America. (South America is out of the hurricane belt.) Beginning in July, westward-moving low-pressure disturbances form off the coast of West Africa, picking up moisture and speed as they move across the Atlantic. The air masses are usually no more than 100 miles across, but to achieve hurricane status, their winds must reach velocities of more than 75 miles per hour. Typically, half a dozen to a dozen hurricanes form each season and move through the region, causing limited damage. There are, of
course, exceptions, and most longtime residents of northern Latin America have experienced the full force of at least one major storm in their lifetimes.

In 1998, the torrential rains of Hurricane Mitch, one of the most deadly tropical storms in a century, resulted in the death of at least 8,000 people in Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Mudslides and flooding ravaged structures and roads, leaving upward of one-quarter of Honduras's population without shelter. Whereas Hurricane Mitch largely bypassed the Caribbean, Hurricane Gilbert took 260 lives in 1988 and pounded Jamaica and Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula before slamming into Texas. Eighty percent of the houses in Jamaica lost their roofs. Plantations of coconut palms on the Yucatán were leveled like matchsticks. Hurricane Hugo came the following year, leaving nearly everyone in Montserrat homeless, wiping out the infrastructure and tourist economy of St. Croix, and damaging Puerto Rico to such an extent that army troops were sent in to help restore order. Modern tracking equipment has improved hurricane forecasting and reduced the number of fatalities. Forecasting, nevertheless, cannot reduce the economic damage done to crops, forests, and infrastructure when a powerful storm hits.

In recent years, abnormally heavy rains have been responsible for tragic natural disasters, made worse by poverty that forces thousands of people to live in vulnerable areas. The massive mudslides on the northern side of the El Ávila mountain range that separates Caracas from the sea was caused by weeks of torrential rains in December 1999. Thousands of hillside squatter settlements vanished in the mud. The official death toll was 10,000 (2,000 more fatalities than Hurricane Mitch caused), and 400,000 were left homeless. In Haiti, torrential rains called nearly five feet of water during one week in May 2004. Rain ran down the denuded hillsides, the silty rivers rose, and towns like Mapou were washed away in the floods that followed. Nearly 3,000 people perished in Haiti and the bordering villages of the Dominican Republic as a result of flooding.

The most debated weather phenomenon in Latin America, and perhaps the world, is El Niño. El Niño (a reference to the Christ child) is a warm Pacific current that usually arrives off the coast of Ecuador and Peru in December. Every decade or so, an abnormally large current arrives that produces torrential rains, signaling the arrival of an El Niño year. The 1997–1998 El Niño was especially bad for Latin America; at least nine hundred people were killed by floods or storms attributed to El Niño-related disturbances. Devastating floods occurred in Peru and Ecuador. In Peru, flooding drove some 350,000 people temporarily from their homes. Heavy May rains in Argentina and Paraguay caused the Paraná River to rise 26 feet above normal, forcing thousands of people to flee.

The other, less talked about aspect of El Niño is drought. While the Pacific Coast of South and North America experienced record rainfall in the 1997–1998 El Niño, Colombia, Venezuela, northern Brazil, and Central America battled drought. Hundreds of brush and forest fires left their mark; the amount of smoke produced by forest fires in northern Mexico in the spring of 1998 was so great that it caused haze in the southeastern United States. Drought also brought losses, estimated in billions of dollars, to farmers and ranchers in the region. And for areas that depend on hydroelectricity, such as Colombia and Central America, drought can cause disruptions in electrical power. The indirect costs of drought, such as fire-charred hillsides vulnerable to landslides, are impossible to measure.

Environmental Issues
Given Latin America's immense size and relatively low population density, it has not experienced the same levels of environmental degradation witnessed in other parts of the world, such as in East Asia. The worst environmental problems are found in cities, their surrounding rivers and coasts, and intensely farmed zones (Roberts and Thanos 2003). Vast areas of Latin America remain relatively untouched, supporting an incredible diversity of plant and animal life. Throughout the region, national parks offer some protection to unique communities of plants and animals. And a growing environmental movement in countries such as Costa Rica, Brazil, and Guyana has yielded popular support for environmentally friendly initiatives. It can be argued that Latin America entered the twenty-first century with a real opportunity to avoid many of the environmental missteps seen in other regions of the world.

