

CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA

1970 TO THE PRESENT

ROBERT H. HOLDEN AND RINA VILLARS



CONTEMPORARY
LATIN AMERICA

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AND RINA VILLARS

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Series Editor's Preface

The contemporary world frequently presents a baffling spectacle: “New world orders” come and go; “Clashes of civilizations” seem imminent if not actual; “Peace dividends” appear easily lost in the post; terrorism and “wars on terror” occupy the headlines. “Mature” states live alongside “failed” states in mutual apprehension. The “rules” of the international game, in these circumstances, are difficult to discern. What “international law” is, or is not, remains enduringly problematic. Certainly it is a world in which there are still frontiers, borders and boundaries but both metaphorically and in reality they are difficult to patrol and maintain. “Asylum” occupies the headlines as populations shift across continents, driven by fear. Other migrants simply seek a better standard of living. The organs of the “international community,” though frequently invoked, look inadequate to deal with the myriad problems confronting the world. Climate change, however induced, is not susceptible to national control. Famine seems endemic in certain countries. Population pressures threaten finite resources. It is in this context that globalization, however understood, is both demonized and lauded.

Such a list of contemporary problems could be amplified in detail and almost indefinitely extended. It is a complex world, ripe for investigation in this ambitious new series of books. “Contemporary,” of course, is always difficult to define. The focus in this series is on the evolution of the world since the 1980s. As time passes, and as the volumes appear, it no longer seems sensible to equate “the world since 1945” with “contemporary history.” The legacy of the “Cold War” lingers on but it is emphatically “in the background.” The fuzziness about “the 1980s” is deliberate. No single year ever carries the same significance across the globe. Authors are therefore establishing their own precise starting points, within the overall “contemporary” framework.

The series treats the history of particular regions, countries or continents but does so in full awareness that such histories, for all their continuing distinctiveness, can only rarely be considered apart from the history of the world as a whole. Economic, demographic, environmental and religious issues

transcend state, regional or continental boundaries. Just as the world itself struggles to reconcile diversity and individuality with unity and common purpose, so do the authors of these volumes. The concept is challenging. Authors have been selected who sit loosely on their disciplinary identity – whether that be as historians, political scientists or students of international relations. The task is to integrate as many aspects of contemporary life as possible in an accessible manner.

A volume on Latin America confronts the question of identity head-on. It is a region, as this volume so amply demonstrates, which exhibits in certain aspects a unity that transcends the reality of its existence as a collection of states. That unity points to a common “Latin” heritage, one which still leaves behind a clear political, social and cultural legacy. The past still complicates political and constitutional evolution and explains turbulent patterns, regarded externally as “typically” Latin American. Yet a broad brush is inadequate. The volume brings out great, and arguably increasing, diversity – in economic performance, in political stability, in cultural vitality – as between individual states. Stock perceptions of the region as “Spanish” or “Catholic” no longer serve in a situation of increasing religious and linguistic pluralism. This volume itself ranges impressively across many subjects as it brings out Latin America’s puzzling but increasingly globally significant amalgams.

Keith Robbins



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Map 0.1 The Hispanic world.

Part I

Latin America in a World Setting



Introduction

Revolts against Spanish and Portuguese rule in the Americas after 1808 produced the nineteen countries that compose Latin America today. Yet no era in the post-independence histories of these countries can match the depth and scope of change that swept over their peoples in the decades after about 1970. The purpose of this book is to identify and weigh the distinctive local, national, regional and global dimensions of those changes.

Because of the compact nature of the period covered in this book, we opted to organize Latin America's history since about 1970 around four big themes, each the subject of a separate "Part": Government (II), Wealth (III), Culture (IV) and Communities (V). None outranks the others in importance, nor can any stand alone as the ultimate "cause" of change. We have chosen them because a *survey* of Latin America's history since 1970 should supply the broadest view of the essential aspects of the topic. We believe that these themes (plus that of beliefs, the subject of Chapter 2) encompass what is most vital to know about the history of any given human society. None can be plausibly analyzed without reference to their global dimensions, which every chapter takes into account.

Thus, change after about 1970 will be the core historical problem of each of the chapters that follow. While in most cases the evidence for epochal change revealed itself only in the 1980s, our account begins with the previous decade because the multiple crises of the 1970s opened the door for the reforms that would mark the 1980s.

