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Background and Contemporary Problems, Second Edition

Celso Furtado

Excerpt

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I. FROM THE CONQUEST TO THE FORMATION OF NATION-STATES

Introduction: the land and the people

Latin America: from geographical expression to historical reality

For a long time the term 'Latin America', popularised in the United States, was used only in a geographical sense to designate the countries situated south of the Rio Grande. Far from showing any interest in what they had in common, the nations that emerged from the Iberian colonisation of the Americas sought to emphasise their distinctive characteristics in an effort to define their own national personalities. With the exception of Brazil, colonised by Portugal, and Haiti, colonised by France, the remaining Latin American republics share much of their colonial history and, in Spanish, a common language. Nevertheless, the fact that the pre-Columbian cultural heritage contributed in such widely diverse ways to the formation of the present national personalities makes the differences between countries such as Argentina and Mexico as great as the similarities. The same can be said of the African ethnico-cultural contribution, which is no less unevenly distributed. Even leaving aside the case of Haiti, whose African-French origins place it in a category of its own, the differences between the countries of the Caribbean region, where there is a marked African ethnico-cultural influence, and the Andean countries, where indigenous ethnico-cultural elements predominate, are as marked as is possible for countries sharing part of their history. None the less, the emphasis on diversity was less a reflexion of the real extent of the differences between the Latin American countries than of their awareness of a common origin. It was as though the new nations felt themselves threatened, in their formative process, by superior forces that would lead them, sooner or later, to be reintegrated in the web of a common history interrupted by the circumstances in which the Spanish colonial empire finally collapsed.

The growth of a Latin American consciousness is a recent phenomenon, deriving from the new problems posed by the region's economic

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and social development since the Second World War. Generally speaking, traditional development, based on the expansion of exports, had transformed the countries of the region into competing economies. Exporting the same primary products and importing manufactured products from outside the region, they failed to forge any economic links with each other. Thus, in the context of the international division of labour created in the Colonial Pact period and extended during the first stage of the Industrial Revolution, the traditional form of development helped to foster regional fragmentation. The disruption of international trade following the 1929 crisis had profound repercussions in the region. It is the attempt to find the solution for the problems that have arisen since then that has paved the way for the emergence of the present Latin American consciousness. The shortage of traditional imports which became more acute during the Second World War, gave rise to a more diversified regional trade which altered the traditional patterns of trade among countries exporting temperate-zone products, such as Argentina, and those exporting tropical products, such as Brazil. With the end of the war and the reopening of normal channels of trade, there were strong pressures for the re-establishment of the old trading patterns, but the experience had served to create contacts and crystallise possibilities.

In the second half of the 1950s, when industrialisation based on import-substitution began to reveal its limitations, for the first time in Latin America the obstacles to regional development created by the small size of the national markets began to be widely discussed; this discussion shed light on the similarities and contributed to the creation of a regional consciousness.

No less important for the shaping of this regional consciousness is the role played by Latin America's changing relations with the United States. Control by the United States companies of a large part of the region's sources of raw materials, public services and trading activities, created close dependent links with the United States for most Latin American countries, particularly those in the Caribbean area. After the First World War the penetration of United States capital was intensified, not only in the traditional forms of portfolio investment, but also in the form of control over companies. The latter form of penetration gained considerable momentum, during the 1930s, in manufacturing, which was the region's fastest-growing sector. Thus Latin America as a whole was clearly in a position of economic domination by the United States which extended and deepened the traditional political domination in the proliferation of institutionalised 'Pan-American' organisations. This institutionalisation obviously helped to consolidate the system of

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control but it also served to hasten the realisation that only by seeking closer ties could the Latin American countries hope to bring about any significant change in the conditions of their dialogue with the United States.

A similar process took place within the United Nations framework: the United States consistently used the Latin American countries as a submissive tactical reserve during the cold war years, a period when these countries represented one-third of the votes in the General Assembly. It was not long, however, before the hitherto disciplined Latin American *bloc* began to put forward its own claims, as in the case of the creation of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) established in 1948 against strong opposition from the United States. ECLA established its headquarters in Santiago, Chile, in marked contrast with the Washington-based Pan-American organisations, and came to play a leading role in the formation of the new Latin American consciousness.