At the same time, economic pressures brought about by global market forces are driving governments to exploit their natural resources (minerals, fossil fuels, forests, and soils) aggressively. The challenge lies in managing the region's immense natural resources and balancing the economic benefits of extraction with the ecological soundness of conservation. Of the many environmental challenges facing the region, three of the most pressing are deforestation, degradation of arable lands, and urban environmental pollution.

Due to international interest in tropical forests, deforestation is probably the environmental issue most often associated with the region. The Amazon Basin and portions of the eastern lowlands of Central America and Mexico still maintain important stands of tropical forest. Other areas, such as the Atlantic coastal forest of Brazil and the Pacific forests of Central America, have nearly disappeared because of agricultural use, settlement, and ranching. Likewise, extensive forest clearing for sugar plantations in the Lesser Antilles nearly eliminated all the tropical forest there more than two centuries ago. In the midlatitudes, the ecologically unique evergreen
rain forest of southern Chile (the Valdivian forest) is being cleared to export wood chips to markets in Japan (Clapp 1998). The coniferous forests of northern Mexico are also being cut down, in part because of the boom in commercial logging stimulated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In terms of biological diversity, however, the loss of tropical rain forest is the most critical. Tropical rain forests account for only 6 percent of the earth’s landmass, but at least 50 percent of the world’s species are found there. Moreover, only the Amazon contains the largest undisturbed stretches of rain forest in the world. In the last forty years, the region’s tropical forests were seen as agricultural frontiers that governments opened up in an attempt to appease landless peasants and reward political cronies. The forests fell as colonists created farms and large cattle ranches (Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Forest clearing also occurred due to the search for gold in Brazil, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Guyana and the production of coca leaf for cocaine in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia (Young 1996), as well as from logging concessions to Southeast and East Asian companies in Guyana, Suriname, and Brazil.

Soil erosion and fertility decline occur in all agricultural areas. Certain soil types in Latin America are particularly vulnerable to erosion, most notably the volcanic soils and the reddish oxisols found in the humid lowlands. The productivity of the volcanic highlands of Central America, for example, has declined over the decades, due to the ease with which these soils erode and the failure to apply soil conservation measures in many localities. The oxisols of the tropical lowlands, by contrast, can quickly erode into a baked claypan surface when the natural vegetative cover is removed, making permanent agriculture nearly impossible. Ironically, the consolidation of large modern farms in the valleys tends to push subsistence farmers into marginal areas on steep slopes. On these hillside farms, gullies and landslides are a constant threat to rural livelihoods.

The reality of poverty forcing people to degrade their environment is evident in many rural places in Latin America. Nowhere is this connection clearer than in Haiti. The inhabitants of this densely settled country are largely dependent on commercial and subsistence agriculture, which has resulted in serious problems with soil erosion and declining yields. In addition, the majority of Haitians rely on charcoal (made from trees) for their cooking fuel, which places additional strain on the island’s vegetation. The deterioration of the resource base is evident from the air: aerial photos reveal a sharp boundary between a denuded Haiti and a forested Dominican Republic. The difference between the two countries is explained, in part, by the lack of affordable fuel alternatives. Whereas many Dominicans can afford to buy liquid or gas cooking fuel, many Haitians cannot.

Because the vast majority of Latin Americans live in cities, it has become increasingly clear that the environmental quality of urban settings has been a focus for local activism. While Susan Place and Jacqueline Chase discuss urban environmental issues at some length in Chapter 8, it is important to recognize here that many of Latin America’s environmentalists worry about ways to make urban environments cleaner rather than about the future of distant tropical forests. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo alone, hundreds of local environmental organizations push for cleaner air, better water, and more green space (Christen et al. 1998).