Understanding change requires clarity about the subject of change. The introductions to each of the parts that follow this one will therefore define the theme and explain its significance in the larger context of Latin American history.

In the first chapter, we elaborate our general interpretation of the trends of the last four decades: toward liberalization, by which we mean a loosening of restraints, a tendency toward inclusiveness, an openness to experimentation. On balance, of course, there is much more evidence of continuity than of change, as one would expect in a period of such short duration. And not every kind of change has come down on the side of liberalization.

Moreover, the movement toward liberalization in the areas that constitute the topics of Parts II to V can be expected, if carried far enough, to generate resistance and countertrends. Evidence for both is not hard to find, as we will see.

In Chapter 1, we set out to define the region, survey its more distant past, and situate it globally. We go on in Chapter 2 to characterize the array of beliefs and values that ultimately account for the distinctiveness of our nineteen countries, and thus for their status as a separate world region or civilization.



Chapter 1

What Is Latin America?

“Latin America” as the preeminent name of the lands to the south of the United States first emerged in the mid-1850s. Until then, they were normally referred to as “Spanish America” or “South America” by both English and Spanish speakers. While the origins of the term remain controversial among historians, it seems likely that two trends intersected that together gave rise to a preference for “Latin America.” The first was the belief that the people of the world could be divided into separate races, each with their own distinctive temperaments and capacities. Race as the dominant explanation for the material progress of some peoples and the backwardness of others would gain currency everywhere in the nineteenth century. Second, as leading thinkers in the new republics worried increasingly about the political and cultural challenges posed by the United States, they sought to distinguish between what some considered a northern “race” of Anglo-Saxons or Yankees, on the one hand, and a contrasting “race” of Latins, on the other. At the same time, France popularized the name “Latin America” in the 1860s when it tried to justify its military invasion and occupation of Mexico by claiming a shared “Latin” racial and linguistic legacy with Mexico and the rest of the territories south of the United States. By the late nineteenth century, “Latin America” had become the preferred designation. In a nutshell, acceptance of the qualifier “Latin” seems to have represented an attempt to endow a strictly linguistic phenomenon (the strong dependence of Spanish, Portuguese and French on the Latin language) with a wholly imaginary Latin ethnicity. Even linguistically, of course, “Latin America” falls short in view of the continued vitality of hundreds of indigenous languages in most of the eighteen countries whose official language is Spanish, or in Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

“Latin America” seems even less appropriate when applied to all the lands south of the United States, a practice not uncommon among scholars of the region nor within some international organizations like the World Bank and the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America. This maximal interpretation of the region’s limits would encompass thirty-three independent, self-governing states and the fourteen dependencies of three European countries (France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) and of the United States. While numerous, all the dependencies are clustered in the Caribbean Basin (except for the UK’s Falkland Islands) and together they account for no more than 1% of the population and one-half of 1% of all the territory to the south of the United States. Of the thirty-three independent states that make up the maximal definition, half (sixteen) gained their sovereignty in the twentieth century and lie in the Caribbean Basin, but account for less than 4% of today’s population and only 3% of the territory to the south of the United States. All sixteen had been British territory since at least the eighteenth century except for Cuba (a Spanish colony until 1898, then a U.S. protectorate until 1934), Panama (a province of Colombia until 1903) and Suriname (a colony of the Netherlands until 1975).

In the eighteen other countries, political independence and decolonization were a nineteenth-century affair. They are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. If we drop the formerly French possession of Haiti (overwhelmingly Afro-American in culture) and add Cuba and Panama to the list, we find these nineteen countries comprise 97% of the territory and 96% of the population south of the United States. They share some important characteristics that justify treating them as a cohesive entity:

- All of them except Brazil (formerly a possession of the Portuguese monarchy) were settled, colonized and governed for at least three centuries by the monarchy of Spain.
- A common process of independence (1810 to 1825) complemented the shared experience of three centuries of Spanish or Portuguese rule. The only exceptions are the island nations of Cuba and the Dominican Republic.
- During the nearly two centuries of self-rule that Brazil and most of Spain’s former territories have passed through since the 1820s, turbulence and violence, including frequent disruptions of constitutional order and authoritarian rule, have defined their political histories. Writing in the late 1970s, the social scientist and future Brazilian president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, could still compare the status of democracy in Latin America to that of an “exotic plant.” Not even today would most scholars consider any

of the nineteen to be fully consolidated democracies, with the possible exceptions of Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay.