In summary, 'Latin America' ceased to be a geographical term and became an historical reality as a result of the break in the traditional pattern of the international division of labour, the problems created by the belated process of industrialisation, and the evolution of its relations with the United States which, in becoming a hegemonic world power, drew up a special code for the region involving more direct and open control, while at the same time requiring increased co-operation among countries in the area.

Physical background

The Latin American republics form a geographical entity of more than 20 million square km, an area equivalent in size to that of the Soviet Union or of the United States and Canada combined. Crossed by the Equator, much the larger part of Latin America lies in the Southern Hemisphere: its southern tip is in latitude 56° S, whereas its northernmost extremity extends only as far as latitude 32° N. From the geographical viewpoint the region is made up of three sub-regions:

(a) northern Mexico, in which the basic relief features of the United States are prolonged,

(b) the American isthmus, which extends for more than 2,000 km, narrowing southward to a width of only 70 km in Panama; and

(c) the South American continent, whose relief is dominated by the Andean Cordillera, the great alluvial plains, the Guiana and Brazilian massifs, and the Patagonian plateau. The Andean barrier extends from the extreme north to the extreme south of the South American continent.

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sheltering extensive plateaus such as the Bolivian Altiplano – over 800 km wide – and reaching altitudes of more than 6,000 m. The great South American plains are formed by the basins of the Orinoco, Amazon and Parana rivers.

The west coast of Latin America, extending for more than 12,000 km is bordered by the Andean and Middle American Cordilleras. In Colombia, the Andean Cordillera is divided into three orographic branches, separated by the great southern valleys of the Magdalena and Cauca rivers. In contrast with the Colombian highlands, the highland areas of Peru and Bolivia occupy a large part of the Cordillera, which is between 250 and 400 km in width and over 4,000 in height in this section. Both in the Equatorial–Colombian and Peruvian–Bolivian regions the Cordillera's highest peaks reach altitudes of 6,000 m or higher; but the highest peak of all, Mt Aconcagua (7,000 m) is found in the Argentine–Chilean region, where the Cordillera takes on the form of a monoclinical relief.

The eastern region of the South American continent is made up of the Brazilian and Guiana massifs, fragments of Gondwanaland, which was separated from similar structures in the African block by the widening of the Atlantic Ocean.¹ The Brazilian massif, which extends 3,500 km south of latitude 6° S and some 4,000 km from northeast to southeast, is by far the greater in size. Between these two massifs and the Andean Cordillera there are vast sedimentary basins which support the alluvial plains formed by the Orinoco, Amazon and Paraná–Paraguay rivers.

The existence of extremely diverse general conditions and of certain highly significant peculiarities determines the extraordinarily wide variety of climates found in the Latin American countries, taken as a whole. The two major conditioning elements in the regional pattern of climate are the position of the Equator, which crosses the region close to its widest part, and the importance of the Andean Cordilleras and the Sierra Madre in Mexico – an importance reflected in the fact that several of Latin America's largest cities are situated more than 2,000 m above sea level (Mexico City: 2,240 m; Bogota: 2,591 m). The pattern of climate can be roughly characterised as follows: a humid tropical climate prevails in extensive areas, which are also the least densely populated. A tropical climate with a dry season and a hot semi-arid climate prevails in areas no less extensive but with a greater density of population. Finally, mountain climates, sub-tropical climates, and temperate climates characterise the most densely populated areas.

¹ Cf. Cl. Collin Delavaud, and others, *L'Amérique latine; Approche Géographique Générale et Régionale*, Paris, 1973, vol. I, p. 11.

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Population pattern

The Latin American population, which at present exceeds 300 million, represents about 7.7 per cent of the world total and around 15 per cent of the total population of the underdeveloped world, excluding China. The Latin American population is distinguished from any other population grouping of comparable importance by the fact that it combines a low crude death rate – similar to the average rate for the developed countries – with a high crude birth rate – equal to the average rate for the underdeveloped countries.² Latin America's peculiar position is shown by the average annual growth rates for the world's major population groupings at the beginning of the 1970s:

	%		%
Latin America	2.8	China	1.7
Africa	2.6	Japan	1.2
Asia (except China and Japan)	2.4	United States	0.6
		Soviet Union	1.0
		Europe	0.5

As a result of these characteristics, the age structure of the Latin American population is characterised by a large proportion of children and young adults. Persons under 15 years of age now make up around 42 per cent of the Latin American total, a percentage which had been showing an upward trend over the last twenty years and is only now beginning to stabilise.

