

Understanding Contemporary Latin America

Richard S. Hillman (ed.)

Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 1997. [371 pages]

James L. Citron

Endicott College

Understanding Contemporary Latin America was designed to be “a basic interdisciplinary resource for use in college and university classrooms, foreign service seminars, and corporate training programs, as well as by interested individuals.” It is also a welcome addition to reading lists for students who are studying in Latin America and/or for study abroad advisors looking for a general overview of the region. The book encompasses within its scope all of the Western Hemisphere south of the United States, including the Anglo, French, and Dutch Caribbean. It is appropriate both for students studying in one country who are looking to understand their experiences within a broader cultural context and for those whose studies will take them to more than one country.

The volume is a collection of fourteen chapters written by eighteen authors, seventeen of whom hold appointments at U.S. institutions. The U.S. background of the authors does influence the voice of the text and the authors’ choice of content, but does not make the volume discernably less authoritative or informative. On the contrary, it may make it more accessible as an introductory text for U.S. readers. The chapters are presented in a straightforward way that can be readily understood by a student with limited international experience. They can be read on their own or col-

lectively for a more comprehensive introduction to the area.

An introductory chapter by the editor seeks to define Latin America as a region and Latin Americans as a people. After addressing the fact that many different definitions of both are often put forth, it acknowledges many U.S. citizens' ignorance of the region and discounts as misleading and counterproductive some of the images often portrayed by the U.S. media. This early attention underscores the fact that the book is written with a U.S. audience in mind. The chapter then addresses how the diversity of the region creates common historical, social, political and developmental patterns, and sets the tone for the remaining chapters' treatment of the region by drawing examples from several countries to illustrate their points.

The next chapter, a "Geographic Preface," discusses the diverse topographical features, climates, flora, fauna, and natural resource bases of the region as well as the diversity of the region's population within its historical context. This historical context is expanded upon in the next chapter, which traces the region's development, not—surprisingly—from its precolonial origins, but from the arrival of Christopher Columbus forward. The chapter traces the region's development following the conquest, paying equal attention to Portuguese Brazil, to the Spanish colonies, and to islands occupied by the Dutch, French, and English. Annotated maps accompany the subsequent discussion of independence movements from the early nineteenth century through the early twentieth century.

Chapter 4, "Latin American Politics," discusses how the legacies of the colonial era have affected ongoing political institutions through today. One of these institutions, the military, is then given a chapter of its own. The next three chapters explore Latin America's economic transformation, international relations—both among countries within Latin America, and with the rest of the world—and environmental issues, population expansion and urbanization. Chapter 9 addresses patterns of ethnicity, class and nationalism, with special attention paid to immigration and indigenous movements, ethnic relations in Cuba, and the comparative social status of the region's different racial groups. This latter discussion should be of special interest to U.S. students of African or Latin American descent who will be living in the region.

Chapter 10's exploration of the changing roles of Latin American women appeals to U.S. students—male and female alike—with its

detailed discussions of reproduction, division of labor across genders, the role of women in the formal labor force, and of feminist movements, mixed-gender movements, and women's movements in the twentieth century. Chapters on "Education and Development," "Religion in Latin America," "Latin American Literature," and a final chapter by the editor, entitled "Trends and Prospects," round out the volume.

The omission of pre-colonial history in Chapter 3, as mentioned above, is noteworthy, since so many contemporary religious, linguistic, and social structures and behaviors—especially in such popular study abroad destinations as Mexico—are heavily influenced by the region's indigenous heritage. One of the very few references to pre-colonial history comes in a cursory discussion of Pre-Columbian economies in Chapter 6. Other than that and a discussion in Chapter 10 which notes that the Aztecs and the Incas "created societies in which women were deemed inferior to men and had more limited resource access," the influence of pre-colonial history on contemporary life is missing from the text's analysis.

The book addresses such open-ended questions as how legacies of colonialism and nationalism are being addressed and transformed today, whether free trade zones are inevitable, and the likelihood of further democratization, social and economic development, and stability in the region. In the words of the editor, "The story is far from complete. Each chapter of this book focuses on a different, yet interrelated, aspect of these open-ended questions. If we are to understand Latin America, we will continue to seek answers to these questions; develop new insights, empathy and appreciation; and raise new questions." Although it presupposes little knowledge of the region, the book does not shy away from scholarly analysis as it introduces the reader to the task of formulating such answers, insights, and new questions and to treating the region with a more thorough appreciation for its recent past, its present, and its future.