- Spanish is the official language in eighteen of the nineteen countries, while Portuguese is spoken in Brazil; both reign over a diversity of indigenous languages. Another important cultural trait was the near-monolithic adherence, until the late twentieth century, to the Roman Catholic religion in all nineteen countries.
- Finally, the economic geography of the nineteen countries reveals important regional consistencies. The World Bank, for example, classifies all the world's economies as either developed (industrialized countries with high incomes and high standards of living) or developing economies (countries with low or mid-level incomes). All nineteen are "developing" economies, and their average level of development (as measured by life expectancy, education and purchasing power) is the highest of all the developing world regions. However, despite their *average* superiority in standard-of-living compared to other developing regions, our nineteen countries stand out in global terms as a region of extreme inequality of income. In the late 1990s, in most of the nineteen, the richest 10% of individuals were receiving 40% to 47% of total income while the poorest 20% were earning 2% to 4% of total income. Few countries in the world could match that record.

Taken together, these features indicate that in their common political history, geographical proximity, economies and basic cultural orientation, the eighteen Spanish-speaking countries and Portuguese-speaking Brazil (Table 1.1) make up a coherent and distinctive region, and thus constitute what we will refer to throughout this book as "Latin America." We exclude Puerto Rico, despite its people's success in preserving much of the culture that it inherited from its 400-year experience as a realm of the Spanish monarchy. Since its forced incorporation into the United States in 1898, followed in 1917 by the imposition of U.S. citizenship on its people, Puerto Rico has been largely isolated from the dominant patterns of social, economic and political change that will occupy us in this book.

What we have just defined as Latin America is sometimes referred to as "Iberoamerica" or "Hispanic America." "Iberia" was the ancient name for the peninsula now constituted by the modern nations of Spain and Portugal. "Hispanic" derives from the Latin *Hispania*, the name the Romans gave the Iberian peninsula when it was a province of their empire. Portugal and (by extension) Brazil can be associated with a more fanciful "Lusitanian" legacy, a name derived from *Lusitanus*, the Roman designation for the part of western Hispania out of which Portugal would one day emerge. The fact that the Romans called all of the Iberian peninsula "Hispania," of which "Lusitania" was a part, might justify calling both Brazil and the Spanish-speaking republics

Table 1.1 Latin America: basic demography, living standards and history. Based on data from *South America, Central America and the Caribbean 2006* (London: Routledge, 2006); United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report 2010; World Population Prospects, the 2010 Revision (UN Population Division, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Excel-Data/population.htm>).

	<i>Ex-metropolis (after c. 1800)</i>	<i>Year of Independence</i>	<i>Population 2010 est. (UN Pop. Div.)</i>	<i>Area (km sq.). Includes inland water</i>	<i>HDI 1980</i>	<i>HDI 2010</i>	<i>Ave. annual HDI growth rate (%)</i>
Argentina ¹	Spain	1816	40,412,000	2,780,403	0.66	0.78	0.56
Bolivia	Spain	1825	9,930,000	1,098,581	..	0.64	..
Brazil	Portugal	1822	194,946,000	8,547,404	..	0.70	
Chile	Spain	1818	17,114,000	756,096	0.61	0.78	0.85
Colombia	Spain	1819	46,295,000	1,141,748	0.54	0.69	0.83
Costa Rica	Spain, Mexico, United Provinces of Central America	1821, 1823, 1838	4,659,000	51,100	0.60	0.73	0.63
Cuba	Spain, United States	1898, 1934	11,258,000	110,860	
Dominican Republic, the	Spain, Haiti, Spain	1822, 1844, 1865	9,927,000	48,734	..	0.66	
Ecuador	Spain, Gran Colombia	1822, 1830	14,465,000	272,045	0.58	0.70	0.62
El Salvador	Spain, Mexico, United Provinces of Central America	1821, 1823, 1838	6,193,000	21,041	0.46	0.66	1.23