The rapid growth of Latin America's population is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although conclusions in this respect must be regarded as

² The average for Latin America as a whole obviously conceals wide differences between the various sub-regions. Thus, in Argentina and Uruguay, both the birth and death rates have already declined significantly and the natural rate of increase of the population is less than 1.5 per cent. Chile and Cuba are in an intermediate position: with a substantial decline in the mortality rate and the birth rate also beginning to show a downward trend, the rate of population increase is nearly 2 per cent but has started to decline. In some special cases (Haiti and Bolivia) the crude death rate has not yet been significantly reduced and this, combined with a high but stable birth rate, produces a rate of population increase of the intermediate type (2.5 per cent), but with a tendency to rise, in contrast to the second group for which rates of increase show a downward trend. Finally, in the remaining fourteen countries, representing 79 per cent of the region's population, the combination of a high birth rate, which has only recently begun to decline, with a mortality rate which has already been significantly reduced, results in a rate of population increase which is close to 3 per cent and in some cases even higher than 3.5 per cent. For details see: Carmen A. Miro, 'The Population of Latin America', in Claudio Veliz (ed.), *Latin America and the Caribbean: A Handbook*, London, 1968.

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provisional pending further study, it is now generally accepted that the population of Spanish America at the time of Independence was much smaller than when America was discovered.³ It is widely held that the total Indian population in the areas occupied by the Spaniards must have been not less than 50 million at the time of the Conquest. The particular circumstances of the Conquest and of the subsequent occupation of the more densely populated areas produced what amounted to a virtual holocaust of the indigenous population. To understand this extraordinary phenomenon, almost without parallel in the history of mankind, one must bear in mind that at the time of the Conquest, the native populations were concentrated in mountainous regions, supported by artisan agricultural economies, using elaborate techniques for the utilisation of soil and water and characterised by complex systems of social organisation. The mining economy introduced by the Spaniards, which required a wide-scale dislocation of the population, disrupted the pattern of food production and led to the break-up of the family units among a sizeable proportion of the population. The actual process of conquest resulted in the forcible transfer of great numbers of people, particularly adult males, who were practically wiped out by the long marches and forced labour imposed upon them by the *Conquistadores*. On the other hand, the need to exact a surplus from the population remaining on the land, in order to provide a steady food supply for the mining communities and cities, made heavy demands on the remaining rural population. Finally, the ravages of epidemics caused by contact with peoples carrying new contagious diseases played a no less significant part in bringing about a holocaust of the Indian population. It has been estimated, for example, that the Mexican population, which probably was not less than some 16 million at the time of the Conquest, was reduced to one-tenth of this total in the course of a century.⁴

³ For a general survey of data relative to the growth of the population of Spanish America in the Colonial period, see: Rolando Mellafe, 'Problemas Demograficos e Historia Colonial Hispanoamericana', in *Temas de História Económica Hispano-americana*, Paris, 1965. For data relative to Brazil, see: Celso Furtado. *Formação Económica do Brasil*, Rio, 1959; English edition: *The Economic Growth of Brazil: A Survey from Colonial to Modern Times*, tr. Richard W. de Aguiar and Eric Charles Drysdale, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1963. See also the essays by Bailey W. Diffie, Woodrow Borah and S. F. Cook; Peter Boyd-Bowman, Wilbur Zelinsky and Dauril Alden on estimates of the population before the Conquest and during the colonial period, in Lewis Hanke (ed.) *History of Latin American Civilization*, New York, 1967, vol. 1.

⁴ The wholesale destruction of Brazil's aboriginal population was equally drastic. The Jesuit, José de Anchieta, observed that 'the number of people used up in this place (Bahia) from twenty years ago until now (1583) seems a thing not to be believed', and

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Towards the middle of the seventeenth century the decline of the mining economy, and the development of subsistence agricultural and pastoral activities, together with the consolidation of new social structures and the increased natural resistance to the new diseases, opened a new chapter in the demographic history of Latin America. Attached to large agricultural estates with abundant land resources, in communities which received some protection from the Crown, the population began to increase. The establishment of an export trade in agricultural products in the eighteenth century made possible the continuation and even acceleration of population growth, as the result of the incorporation of a considerable African contingent.