Factories, coal- and gas-burning power plants, and vehicles all contribute to urban air pollution. The environmental regulations that exist are seldom enforced. The consequences are, in the worst cases, a serious threat to people and the environment. In the 1980s, the Brazilian industrial center of Cubatão, near São Paulo, became synonymous with environmental catastrophe. For years, people complained of headaches and nausea from the belching factory smokestacks, but their complaints were not taken seriously. In 1984, a leak occurred in a gasoline pipeline that ran through one of the poorest squatter settlements. The smell of leaking gas went unnoticed because of the stench of industrial pollutants throughout the valley. When the gas was finally ignited, as many as two hundred people were incinerated in the resulting explosion and fire. While industry leaders downplayed the disaster, traumatized residents mobilized to address the worst abuses (Dean 1995). The events in Cubatão, more than the destruction of the Amazon rain forest, are credited with invigorating the environmental movement in Brazil.

Despite serious urban environmental issues, people in Latin American cities tend to have better access to water, sewers, and electricity than their counterparts in Asia and Africa. Moreover, the density of urban settlement encourages the widespread use of mass transportation—both public and private bus and van routes make getting around most cities fairly easy. The largest cities, such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Caracas, have subway systems. Increasingly cost-effective high-speed bus systems, as found in Curitiba and Bogotá, are gaining popularity. Yet, the inevitable environmental problems that come with primate (dominant or major) cities that grew rapidly and have widespread poverty cannot be overstated. Improving sewer systems, waste disposal, and water treatment plants is expensive. Chronic air pollution has caused debilitating health effects, most notably in Santiago and Mexico City. The money to clean up cities is always in short supply, especially with problems of foreign debt, currency devaluation, and inflation. And, as many urban dwellers tend to reside in unplanned squatter settlements, retroactively servicing these communities with utilities is difficult and costly.
A Bounty of Natural Resources

Historically, Latin America’s abundant natural resources were its wealth. In the colonial period, silver, gold, and sugar generated fortunes for a privileged few. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a series of export booms introduced commodities such as bananas, coffee, cacao, grains, tin, rubber, copper, wool, and petroleum to an expanding world market. One of the legacies of this export-led development was the tendency to specialize in one or two major commodities, a pattern that continued well into the 1950s. During that decade, Costa Rica earned 90 percent of its export earnings from bananas and coffee. El Salvador earned over 90 percent from coffee and cotton, 85 percent of Chilean exports came from copper, and half of Uruguay’s export earnings came from wood (Wilkie 1997). Even Brazil, the region’s largest country, generated 60 percent of its export earnings from coffee in 1955. By the 1990s, that figure was less than 5 percent (although Brazil remains the world’s leader in coffee exports, followed by Colombia), and soy products earned Brazil more foreign exchange than coffee.

The trend throughout Latin America since the 1960s has been to diversify and mechanize resource extraction, especially in agriculture and mining. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Plata Basin, which includes southern Brazil, Uruguay, northern Argentina, Paraguay, and eastern Bolivia. Soybeans, used for oil and animal feed, transformed these lowlands in the 1980s and 1990s. Added to this crop are acres of rice, cotton, and orange groves; the more traditional plantings of wheat and sugar; and livestock. Other large-scale agricultural frontiers exist along the piedmont of the Venezuelan Andes (mostly grains) and the Pacific slope of Central America (mostly cotton and tropical fruits). In northern Mexico, water supplied from dams along the Sierra Madre Occidental has turned the valleys in Sinaloa into an intensive production zone for fruits and vegetables bound for the United States. An explosion of so-called nontraditional agricultural exports is reshaping activities in rural areas—from melons and shrimp in Honduras, to flowers and ferns in Costa Rica and Colombia. One major exception to this trend toward agricultural diversity was Cuba from the 1950s until 1990. During that period, Cuba earned nearly 80 percent of its foreign exchange from sugar. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of guaranteed prices and markets for Cuban sugar, the value of Cuba’s sugar exports declined by two-thirds from 1990 to 1998 (Wilkie 2002: 686).