Guatemala	Spain, Mexico, United Provinces of Central America	1821, 1823, 1838	14,389,000	108,889	0.41	0.56	1.05
Honduras	Spain, Mexico, United Provinces of Central America	1821, 1823, 1838	7,601,000	112,492	0.44	0.60	1.09
Mexico	Spain	1821	113,423,000	1,964,375	0.58	0.75	0.85
Nicaragua	Spain, Mexico, United Provinces of Central America	1821, 1823, 1838	5,788,000	130,373	0.44	0.57	0.84
Panama	Colombia	1903	3,517,000	75,517	0.61	0.76	0.69
Paraguay	Spain	1811	6,455,000	406,752	0.53	0.64	0.64
Peru	Spain	1821	29,077,000	1,285,216	0.56	0.72	0.85
Uruguay	Spain	1825	3,369,000	176,215	..	0.77	
Venezuela	Spain, Gran Colombia	1819, 1830	28,980,000	916,445	0.61	0.70	0.44
Totals and averages			567,798,000	20,004,286	0.54	0.69	0.80

¹ Argentina's area includes Antarctic claim; HDI is the UN Development Program's Human Development Index.

together “Hispanic America.” While contemporary usage tends to associate “Hispanic” exclusively with Spain and the Spanish language, the peninsular scope of “Hispania” in Roman times reminds us of the extremely close affinity between the cultures and languages of Spain and Portugal, and thus between Brazil today and the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. Along with most of the rest of Iberia, the Christian territories of the western third of the peninsula were conquered by the Islamic Umayyad Empire in 715 AD. The lands that would one day become known as Portugal thus participated in the *reconquista* or reconquest of Iberia by Christian armies, an enterprise that would continue until 1492. During the reconquest, the lands that would someday comprise the nation of Portugal came under the control of the kingdom of Castile y León, the preeminent power on the peninsula. When Portugal emerged as an independent kingdom in the twelfth century, it still lacked both a common language and a distinct tradition, for it had come into existence largely as a result of fortuitous politico-military developments arising from feudalism and the reconquest. Portuguese did not take its place as a national language distinct from Spanish (but strongly resembling it) until the early fourteenth century. Fear of reabsorption into the Spanish-speaking part of the peninsula persisted for centuries, but became a reality only once, when King Philip II of Castile seized Portugal in 1581. An armed revolt against Castile in 1640 resulted in the restoration of Portuguese independence, under the rule of the Braganza family.

Thus, although they have been politically separate for the better part of a millennium, Spain and Portugal (and their former American territories) nevertheless share a distinctive legacy of ideas, values and beliefs whose influence can be seen in literature, law, social custom, politics, religion, architecture and the arts. The Spanish monarchy in particular set out to make its New World kingdoms even more centralized, homogeneous, religiously orthodox and culturally unified than its own peninsular kingdoms. That policy was largely successful, and accounts for the remarkable sense of trans-national solidarity and shared values that has made Latin America the world’s largest multinational culture zone – both more unified and more diverse than Europe, as the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has pointed out.¹ In places with high concentrations of indigenous and Afro-American peoples, customs and beliefs associated with those cultures continue to thrive, though invariably subordinated to an Iberian-oriented national culture.

Regardless of their identity as citizens of one country or another, or as members of particular ethnic groups or social classes, the peoples of the region habitually reflect on their experiences across national boundaries, and often seek to coordinate their responses to similar situations. In doing so, they act on the presumption that they share something larger, and more intangible, than the hard political facts of their common past.

An example in action was the university reform movement, launched by the students of a single Argentine university in 1918. Within a decade, it swept Latin America, transforming students into a potent interest group almost everywhere, while profoundly altering the political landscape. Similarly, the example of the Cuban revolution of 1959 ignited insurrectionary movements across the region, from Mexico to Argentina, in the 1960s and 1970s. Numerous other instances could be plucked from the realms of literature, music and other forms of popular entertainment. The Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez's great novel *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) topped the bestseller lists in every country of the region soon after it was published in 1967. Two years later, the Peruvian songwriter, Daniel Camino Díez, wrote "Los Cien Años de Macondo," celebrating the novel's main characters. Numerous singers recorded it, but the Mexican singer Oscar Chávez's version became a hit everywhere, as radio stations from rural Honduras to Santiago de Chile played the song repeatedly, inspiring many listeners to read the novel for the first time. This and countless other episodes like it cannot be explained by a common language alone, but above all by a common history and a common cultural orientation.