Brazil's demographic history contrasts sharply with that of Spanish America. The aboriginal population was relatively sparse when the Portuguese began to colonise Brazil, which led them to bring in large numbers of Africans who were to provide the basis of the labour force for the tropical agricultural economy established in the Brazilian Northeast in the first half of the sixteenth century. The exploitation of alluvial gold and precious stones from the early years of the eighteenth century prompted a strong current of immigration from Portugal to Brazil. This influx of immigrants altered the demographic and ethnic patterns in Brazil. Up to that time the population had been concentrated in the region of tropical agriculture between Bahia and Maranhão, with the African contingent in the majority. The mining economy, which in Spanish America had brought about the depopulation of certain regions, produced the opposite effect in Brazil. Since what was involved was not the full-scale operation required in the case of silver, but simply the working over of placer deposits, Brazilian gold provided opportunities for the small entrepreneur. Even the slaves, who generally worked under strict supervision, enjoyed far better living conditions than the slave workers on the plantations. By the end of the century dominated by the mining economy, Brazil's population structure had undergone striking changes: the population of European origin now outstripped the African contingent, and the largest and most rapidly expanding population cluster had shifted from the northeast to the centre-south. At the close of the eighteenth century Brazil's population numbered 3 million, whereas that of Spanish America was slightly over 16 million.

During the nineteenth century Latin America's population increased at twice the overall rate estimated for the growth in world population.

proceeds to give figures that reveal a destruction of population on a scale similar to that carried out in Mexico. See J. Capistrano de Abreu, *Capítulos de História Colonial*, 5th ed. Rio, 1934, p. 79.

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In fact, the ten-year average for Latin America was as high as 12.8 per cent, as against a growth rate of 6.4 per cent for the world as a whole. Nevertheless, compared with the rate of population increase in North America, for which the ten-year average was as high as 30 per cent, the Latin American growth rate was relatively low. In 1800 the population of the United States and Canada combined was 6 million, whereas that of Latin America was over 19 million. By 1900, Anglo-Saxon America had a population of 81 million and Latin America only 63 million. It is only in the present century that Latin America has taken over the lead in world population growth. Between 1900 and 1930 the decennial average of Latin America's population increase was 20 per cent, whereas that of Anglo-Saxon America was 18.6 per cent, and the world rate was 7.8 per cent. Between 1930 and 1960 the Latin American rate rose to 24.8 per cent, easily overtaking that of Anglo-Saxon America (14 per cent) which for the first time fell below the world average of 14.3 per cent. As a result of these changes in the rate of increase, Latin America's population, which at the turn of the century was approximately one-fifth below that of Anglo-Saxon America, now exceeds it by about 20 per cent.⁵

The significant changes in trend which characterise the present demographic pattern in Latin America began to emerge in the 1940s. Between 1920 and 1940, the growth rate of the region's population remained more or less stable at around 19 per thousand per decade. During the 1920s the fastest growing population was that of Argentina (at an average rate of 3 per cent a year) mainly as the result of a large influx of immigrants. The Mexican population, affected by the aftermath of Civil War, showed the lowest rate of increase: an average of only 1.35 per cent a year. In the following decade, the flow of immigrants to Argentina was reduced considerably, while in Mexico the opposite process occurred: part of the population which had emigrated to the United States returned home during the years of the depression; at the same time, the effects of the Civil War disappeared. The rate of population increase in these two countries was around 1.8 per cent. After the 1940s, the Latin American demographic process was no longer significantly affected by migratory flows; the decisive variable became the mortality rate, which began to decline throughout the region. The average annual growth rate of the population rose from 1.91 per cent in 1935-40 to 2.54 per cent in 1945-50; 2.85 per cent in 1955-60; and 2.91 per cent in 1965-70.⁶ In

⁵ For data on the growth of world population since the nineteenth century see Simon Kuznets, *Modern Economic Growth*, Yale University Press, 1966.

⁶ Cf. Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía (CELADE), *Boletín Demográfico*, no. 10, July, 1972.

