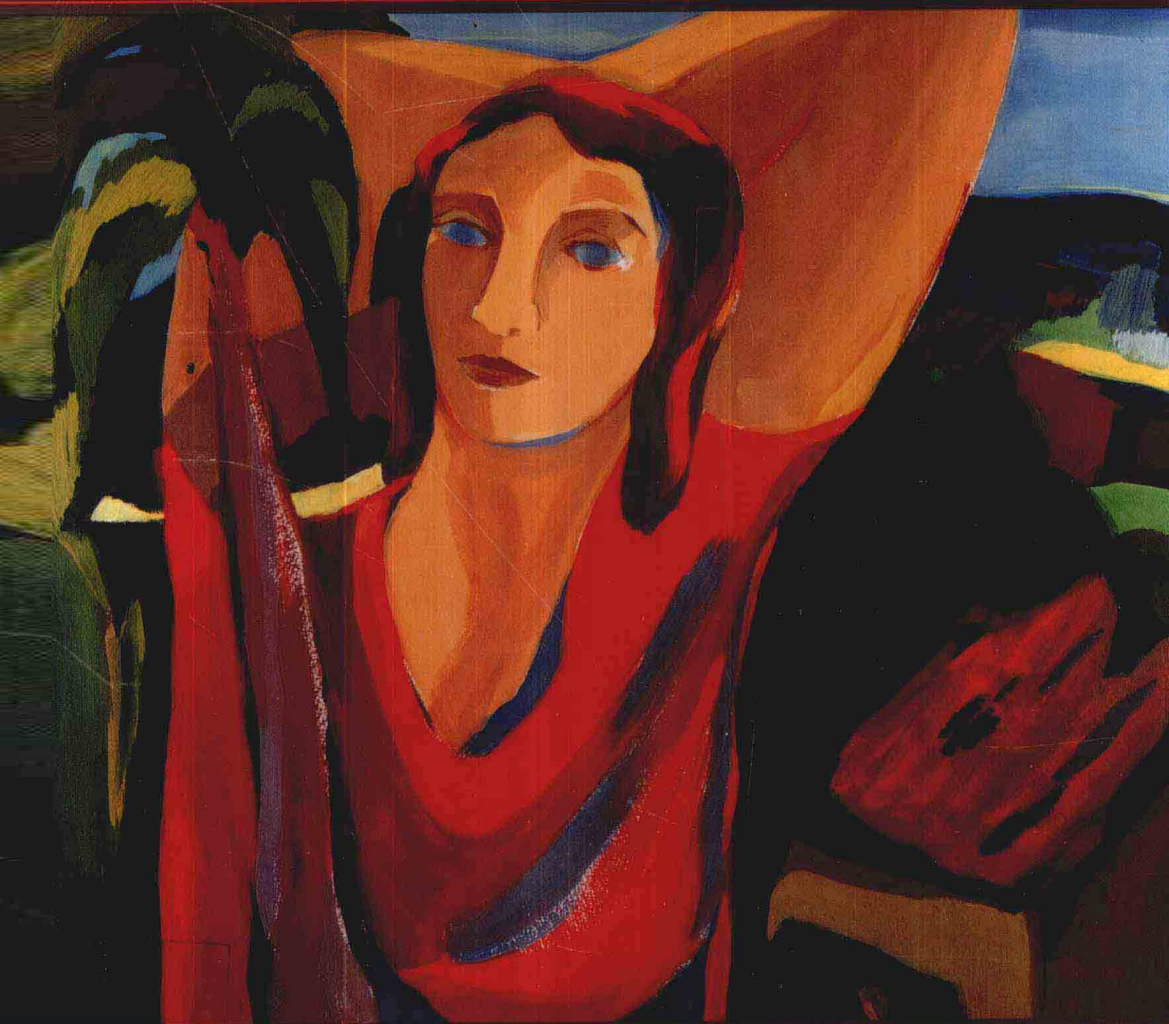


UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY

# LATIN AMERICA

second edition



edited by

**Richard S. Hillman**

SECOND EDITION

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# UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

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edited by  
Richard S. Hillman



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# Preface

**T**his volume is the product of the collaboration of seventeen Latin American specialists whose enthusiasm and diligence manifest an abiding commitment to education about Latin America. It was clear to all involved in the project that expanding academic, business, and policy interests require a basic introduction to this complex and significant area. The increasing number of scholarly studies analyzing the region's socio-economic and political conditions amply attests to the importance of Latin America in the contemporary world. However, comprehending these studies presupposes some degree of expertise and experience. In contrast, *Understanding Contemporary Latin America* is intended for the many "beginners" who wish to learn about Latin America. This revised and updated second edition of the volume responds to the excellent reception of the first edition. Clearly, interest in learning about Latin America is continuing and expanding.