History

As recently as the beginning of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, most of the Americas had been part of the overseas territory of some European empire. Then, first Great Britain (between 1776 and 1783) and later Spain and Portugal (between 1810 and 1825) lost control of most of their American possessions in separate wars for independence. Haiti's African slaves wrested their land from France in 1804. Yet despite the passage of nearly two centuries (in the case of Spain and Portugal) or more (in the case of the British seaboard colonies) nothing about their past remains more consequential than the fact that they were founded, populated and ruled by one or the other of these European powers. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Spain had completed the conquest of the two main centers of American civilization, that of the Aztec empire of Mexico and the even larger Inca empire of western South America. Soon, the Spanish monarchy would effectively claim sovereignty over a contiguous territory that was among the largest of any empire in history. Stretching from the central plains of what is now the United States to the tip of South America, the bulk of Spain's America remained under its dominion until the early 1800s, except for a few Caribbean insular possessions and coastal strips acquired by Britain, France and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Portugal, at first confining its American claim to the Brazilian littoral, succeeded in pushing that frontier

inward over the centuries. The acceleration of that process by post-colonial governments made Brazil the largest country in Latin America and the fifth-largest in the world.

But the territorial extent of these conquests is not the most significant aspect of Iberian rule in the Americas. Rather, it was both the *duration* of that rule and its relatively *unmediated* and therefore directly influential nature that mattered most in the history of Latin America. Even today, those three centuries of imperial rule (from the early 1500s to the early 1800s) exceed the period of independent status by more than a third. In other words, not until the early decades of the twenty-second century will the peoples of Latin America be able to say that their lands have been self-governing for as many years as they were governed by the monarchies of Spain and Portugal.

The Spanish and Portuguese presence in America was long-lasting, penetrating and vigorous, driven by immigration from Iberia itself and by the legal premise that the land and its resources were the property of the monarchy, and the people were its subjects, the equals of those of Iberia itself. By contrast, British rule of the Indian subcontinent exceeded a century in duration, but was mediated by native princes accountable to British colonial overseers who generally remained aloof from Indian society, while British immigration was practically nil. Of course, the great distance that separated America from Iberia and the very vastness of the overseas realms moderated the impact of Iberian control. The prohibitive cost of establishing a standing army throughout the continent to enforce every royal dictum, and the long delays in two-way communication and transportation, encouraged a certain flexibility, and even occasional defiance on the part of Spain's American bureaucrats.

Yet, to an extent unmatched anywhere else, a European settler minority implanted its language, religion, manners, morality, political institutions and economic policies across a diverse aggregation of non-European people. To be sure, the process was accompanied, especially in its early years, by the violence, intolerance and intentional cruelty altogether characteristic of European civilization in the sixteenth century. The magnitude of the native American population at the time of the conquest remains a deeply contentious subject among historians; estimates range from 7.5 million to 80 million or even more. What is not in doubt, however, is that many millions of indigenous peoples died during the first century of European rule, mainly as a result of the spread of such exclusively Eurasian diseases as smallpox and measles to which the Indians had no immunity. Other leading causes of mortality were the massive enslavement of the indigenous peoples during the first few decades of Spanish and Portuguese rule, particularly in the Caribbean zone, Central America and Brazil, and of course the many deaths resulting from direct military engagements, the forced migrations caused by military invasion, and by subsequent

campaigns of pacification and forced relocation aimed at concentrating the surviving populations for administrative purposes.

Yet, of the Spanish conquest and settlement of the Americas, it is also necessary to acknowledge that no European overseas empire ever sought more conscientiously to define and protect the rights and interests of the indigenous peoples. Often, those efforts were frustrated and flouted by corrupt and disloyal Spaniards, some of whom were imprisoned or executed for their crimes. But the Spanish crown's interest in protecting the Indian peoples and their ways nevertheless worked to preserve the cultural and ethnical pluralism that characterizes much of Latin America today. Portuguese efforts to defend the Indians of Brazil were considerably less intensive, however, and as a result the Indians of Brazil continued to be enslaved on a massive scale up to the middle of the eighteenth century, when the monarchy took steps to eradicate all forms of indigenous forced labor. After independence in 1821, however, Brazil's indigenous peoples were again subjected to enslavement and other forms of forced labor.