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the two decades between 1950–5 and 1970–5 the crude birth rate (per thousand per annum) declined from 41.31 to 37.21 while the crude death rate fell from 14.51 to 9.28. As a result, the natural rate of increase of the population rose from 26.80 to 27.93. However, these averages obscure the more complex process now under way. Thus, the *overall fertility rate* (the average number of children which a woman has had at the end of her reproductive years) declined, in the period under consideration, from 5.69 to 5.29, after having been as high as 5.72 in 1955–60. The evolution of the fertility rate is one of the most important indicators of the long-term behaviour of a population. There is every likelihood that the downward trend registered over the last fifteen years will persist in the future. The effect of this lower fertility pattern has not yet made itself felt because of the continuing rejuvenation of the Latin American population: the proportion of persons under 15 years of age reached its maximum in 1965–70.

A closer examination of the demographic behaviour of the three most populous countries, which together account for two-thirds of the Latin American population, may provide a clearer picture of the contradictory trends underlying the regional averages. In Argentina, the pattern is similar to that found in highly urbanised countries with a high level of income. Between 1950–5 and 1970–5, the crude birth rate fell from 25.38 to 21.80 per thousand per year and the overall fertility rate from 3.15 to 2.98. The crude death rate declined from 9.16 to 8.76 while the average expectation of life at birth rose from 62.72 to 68.19 years. The natural rate of increase of the population declined from 16.22 to 13.04 per thousand per year and the proportion of persons under 15 years of age from 30.64 to 28.82 per cent, while the group of persons of 64 years and over increased from 4.52 to 7.56 per cent.

In Brazil, the picture is different. During the two decades under consideration, the crude annual birth rate declined from 41.42 to 37.12 per thousand and the overall reproductive rate from 5.70 to 5.15. The crude death rate was reduced from 12.16 to 8.77 and the expectation of life at birth increased from 54.15 to 61.39 years. The natural rate of increase declined from 29.26 to 28.35, the proportion of persons under 15 years of age increased from 42.74 to 43.32 per cent of the population, and that of persons of 64 years and over from 2.44 to 3.14 per cent.

For Mexico we have the following data: the crude birth rate declined from 46.62 to 42.00 and the overall fertility rate from 6.88 to 6.46; the natural rate of increase rose from 30.18 to 32.47; the proportion of the under-15 group increased from 43.54 to 46.18 per cent and that of the older group (64 years and over) rose from 3.30 to 3.53 per cent.

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A comparison of these figures shows that mortality rates are low and have been sustained at practically the same level. The similarity is only partial, however, as can be seen by comparing the expectation of life at birth in the three countries. This is far greater in Argentina than in the other two. The proportion of persons in the older group is twice as high in Argentina, a relationship which clearly affects mortality levels. What characterises Brazil and Mexico in relation to Argentina is the extremely rapid pace of the decline in mortality. This feature is the basic cause of the so-called population explosion in Latin America. During the period under review, the death rate in Brazil declined twice as fast as in Argentina, and in Mexico five times as fast. Factors of a social and economic nature are responsible for this acceleration in the decline of mortality. It is known, for example, that the cost of controlling epidemic and endemic diseases has been reduced considerably in the last three decades. Moreover, the rapid growth of the middle classes, the principal beneficiaries of economic development in Mexico and Brazil, was accompanied by the modernisation of public services, including public health, a process which affected the sanitary conditions of the population as a whole. The demographic pattern in Mexico, where the overall fertility rate is extremely high and relatively stable, is of particular interest. It would seem that in that country the urbanisation process has had little effect on the social conditions which influence reproductive behaviour. Notwithstanding the rapid decline in mortality, the average age of the Mexican population is now less than it was two decades ago. The index of dependency – the relation between the population not of working age (less than 15 years of age and 64 years and over) and the economically active population (from 15 to 64 years of age) – is around 1 in Mexico while in Brazil it is 0.83 and in Argentina 0.57.

Rapid urbanisation is another striking feature of Latin America's recent demographic evolution. Unlike the urbanisation of the industrially more advanced countries, which took place in conditions of relative stability or decline in the rural population, the rapid growth of cities in Latin America did not prevent the rural populations from continuing to expand at a relatively rapid pace. If we define 'urban population' as the population living in centres of 20,000 inhabitants or more, this demographic group increased at an average annual rate of 5.4 per cent between 1950 and 1960 while the rural population continued to expand at an annual rate of 1.8 per cent. In the following decade (1960–70) the rates were 5.2 and 1.5 per cent respectively. The urban population increased from 25.6 per cent of the total in 1950 to 41.1 per cent in 1970. In absolute terms, it grew from 40,187,000 to 112,961,000. Of this total,