

Latin America

**Social Structures &
Political Institutions**

**JACQUES
LAMBERT**

Translated by Helen Katel



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Political Institutions*

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Introduction

"Latin America Appears on the Scene" was the title of Tibor Mende's outstanding series of articles, published in 1952. Actually "Return Performance" might have been more appropriate, for Latin America had previously played a major international role. In 1545, when precious metals from Huanacavelica and Potosí began flowing into Spain they gave Spain her financial supremacy and, by spreading throughout Europe, hastened the advent of capitalism.

Early Latin American Colonial Development

Iberian and especially Spanish settlements in America had developed both early and swiftly. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the English had not yet left the Atlantic shore to venture inland and an almost empty continent lay in front of them. By then the Spaniards had been for almost a century the masters of organized empires with millions of subjects in Central America and the Andean plateaus. The natives had been cultivating the land before the conquerors landed and continued to do it for them. The Spaniards and Portuguese had also established settlements and had set up an efficient administration along the coastline of huge territories stretching from California to the Rio de la Plata. Humboldt, who traveled over Latin America from 1799 to 1804, estimated its population at about 17 million, at a time when the United

States did not have over 5 million inhabitants. Mexico alone had a larger population than the United States.

It is true that the economic and social structure that was later to impede Latin America's evolution was already being shaped. But under the colonial system, when the colonizers' success was measured by the amount of precious metals and tropical produce supplied to the home country, the stern tutelage of the Spanish and Portuguese administrations over American trade, the concentration of the land in the hands of a few, and the enslavement of native labor had fostered rather than hindered the prosperity of colonial empires. Until the eighteenth century America loomed in the eyes of the world as an Iberian-dominated continent.

Latin America's Delayed National Development

After her early start, Latin America—as thoroughly exploited as she was poorly developed—fell into a deep slumber induced by the colonial system. The intellectual awakening of the late eighteenth century and the independence won in the first quarter of the nineteenth were felt in Latin America only as ceaseless, nightmarish political upheavals. The revolutions that brought independence separately to the various parts of Latin America were local in character so that the continent was eventually parceled into twenty sovereign states, some of them too small and too sparsely populated even today. Being neither social nor economic in character, the revolutions in independent nineteenth century Latin America left intact or sometimes even strengthened the existing obsolete social structure in the various countries. This structure had formerly helped the home country to exploit its colonial empire, but its persistence was to become a serious hindrance to national economic and social development.

Thus, most of the Latin American states retained long after independence a colonial social structure that was hardly compatible with diversified economic growth or an egalitarian ideology and democratic institutions. Power struggles among individuals or groups were the consequence. The unshakable obsolete social fabric dissociated the economic and social evolution of Latin America from that of the United States and

western Europe. For a large part of Latin America, the nineteenth century was a wasted century; even for the most favored countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, the first half of that century was wasted. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had a larger population than the whole of Latin America, and, while the 80 million North Americans were rich and literate, most of the 60 million Latin Americans remained illiterate and in a state of wretchedness. Compared to fast-growing Western Europe and Anglo-America, Latin America had turned into an underdeveloped continent.

Eclipse in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, America meant the United States, and Latin Americans had to accept the fact that the people who in their opinion should have been called "North Americans" or "United Statesmen" were called "Americans." Europe and English-speaking America received a distorted image of Latin America in which there was no place for the bulk of her population.

In Europe, especially in France, Latin Americans were regarded as likable aristocrats—tin, silver, coffee, or cattle barons who shuttled between the Sorbonne and Monte Carlo—expatriates in search of a life of culture and luxury. This misleading image concealed the extreme poverty and ignorance of the masses, and gave credibility to the myth of a fabulously wealthy continent.

On the other hand, to the United States, which saw in the Caribbean a caricature of Latin America's backwardness, the image was one of utter squalor and violence. Here were selfish feudal landlords, bloodthirsty generals, crooked politicians (all lumped together under the derogatory term of *caudillos*), who were always at one another's throat but always managed to stay in power just long enough to get rich. Surely it was the duty of good neighbors who believed themselves wiser to help these people, who apparently were incapable of governing themselves; obviously, they had to be subjected to the discipline of U. S. Navy expeditionary forces.

It took a long time for these clichés to die. They masked for too long the awakening of Latin America which began in

the second half of the nineteenth century at the southern tip of the continent, far from the United States. From there, the movement spread after World War I, and even more so after World War II.

The ignorance on both sides was as dangerous for the United States as for Latin America because it bred a mutual lack of understanding stemming respectively from contempt and resentment. This ignorance and contempt led the United States to maintain her policy of military interventions in the Caribbean too long and to delay giving any economic aid. Ignorance and resentment in Latin America produced in turn a pathological sensitivity toward the United States that is the most widespread common trait of all those countries, and that today thwarts the efforts of the United States to hasten economic and social progress.