In both empires, a totally different policy was applied to Africans and people of African descent. Unlike the Indians, whose principal claim to freedom was their status as subjects of the monarchy, Africans had been purchased from African slave traders who in turn had captured them (at least in theory) in war. As such, under prevailing European legal norms, their enslavement and that of their offspring remained licit, as long as the war in which they were captured could be considered "just." As the first European power to establish stable trade relations with the inhabitants of the West African coastal ports, Portugal began importing African slaves on a massive scale in the late sixteenth century to work on its Brazilian sugar plantations. In 1888, Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to emancipate its African slaves. Only two years before that, Spain freed the Africans still enslaved in its colony of Cuba. In the rest of Spanish America, where African slavery was a relatively minor feature of the national economies, all the governments had abolished slavery and emancipated African slaves by 1860.

The social, cultural and demographic consequences of this massive and long-term wave of involuntary African immigration varied considerably according to the relative weight of slavery in the local economies. By the late eighteenth century, Brazil was home to about 1 million African slaves, or one-third of all the slaves in the western hemisphere. About 1.2 million resided in the Caribbean islands, almost entirely in the ones controlled by Great Britain and France. The dependence on slavery in Brazil and the islands derived from the predominant role of plantation agriculture – above all, that of sugar – in the local economies. About 20% of the remaining African slaves in the Americas could be found in the United States and only about 9% in the mainland territories of the Spanish monarchy. During the nineteenth century, the

population of African slaves continued to rise in Brazil, to some 1.5 million by 1872, and in Cuba, where the slave population jumped from about 80,000 in the late eighteenth century to about 400,000 in the mid-nineteenth century in response to rising worldwide demand for sugar and its byproducts, such as rum and molasses. Nowhere, however, had African slavery grown faster than in the plantation-agriculture sector of the U.S. economy, which employed 4 million slaves at the start of the Civil War in 1861, their numbers having leapt seven-fold (from about 575,000) since the late eighteenth century.

Despite the continuing powerful influence of the Indian and African elements of Latin American culture in certain places, it is the manifold legacies of Iberian rule that continue to frame the deepest currents of contemporary Latin American life. The sixteenth-century boundaries of several *audiencias* (the principal colonial-era administrative and judicial organ) roughly defined the limits of such modern nations as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Many of today's capital cities were once the seats of *audiencias*. Since each *audiencia* was understood to be a separate realm subject to the personal rule of the monarch (rather than as a constituent element of a greater Spanish empire), it is not surprising that little serious thought was given to creating a single "Latin American" nation when Spain and Portugal lost their American lands between 1810 and 1825. Another legacy descended from the notably lax discipline of colonial administration, and its tendency to beget abundant opportunities for patronage, speculation and self-dealing – customs still characteristic of contemporary Latin American government, and regularly identified today as impediments to the consolidation of democracy. Similarly, the frequent blurring in contemporary Latin America of executive, legislative and judicial powers follows the custom of combining them in single institutions during the three centuries of colonial rule. Perhaps the deepest political imprint of the colonial past was not a "something" but a "nothing" – i.e., the near-absence of representative political institutions and traditions of self-government.

Spain's American realms gained their independence and adopted republican forms of government around 1821, at what seemed to be a propitious moment. A wave of political change in favor of representative government, roused by the American (1776) and then the French (1789) revolutions, swept across much of Europe and the English-speaking world, undermining or destroying absolutist and aristocratic forms of government and opening a new age in the political history of humankind. The only independent Latin American country to preserve the monarchical form of government (until 1889) was Brazil, but even it was founded on a written constitution that limited the power of the emperor.

The self-governing polities that proclaimed their independence from Spain bore the gargantuan burden of seeking a workable consensus in favor of com-

pletely novel, republican systems of government. Their frequent failures to achieve consensus during the first half-century or so of independence and beyond were accompanied by violent instability in the political sphere, and the entrenchment of habits that would give rise to certain features of Latin American politics – lawlessness, militarism, personalism and dictatorship – that thrived well into the twentieth century. As the historian Charles Gibson observed in the 1960s, Latin America’s “escape from the colonial past remains much less complete than in the United States.”² Thus, despite the auspicious timing of Latin America’s independence movements, and the subsequent establishment of formally democratic procedures and institutions, the region’s experience with democracy could only be described as fragile and fleeting until the 1980s, the eighteenth decade of independent rule, when Latin America entered a period of transition that compares in significance to two earlier turning points.