Although the strategic geopolitical relevance of the region has been recognized throughout history and an increasing volume of trade has begun to significantly affect hemispheric development, Latin American attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding the conduct of politics, business, and life in general remain vastly and profoundly misunderstood by many. The media has sensationalized issues such as political corruption and instability, narcotics trafficking, and immigration problems, overshadowing attempts to promote democracy, trade and development, tourism, and regional cooperation. But the long-term health of inter-American relations is contingent on accurate awareness and mutual understanding. In this context, *Understanding Contemporary Latin America* introduces fundamental background, issues, themes, and directions in countries within the contemporary region. The book is designed as a basic interdisciplinary resource for use in college and university classrooms, foreign service seminars, and corporate training programs. Its wealth of graphic and textual information, presented in a straightforward style, is intended to enhance clarity, comprehension, and appreciation of the traditions, influences, and commonalities underlying the varying cultural orientations within this vital area.

The facts alone are insufficient for a complete understanding of contemporary Latin America. Insight and empathy are required for overcoming

stereotypical characterizations and cultural biases. It is precisely this mix of knowledge and appreciation that is inherent in each chapter's treatment of Latin America's complex setting and challenges. After the first chapter's brief introduction outlining the scope and themes of the book, the second chapter describes the rich diversity of Latin America's human and physical geography. Legacies of the colonial era that continue to influence current realities are analyzed in the third chapter on the historical context. Chapter 4 discusses how these legacies affect ongoing political institutions, including the military, which is treated separately in the fifth chapter due to its singular importance in the region. The sixth chapter investigates the area's economic transformation over time, culminating in a discussion of current problems. Some of these problems are covered further in Chapter 8, specifically those dealing with environmental degradation, population expansion, and rapid urbanization. Chapter 7 examines international relations among countries within Latin America as well as with the rest of the world. Patterns of ethnicity and class are explored in Chapter 9, the role of women in Chapter 10, and the relationship between education and development in Chapter 11. These chapters offer a human face to the problems and challenges detailed in other parts of the book, as do Chapter 12 on religious beliefs and Chapter 13 on literary expression. Finally, Chapter 14 examines where the region has been and in what direction it appears to be going. Far from a definitive closure of these matters, however, the book is designed to be an open-ended resource for provoking greater interest and raising even more questions about a vital, complex, and increasingly important region of the modern world.

\* \* \*

I am grateful to all of the authors for finding time during busy academic schedules to participate in this collaborative effort, and for making my tasks as editor intellectually fulfilling and enjoyable. I would like to thank David Myers for his assistance with the volume. The cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge inherent in this project is testimony to the highest academic ideals.

The programs and institutions that made *Understanding Contemporary Latin America* possible are deeply appreciated. The Fulbright Scholars Program granted me awards in 1987, 1992, and 1996 that supported my research and allowed me to teach and live in Latin America. The School of International Studies at the Central University in Caracas became my "home away from home" during these study tours. These linkages have been reaffirmed and supported by a U.S. State Department College and University Affiliation Program grant beginning in 1997 and renewed in 2000. One product of this program is the Institute for the Study of Democracy and Human Rights at St. John Fisher College. The institute has spon-

sored six exchanges of scholars (two from St. John Fisher College and four from the Central University of Venezuela), two international conferences on democracy in Latin America, and several research projects. The United Nations Photographic Library and the World Bank Photographic Department gave me the opportunity to select most of the photographs that appear throughout the text.

John Bogdal created the excellent maps that appear in the book. Lynne Rienner Publishers provided helpful advice during the copyediting phase. Anonymous reviewers and editorial assistants made sensible suggestions that enhanced the readability of the manuscript. Finally, I am indebted to my wife, Audrey, whose patience and love allow me to work, and to my mother, Edith, who gives me inspiration.

—*Richard S. Hillman*

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# Introduction

*Richard S. Hillman*

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

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

Let us begin to formulate a response by considering one of the first encounters between a Native American and a European in the early sixteenth century. Montezuma, leader of the Aztec civilization, is reported to have told Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés that “we have known for a long time, from the chronicles of our forefathers, that neither I, nor those who inhabit

this country, are descendants from the aborigines of it, but from strangers who came to it from very distant parts" (Keen 1966:47). According to Cortés's account in his letters to the king of Spain, Montezuma then related an ancient story that legitimized Spanish sovereignty in the Americas. But Montezuma added a comment that would have portentous significance in subsequent history: "Look at me," he said, "and see that I am flesh and bones, the same as you, and everybody, and that I am mortal, and tangible" (Keen 1966:48). Since the first contact between Europeans and Native Americans, Latin America has been in the process of continuous self-definition. Who would govern this New World inhabited by the progeny of "strangers"? What kind of world would it become?

The story of Latin America's Indian origins, conquest by European powers, struggles for independence, and twentieth-century search for political and economic stability is interesting and revealing. Moreover, the historical and increasing contemporary importance of Latin America in world politics makes it essential for every citizen to understand how this story is rooted in a complex and turbulent past. Popular discussions of Latin America and inter-American affairs, however, are generally charged with a high level of passion and scanty knowledge, resulting all too often in mutual misunderstanding. For example, North Americans have argued vehemently about their need to protect themselves against violent Latin American revolutionaries who threaten political stability in their backyard, illegal immigrants who steal jobs from U.S. workers, and narcotraffickers who poison U.S. youth. And Latin Americans have feared the malevolent intentions of a "colossus of the North" that has seemed to intervene continuously in their domestic affairs.<sup>1</sup> They exhibit a strong tendency to resent U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and blame the violence occasioned by drug cartels on the strength of the U.S. market. Yet Latin Americans continue to seek upward mobility in the United States, thereby causing their "love-hate" relationship to confound many observers.