In each of these cases, the agricultural sector is capital intensive and dynamic. By using machinery, high-yielding hybrids, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, many corporate farms have become extremely productive and profitable. What these operations fail to do is employ many rural peo-

tle, which is especially problematic in countries where one-third or more of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihood. As industrialized agriculture becomes the norm in Latin America, subsistence producers are further marginalized. The overall trend is that agricultural production is increasing, while proportionally fewer people are employed in it, and agriculture contributes less to the overall economy than it once did. In absolute terms, however, the number of people living in rural areas is about the same today as it was in 1960 (roughly 100 million). The major difference over the last forty-five years is that many of these people are worse off, because traditional rural support networks have broken down and small farmers have been forced onto marginal lands that are vulnerable to drought and erosion. Peasant farmers who are able to produce a surplus of corn or wheat earn very little from these crops, as their value is undercut by cheaper imported grains.

Mining and fossil fuels continue to shape the economies of several countries in the region. The oil-rich nations of Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia are able to meet their own fuel needs and to earn vital state revenues from oil exports. Venezuela is most dependent on revenues from oil, earning up to 90 percent of its foreign exchange from crude petroleum and petroleum products. Venezuela and Mexico have become major suppliers of oil to the United States. In 2002, oil exports from these two countries to the United States were equal to the volume of oil exports from the Middle East to the United States. Vast oil reserves also exist in the eastern lowlands of Colombia, yet a costly and vulnerable pipeline that connects the oil fields to the coast is a regular target of guerrilla groups. By 2000, Colombian oil production had improved, making it the third largest Latin American exporter of oil to the United States (Wilkie 2002).

Besides oil, Latin America’s other important exports are silver, zinc, copper, iron ore, bauxite, and gold. Like agriculture, mining has become more mechanized. Even Bolivia, a country dependent on tin production, cut 70 percent of its miners from state payrolls in the 1990s without appreciable falls in production. The measure was part of a nationwide austerity program, but it also illustrates that the majority of miners were not needed. Similarly, the vast copper mines of northern Chile are producing record amounts of copper with fewer miners. Gold mining, in contrast, continues to use artisanal methods and larger numbers of miners. Gold rushes are occurring in remote tropical regions of Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, and Costa Rica. Many gold strikes are made illegally on indigenous lands or within the borders of national parks (as in Costa Rica and Guyana). However, because gold is such a valuable export commodity, the borders of protected areas are seldom enforced.
Human Geography of Latin America

Today, more than half a billion 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 almost 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 43 years; by the 1980s, it was 63; and by 2000, it was 68. In fact, most countries in the region experienced a twenty- to thirty-year improvement in life expectancy between 1950 and 2000, which pushed up growth rates. Today, the average life expectancy for the entire region is 71 years, compared to 78 for the United States. Four countries account for two-thirds of the region’s population: Brazil, with almost 177 million; Mexico, 105 million; Colombia, 44 million; and Argentina, 37 million (Population Reference Bureau 2003).

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 the sudden slowdown in growth surprised many demographers. For example, in the 1960s, a typical Latin American woman had six or seven children. By the 1980s, the average woman was having three 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. Today, the average number of children per woman is 2.7. Only a few poorer and more rural countries (Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Bolivia, and Paraguay) have averages higher than four children per woman (Population Reference Bureau 2003).

The distribution of population away from rural areas and into cities is the other major demographic change for the region. A staggering 75 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 primacy city that is three to four times larger than any other city in the country. Examples of prime 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 cen-

ter. In an effort to decentralize, governments have intentionally built cities far from prime cities, such as Ciudad Guyana in Venezuela and Brasilia 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 transplantation 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 territorial claims.

Nevertheless, Spain was able to conquer and administer an enormous territory in less than one hundred 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, Amerindian cultures have shown remarkable resilience, as evidenced by the survival of Amerindian languages—Maya, Quechua, Aymará, and Guaraní. 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 last 150 years of settlement.