The first was the 1850s to the 1870s, a moment that marked the end of three to five decades of intense political disorder and economic stagnation. Authoritarian and frequently dictatorial governments oversaw a period of relative stability and growth while asserting their loyalty to the reigning ideas and values of the North Atlantic world. Chief among those ideas were the principles of economic freedom, the racial supremacy of Europeans, the need for leadership by an educated elite, and secularism in public life. Notably absent, and even explicitly rejected in some quarters, were democracy and individual rights.

The second turning point occurred in the 1920s and intensified during the 1930s and 40s. If Latin America’s leadership had been characterized by an outward-looking posture before the 1920s, by the middle of the twentieth century it had become notably inward looking and nationalistic. Governments and political parties now sought to mobilize and incorporate excluded or marginalized groups. Displacing the economic leadership of both national and foreign entrepreneurs, they assumed responsibility for rapid industrialization and job-creating growth. The turn was conditioned by pressure from the rising population of urban and middle-class sectors for two kinds of changes: political equality and economic prosperity. The international political, economic and cultural dislocations provoked by Europe’s Great War of 1914–1918 further contributed to the pressure for change in Latin America. The European catastrophe enhanced the appeal, well beyond the borders of Europe, of new, anti-liberal political ideologies such as communism and fascism. The worldwide economic setbacks of the Great Depression of 1929–1940 only added to the luster of these ideas and the political parties organized by their advocates, while diminishing the appeal of capitalism. Turning away from the selective liberalism of the previous era, away from one-sided economic policies that gambled on rising foreign demand for the region’s agricultural and industrial

commodities, Latin America gradually shifted toward a new era of populist politics, state-directed economic planning and industrialization, and increasingly politicized military forces.

But simultaneously restructuring the economy, maintaining stable growth and satisfying popular demands for genuine political participation, while checking tendencies that could lead to violent disorder, proved to be beyond the capacity of any Latin American government for more than periods measured in months, not years. Evidence of economic growth and modernization could be seen throughout the region in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. But it was ultimately unsustainable, and it was also clear that economic reforms alone were not the answer. A surge of violent, revolutionary political movements, led by Marxists convinced of the futility of conventional strategies for political and economic reform, seriously threatened the social order in the 1960s and 1970s. A rejoinder from the armed forces, usually with the aid of the U.S. government, in the form of military dictatorships that sought to purge their countries of ideas associated with Marxism, communism or even moderate reform, swept Latin America in those decades. In a desperate effort to sustain the strategy of state-led economic modernization, governments across the region borrowed dollars on a colossal scale in the 1970s and early 1980s. It was a disastrous decision. The foreign debt burden threatened to crush already-crippled economies just as a wave of military-directed political repression, unmatched in Latin American history, was peaking, from Guatemala to Argentina.

A new era dawned in the 1980s. In one country after another, governments took steps to liberalize national economies. Support for militaristic solutions to political conflict evaporated across the region as civilian politicians chosen in free elections took office everywhere but in Cuba. While the first trend could be interpreted as a retreat to pre-1930s market-oriented economic policies, there was no precedent in Latin American history for what, by the 1990s, seemed to be the simultaneous collapse of militarism and the rise of electoral democracy. While a new political norm – the inadmissibility of militarism and military rule – gradually began to command universal assent, coup attempts and threats did not completely disappear. Nor had some forgotten that, for a few years in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a move away from dictatorship and toward democracy in Latin America had also been declared. “The long age of dictators in Latin America is finally in its twilight,” wrote *New York Times* correspondent Tad Szulc in 1959. “Indications are that democracy, so late in coming and still taking its first shaky and tentative steps forward, is here to stay in Latin America.”³ The “twilight of the dictators” instead ushered in two decades of military dictatorship.

Since the late 1970s, the central tendency of Latin America’s history may be summed up in one word: “liberalization.” In this respect, its history matched the general trend of world history during the same period in favor of openness