Traditionally, Latin America is defined as a region of the Americas where Romance languages (those derived from Latin), particularly Spanish and Portuguese, are spoken. Although these are the dominant languages of the region, there are several other languages spoken around Latin America, coming from Europe through the colonization process and also from the region’s many native peoples.

There is still not formal agreement on whether or not Latin America includes the islands of the Caribbean. Therefore, to avoid confusion some people prefer to name the whole region “Latin America and the Caribbean,” just like we did in the header of this page.
1. There are over 280 languages currently spoken in Latin America, including Aymara, Garifuna, Haitian Creole, Mapudungun, Maya, Papiamento, and Quechua. This number pales in comparison to the number of extinct languages in the region.

2. Despite having approximately 39% of the global Catholic population, the Church’s foothold in Latin America has been weakened over the past 20 years due to the rise of evangelical Christianity. Brazil has the second largest concentration of evangelical Christians in the world, representing 26.3% of all evangelical Christians.

3. For the past five years, Latin America has seen increased student mobilization regarding issues such as the price and quality of public primary, secondary, post-secondary, and university education; the ease of entry into the local job market; and the overall political direction of the region.

4. Music in Latin America has incorporated influences from electronic, folk, heavy metal, rock, ska, and rap into traditional music styles such as bachata, cumbia, merengue, samba, and salsa.

5. Brazil and Chile, longstanding economic powerhouses in the region, are beginning to gain recognition of their economic and political influence internationally through direct diplomacy and multinational NGOs.

6. Groups of indigenous people, small farmers, environmental activists, and others have mobilized to resist mining and other forms of resource extraction, often through building regional and international networks and drawing on tools provided by international law.

7. Local and regional holidays represent an integral part of community identity in Latin America. The most famous of these holidays is Carnaval, celebrated in 16 Latin American countries to mark the beginning of Lent. Religious and national holidays also play a major role in almost all countries in the region.

8. Even though about 480 million of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics live in Latin America, for centuries, the church's top job has gone to Europeans. That changed with the announcement that Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who served as archbishop of Buenos Aires, would become the new pontiff. Bergoglio, 76, chose the name Francis.

9. Geographically, Latin America includes some of the highest peaks, longest mountain ranges, and greatest biodiversity of any region of the world. This is in addition to having the driest desert and largest rainforest.

10. Issues of race and ethnicity in Latin America are complicated not only because of the diversity within each of the eight ethnic groups but also because of the diversity in each ethnic group's interaction with and treatment by both colonial and independent governments.
ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Mining in Latin America

Description: Mining, long a contentious issue in Latin America, remains a key site of struggle over issues of both environmental sustainability and social and economic justice. Presidents of countries including Guatemala, Peru, and Ecuador have argued for the benefits of mining for economic growth and employment. At the same time indigenous groups, small farmers and others directly impacted by mining have organized large-scale mobilizations both to stop mine construction and to demand reparations for environmental and health consequences of mining activity, often with support from international organizations including Green Peace, Via Campesina and Friends of the Earth. Recent large-scale protests against mining projects have taken place in Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, Peru, and Ecuador, among other countries. Most have focused on open-pit gold and copper mining, and have had varying degrees of success in halting the construction and expansion of mines. Environmental concerns associated with mining include deforestation, water use and contamination, and disruption of small-scale agriculture.

Related Resources:
- “Hundreds in Peru Balk at Relocation From Site of Mine” New York Times 2012
- “Blood on the Silver: The High Cost of Mining Concessions in Oaxaca” NACLA 2012

Soil Degradation, Agriculture, and the Environment

Description: Erosion is the main cause of land degradation in Latin America, affecting 14.3 percent of the territory in South America and 26 percent in Central America (Oldeman 1994). Nutrient depletion is also a serious issue, largely driven by agricultural intensification. In South America, the depletion of nutrients from the soil had affected 68.2 million ha. by 1980 (Scherr and Yadav 1997). This depletion has exacerbated poverty which, in turn, has contributed to greater environmental degradation and land deterioration. Chemical soil pollution is increasingly significant given the intensification of agriculture and the use of pesticides during the past 30 years. Agricultural technology has increased production throughout the region but at a high cost to the environment. Of great concern is the impact of agrochemical pollution on soil and water and, as a consequence, on human health. Soil and water nitrification is linked to the use of chemical fertilizers which increased from 3.7 to 10.9 million tons during 1972-97 (FAOSTAT 2001). Salinization is a particularly significant form of soil degradation because it is difficult to treat and can lead to desertification. Salinization caused by irrigation affects 18.4 million ha. in the region, particularly in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru (AQUASTAT 1997).