Native Population Decline

It is hard to grasp the enormity of human and cultural loss due to this cataclysmic encounter between Europe and the Americas. Throughout the region, archaeological sites are poignant reminders of the complexity of contact (that is, pre-European arrival) civilizations. Dozens of stone temples found throughout Mexico and Central America attest to how Aztec civilizations flourished in the area’s tropical forests and plateaus. In the Andes, farmers still use stone terraces built by the Inca for village sites and raised fields for agriculture, being discovered and mapped. Ceremonial centers, such as Cuzco (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 Tenochtitlán, where Mexico City sits today. Tenochtitlán 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, about 50 million were 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. Nearly all of the estimated 3 million Amerindian people who inhabited the islands of the Caribbean were gone within fifty years of contact with Europeans. By 1650, 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 Amerindians, 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 densest 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 (Old World) and the Americas (New World) to an immense biological swap.
which he terms the Columbian exchange. According to Crosby (1972), Europeans benefited greatly from this exchange, and Amerindian 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 domestic skills of Amerindian 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 Amerindian 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 Amerindian 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, which had a far larger native population than the Portuguese in Brazil, became obsessed with the matter of race and maintaining racial purity among its colonists. Yet, after generations of intermarriage, four broad categories resulted: **blanco** (European ancestry), **mestizo** (mixed ancestry), **indio** (Amerindian ancestry), and **negro** (African ancestry). The blancos (or Europeans) 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 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 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 land-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 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 the 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 Italian peasants who left Europe in the winter for agricultural work in Argentina and were thus nicknamed "the swallows." Still others paid their 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 seabird 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 last 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.

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. As 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 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 and the Chilean exodus during General Augusto Pinochet’s reign in the 1970s.

One of the largest migrant flows continues to be Mexicans to the United States. Twenty-two million people claimed Mexican ancestry in the 2000 U.S. Census, of whom approximately 8 million were immigrants. 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 2000 Census counted 35 million Hispanics in the United States (both foreign and native born). Most of this population has ancestral ties with peoples from Latin America and the Caribbean.

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 2003, it was estimated that immigrants sent over $30 billion to Latin America. Most of this money came from workers in the United States, but Latino immigrants in Spain, Japan, Canada and Italy also sent money back to the region. 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. 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, Amerindian 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 Aymará. 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 ten thousand speakers.

Due to the more complex colonial history of the Caribbean, other languages are spoken there. Roughly 8 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, Curacao, and Bonaire, Papiamento (a trading language that blends Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and African languages) is the lingua franca, with usage of Dutch declining. Similarly, French Creole or patois 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 upon the region without challenge. As Michael Fleet shows in Chapter 12, most countries report between 70 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 held 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 candomble 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. So accurate are some of these religious transfers that it is common to have Nigerian priests journey to Brazil to learn forgotten traditions. Likewise 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, santeria 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 last few years have seen revolution in Brazilian society as affirmative action measures have been implemented. From federal ministries to public universities, various quota systems are being tried to improve the condition of Afro-Brazilians.

Similarly, in areas of Latin America where Indian 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 Indian south lags behind the booming north and Mexico City. Prejudice is embedded in the language; to call someone an indio (Indian) is an insult in Mexico. In Bolivia, men who dress in the Indian 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.
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 Indian, African, and mestizo populations. Class awareness is very 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 native population died due to disease, cruelty, and forced resettlement. The slow demographic recovery of native 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 growing. Not only was Brazil the site of the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit, but hundreds of locally based environmental groups have formed to try to protect forests, grasslands, indigenous peoples, and freshwater supplies. This brand of environmentalism is pragmatic; it recognizes the need for economic development and aims to improve urban environmental quality and sustainable resource use.

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 age fifteen. Those who cannot find work often consider emigrating to other parts of Latin America, North America, Europe, or Japan to seek better economic opportunities.

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, diverse regions.

Bibliography