*Rediscovery of Latin America After
World War II*

After World War II Latin America again attracted widespread attention. Just before the war, which the United States saw coming and was anxious to stay out of, she had to work out a Good Neighbor Policy in order to create a continental front of American neutrality, and this left no room for contempt or ignorance. When the war ended and the Cold War began, the structure of international organizations gave Latin America a diplomatic weight that none of the Great Powers could afford to ignore. Within the United Nations, fragmentation into small countries was an asset to Spanish-speaking Latin America. Portuguese Latin America, on the other hand, despite her almost equal size, had only one seat because she had escaped fragmentation. At the time when the newly formed United Nations was composed of only its fifty-one founding members, twenty were Latin American—eighteen of them Spanish-speaking. The United Nations General Assembly was Spanish-American before becoming Afro-Asian.

This privileged position did not endure: the birth of so many new independent nations in Africa and Asia has greatly lessened the weight of the Latin-American bloc within the international organizations, which now have over a hundred members. But, while Spanish rang out so forcefully at the meetings,

Latin America became better known, and the old image of republics of operetta or tragedy was forgotten. Of course, there are still some backward countries in Latin America with purely personal dictatorships and frequent military coups, but in the largest ones—Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela—and the two small peaceful nations of Uruguay and Costa Rica, the era of the caudillos is over, just as is that of the enlightened despotism of cultured aristocracies.

*The Awakening of the Middle
Classes*

In all the most advanced countries and to some degree in the others, aggressive middle classes have taken over. They are composed almost exclusively of city dwellers but constitute a large segment of the population, since the cities themselves have expanded so swiftly. Everywhere the embryonic proletariat, consisting of workers and more recently, in some cases, of peasants, is trying to wrest power from the middle classes. The nineteenth century caudillos and aristocrats had shaken off colonial domination in the name of political freedom, but had retained the colonial economic and social structure; the new classes now in power in the various countries are trying to complete the process of decolonization by building more egalitarian and economically independent societies. The working class, fighting for power, thinks that the process is not fast or thorough enough; in the past few years, peasants have also been demanding integration into a society that has been treating them as subjects instead of as citizens.

The political life of this new Latin America is as troubled as before; revolutions, dictatorships, military coups are almost as frequent in the more developed countries as in the others, but these political troubles are of a different nature. Rigid stereotypes must be put out of mind if the meaning of this political ferment is to be understood. No longer does it stem simply from personal or clan rivalries; neither is it the doing of ambitious military men, nor the product of the supposedly volatile Latin American temperament. It is the almost inevitable result of cumulative economic and social backwardness that is now intolerable to nations determined to move forward at an accelerated pace.

Today, except for the Argentine Republic and Uruguay, Latin American countries remain underdeveloped, although in most of them rapid economic and social advances are taking place. No one can dismiss these efforts: if they bear fruit, Latin America's demographic potential, her natural resources, and the quality of her elites will create new nations that could alter the world balance of power.

Demographic Potential

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the population has been increasing faster in Latin America—even without a large influx of immigrants—than anywhere else in the world. The birth rate among the overwhelming mass of the population—as poor as it is illiterate—is still 40 or 50 per thousand, just as before the dissemination of birth control methods; at the same time, under the influence of civic-minded elites who are part of European cultural life, the use of simple low-cost public health techniques has brought the death rate down to an average of 10 to 15 per thousand, and it will in all likelihood continue to decrease rapidly in the near future.

In forty years, from 1920 to 1960, the population of Europe grew by 23 percent, as compared to 126 percent in Latin America. Around 1900, Latin America with her 63 million inhabitants was far less populated than the United States; by 1960 she was far ahead, with 202 million people. If the present rate of increase of 2.9 percent a year persists until the end of the century, which is most likely, the population of Latin America, which was 240 million in 1965, will reach almost 700 million in 2000, that is, twice the number of English-speaking people on the North American continent. By the end of this century Brazil, which in 1960 had the largest population in Latin America with her 70 million inhabitants, might be one of the great powers in terms of population (over 180 million), while Mexico, which had only 34 million inhabitants, should by then have over 100 million.

However, such rapid population growth is not in itself a harbinger of power or prosperity. On the contrary, the present population growth in some underdeveloped countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, although slower than in Latin America, is nevertheless seriously hindering their eco-

conomic and social progress. When population increases, there is a possibility that any economic achievements may merely keep a greater number of people in the same state of wretchedness. Crowding also makes it harder to raise the level of productivity. Nevertheless, most Latin American countries are in a better position than other underdeveloped countries to afford a rapid population growth because, except for some points in the West Indies, Central America, and perhaps Mexico, Latin America is sparsely populated, and suffers from too low a population density.

Economic Potential

The low population density in Latin America—11 inhabitants per square kilometer—is not misleading, as it is in some areas that include huge, totally uninhabited deserts. There are few truly unproductive regions in Latin America; these are in northern Mexico, northern Chile, and on the Pacific coast in Peru, as well as on the high stretches of the Andes. Deserts occupy no more than 6 percent of the land; if one includes areas at high altitude or those with an erratic water supply, such as the region subject to recurrent droughts in northeastern Brazil, the total area unfavorable to settlement does not exceed 25 percent of the continent.