During the Cold War many U.S. citizens excitedly propounded the merits of military incursions or covert operations in places like Grenada, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. When asked to locate these countries on a map, name their major cities, account for their economic status, or place them in historical context, however, they were left in a quandary. Far too many Americans are apt to locate Cuba in Central America or Argentina in the Caribbean and to assume Brazilians speak Spanish. Moreover, public opinion on many issues in both the United States and Latin America has become profoundly divided in the post-Cold War era. The plight of Cuba is a case in point. To many observers, the U.S. economic embargo and diplomatic isolation of Cuba have constituted a misuse of power to the extreme detriment of masses of Cubans who must endure suffering and hardship as a result.

Many others believe Cuba's development problems should be attributed solely to Fidel Castro's adoption of the socialist model. In either case, ideological dogmatism has been reinforced by insufficient understanding and vilification of U.S. foreign policy on the one hand or of Castroism on the other. Could it be that this is not a mutually exclusive proposition, that, in fact, both sides have contributed to the dilemma?

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

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

Many Latin Americans also hold distorted perceptions of the United States and its citizens. These views vary from the vulgar notion that all *gringos* carry guns and walk on gold-paved streets to the more sophisticated analysis of the United States as a materialist and mercenary culture of acquisition devoid of the higher virtues of family loyalty, honor, and personalism. In this regard, José Enrique Rodó of Uruguay wrote *Ariel* in 1900 as a glorification of Latin America's superior cultural sensitivity. His

ideas influenced other Latin American critics of the United States, such as José Martí of Cuba and Rubén Darío of Nicaragua, thus contributing to an anti-*yanqui* sentiment. Hence, mutual misperceptions, stereotypes, and myths abound, making a more penetrating and realistic portrayal of the region particularly important in an era of global change. The basic problem, according to Pike (1992:364), is that "Americans remain reluctant to accept the fact that their country has become a frontier for Latin Americans. For generations, after all, Americans had assumed that Latin America was their frontier. Old myths, like hoary stereotypes, die hard."

Recognition of the highly misleading and counterproductive nature of portrayals of Latin America as somehow more "natural" and uncivilized than the developed North is essential for understanding the region. This book is an attempt to promote such recognition through exploration of basic ideas and information that will contribute to debunking various myths about contemporary Latin America. The fundamental theme of "unity in diversity" provides a comprehensive organizing concept. Using this approach, the authors emphasize the significance of the area as a whole with ample references to the individual countries within the region and their history, geography, and political culture. Our examination encompasses all territory in the Western Hemisphere south of the United States. (Latin American enclaves within North America can be understood in the context of their ties to the region.) Hence, areas within Latin America include Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Countries within these areas form part of Ibero-, Luso-, Indo-, Afro-, and Hispano-America. Subareas such as the Anglo, French, and Dutch Caribbean are also included because of underlying similarities that transcend apparent differences.<sup>2</sup>

Great diversities of peoples, institutions, and geography in Latin America coalesce in common historical, social, political, and developmental patterns. Various combinations of these patterns, similar socioeconomic problems, and analogous cultural expressions permit a unified vision of Latin America. Therefore, each chapter in this volume draws examples from several countries within the various areas of Latin America, thus allowing the text as a whole to offer a balanced representation of the entire region. The authors use a variety of specific cases to illustrate their general overviews of the geographic setting, historical context, political evolution, and political issues; the role of the military; the ways in which economic systems function; the impacts of urbanization, demographic trends, and the environment; the influences of ethnicity, class, and nationalism; the role of women; the relationship between education and development; the impact of religion and of cultural and literary expressions; and the ways international relations have contributed to new trends and prospects for the future. In sum, the book is designed as a core text that introduces students to Latin America as a diverse yet inclusive region facing crucial issues in the advent of the twenty-first century.



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

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

Latin America's more than 500 million people account for approximately 10 percent of the world's population and outnumber North Americans by two to one at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They live in a geographic region that encompasses 15 percent of the world's land surface with vast differences in terrain and climate—ranging from tropical rain forests, swampy lowlands, grassland plains, and deserts to mountainous highlands, island chains, and cays. Increasingly, demographic concentration in urban areas, especially in very large cities, has reaffirmed some cultural traditions and torn down others. European-style central cities have become surrounded by shantytowns occupied mostly by migrants displaced from rural agrarian society. These and other demographic trends have presented a variety of difficult socioeconomic challenges.

Issues relating to the environment, economic growth and distribution, and political and developmental concerns also must be understood in historical perspective. The area has an extremely interesting past in which three major ethnic groups have simultaneously clashed with each other while forming unique fusions. Much of the Latin American story is one of confrontation and accommodation among Native Americans—the Aztecs, Maya, Inca, Taino or Arawak, Carib, Aymará, and Quechua; Europeans—the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, and Dutch; and Africans—Yoruba, Mandingo, Fulani, Hausa, and other groups. The interaction among