It is always arbitrary to speak of a territory as being habitable by a given number of people, since this depends as much on the type of people as on the nature of the land; very rough estimates are valid only for a given level of technology. With this reservation in mind, Latin America as a whole is highly habitable. A 1958 estimate by Harrison Brown, a specialist in geological chemistry at the California Institute of Technology, is for two billion inhabitants, almost twice what he suggests for the English-speaking countries of North America. He probably had in mind primarily the potential food resources, but the natural resources needed for industrialization are equally abundant. Lack of coal in Latin America, which would have been an insuperable obstacle to industrial growth in the nineteenth century, can now be compensated for by an abundance of oil, hydroelectric potential, and also, it seems, by the availability of fissionable materials.

Bearing in mind that these figures are only estimates and

not precise calculations, one can say nonetheless that if by the end of this century the Latin America peoples can use efficient development methods, their continent could easily accommodate 700 million inhabitants, and still leaving ample room for growth. The density of 63 to 70 inhabitants per square mile that will probably prevail in Latin America at the turn of the century might even afford a better economic and social use of the land than today's density, which is only a third of this.

As elsewhere, the rapid rate of population increase is placing too heavy a burden on the Latin American peoples, and a lower fertility would ease their lot. Poverty that feeds on too rapid population growth can only increase the probability of new revolutions. If the sacrifices imposed on the present generation were not so heavy as to paralyze economic and social development, they might help future generations because a larger number of people would better match the vast expanse of the land and the wealth of natural resources.

The land and natural wealth are there; the too small population is increasing too fast. But since World War I the governments have been acting with determination to hasten economic and social development. Great advances have already been made in Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina. Some countries have reached the point of economic takeoff. But, before the advent of general prosperity, much is still lacking; what is needed is capital, the elimination of an obsolete social structure, greater literacy among the masses, slower population growth, and political stability. Nevertheless, Latin America is one of the areas where financial and technological assistance, if given and accepted without ulterior motives, may be the most efficient way of fighting underdevelopment, and where far-reaching results may be achieved within a short time.

Latin America's Dual Background

Although helping Latin America entails some sacrifices, the results may be highly rewarding: a wealthy and powerful Latin America would, in all likelihood, be able to contribute a great deal to solving or alleviating the most serious of world conflicts. Beyond ideological conflicts and power rivalries that range the Communist and capitalist countries in opposing

camp lies the division of countries into developed and under-developed. That division is further embittered as racial animosities and resentments left over from the colonial past are compounded with differences in culture and living standards.

Latin America does not fully belong to either camp in any of these respects. Latin American countries as a whole are equally tied to both groups by some of their features, namely their stage of development, their ethnic makeup, and the role of colonization in their history. Without being fully aware of it, Latin America is ambivalent in the conflict between rich and poor nations, between the European white man and the colored peoples, the former colonizers and the former colonial peoples. She may in the end give her allegiance to either camp according to the generosity or greed, the skill or clumsiness, of the great powers. But if any of the Latin American countries become great powers, their dual background could help them to work out a constructive neutralism, to mediate between the two camps, and possibly to prepare a reconciliation.

Ethnically, Latin America as a whole does not fully belong either to the white or to the colored group. European influence is very strong because the Iberian colonization was followed after independence by an influx of Europeans from many areas who made up a large segment of the population; furthermore, in every Latin American country, European culture predominated for centuries as the undisputed national culture. Nevertheless, except for Argentina and Uruguay, a large segment of the population is today of Indian and, in places, African stock.

The most characteristic ethnic feature of the people of Latin America is that, while there are Europeans, Indians, and Africans, there is an even larger number of Latin Americans who are a blend of the three. Little does it matter whether the conquerors from Spain or Portugal lived with Indian and Negro women because (unlike the English) they had no race prejudice or because their possible prejudices were discarded since they came without families, as conquerors and not as immigrants. The fact is that Latin America has become the land of racial mixture.

Race mixture has always been so widespread that any accu-

rate ethnological breakdown has become very difficult. How could it be otherwise when, through the blending of Europeans, Indians, Africans, and even some Asians which has gone on since the start of colonization, there are not only whites, Negroes, and brown people, but countless others in between so that individuals can be differentiated not by their color but only by their particular shade?

The figures provided by W. S. and E. Woytinsky¹ may be regarded as very rough estimates; the facts to be retained are

TABLE 1
ROUGH ESTIMATE OF THE ETHNIC COMPOSITION
OF LATIN AMERICA IN 1950
(in millions)

Region	Total Population	White	Brown *	Negro
Central America	51	.9	31	11
South America	111	52	40	19
Total	162	61	71	30

* Brown means the pure Indians as well as the mestizos and the mulattoes. In Latin America "mestizo" applies only to the mixture of European and Indian.

merely that the mestizos and mulattoes are probably the largest group; that South America is far more European than Central America but that in neither region are pure Europeans in the majority, as shown in table 1.

The diversity of the mixtures and of the intermediate blends prevents any brutal racial confrontation. If racial barriers were wanted by anyone, they could be erected only between individuals. Latin Americans know that any strict segregation, besides being dangerous, is not even possible. Further mixing is constantly watering down racial differences, and who knows whether Latin America is not thus preparing the only workable solution to the racial problem by melting all the races

¹ W. S. Woytinsky and E. S. Woytinsky, *World Population and Production*, New York, 1953, p. 51.