Related Resources:
  http://go.worldbank.org/I03NJUZAI0
Economic Recovery in Latin America

**Description:** Latin America has recovered from the 2008 economic crises faster than expected, thanks to high commodity prices, and increased regional trade with China. Despite decreased economic growth from 4.3% in 2011 to 3% in 2012, Latin America’s growth rate more than doubled high-income country’s average growth rate of 1.3% in 2012, according to the World Bank. Projections for regional growth for 2013 range from the World Bank’s estimate of 3.5% to the United Nation’s Economic Commission’s 3.8%. The slower growth rate of high income industrialized countries such as China and the United States, however, indicate a change in the overall strategy of the region in order to maintain this trajectory. Led by Panama and Mexico, investing in domestic infrastructure and public services should cushion these economies from global economic trends. Other factors, such as a record low unemployment rates, growth in the middle class, and a younger population also contribute to Latin America’s economic recovery.

**Related Resources:**

- “Bright spots in Latin America despite global economic uncertainty,” Miami Herald 2013  
  http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/02/03/3215384/bright-spots-in-latin-america.html
- “KnowledgeConcierge: Latin America 2103” World Economic Forum.  
  http://knowledgeconcierge.com/LatAm13
- “Latin American Economic Outlook,” OECD 2013  
  http://www.oecd.org/dev/americas/leo2013.htm

Regional Debate on Drug Legalization

**Description:** After forty years of a Washington-led “war on drugs” in Latin America, drug-related violence in the region remains high and many Latin America governments compete with powerful drug cartels for control of territory and resources. Recently, presidents of countries including Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, and Mexico have suggested that they are open to a discussion of drug policy reforms, including drug legalization. In March of 2012, recently-elected Guatemalan President and right-wing ex-general Otto Pérez Molina surprised many with his announcement that his administration will seek to galvanize regional support for drug legalization (BBC News, 3/24/2012, link below).

(Continued on next page...)
Regional Debate on Drug Legalization Continued...

According to John Walsh of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), "It's a different moment when you have actual heads of state talking about the need for a thorough debate on this...It's certainly different for sitting presidents to be uttering those words. You wouldn't have thought it possible just a few years ago (Huffington Post 3/13/12, link below).”

Related Resources:

- “Guatemala’s President Urges Debate on Drug Legalization,” BBC News 2012  
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17502417
- “Colombian Lawmakers Propose Bill to Legalize Drugs,” BBC News 2012  
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17558382
- “Joe Biden to Visit Latin American Amid Drug Legalization Debate,” Huffington Post 2012  
  http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/03/joe-biden-latin-america_n_1318262.html
- “Timeline: America’s War on Drugs,” NPR 2012  
Description: Latin American immigration has three main destinations: the United States, Spain, and other Latin American countries. Between 2010 and 2011, 43 states passed 164 laws restricting undocumented immigrant’s ability to participate in civil society. Championed by Arizona’s SB 1070, five other states – including Indiana – passed similar bills, while 23 other states introduced the bill unsuccessfully. This legislative trend, in addition to the 2008 economic downturn of the U.S. economy, has contributed to a decrease in Latin American migration, both documented and undocumented. From 2008 to 2010, temporary work migration decreased by 7% and permanent migration by 4%. Currently, legislation calling for comprehensive immigration reform is being promoted in the House of Representatives by agricultural lobbyists who are unable to fill their need for workers due to the system’s complexity as well as state intervention in enforcing the current policy. Economic crisis in Spain also decreased Latin American migration by approximately 36% between 2005-2007 and 2008-2010. This represented a decline of 300,000 people migrating to Spain annually over the course of five years. Within Latin America, migration is spurred by the economic and living conditions of the immigrant’s country of origin rather than those of the country of destination. In 2010, Colombia was one of the top countries of origin for both permanent and temporary international migrants to Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

Related Resources:

Student Movements in Latin America

Description: On April 11, 2013 between 100,000 and 200,000 Chilean university students resumed their protests, demanding free and high quality education for all. The Chilean Student Protest Movement has come about in waves. From 2006-2008, public school students demanded free bus fare to and from school and the overhaul of the voucher system. From 2011-2012, student activism returned in response to rising tuition and increasing privatization of higher education. This trend, argued by the movement’s supporters, is said to be threatening both the quality and the accessibility of education in the region. In many cases, students have been met with police repression. While the most visible student movement has been in Chile, a country with one of the most privatized higher education systems in the world (BBC, October 24, 2011, link below), large-scale student protests have taken place in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela as well.

Related Resources:

- “Chile’s Student protests resume as 100,000 march,” BBC News 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-22118682

Description: On February 12, 2014 three members of Parliament from the opposition, former presidential candidate Maria Corina Machado, Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma and Voluntad Popular (People’s Will) party leader Leopoldo Lopez, organized a peaceful protest to demand changes from the current Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro. The initial plan was to escort a large group of students to the Miraflores Presidential Palace to hand in a letter, demanding that the president address Venezuela’s high rates of crime, corruption, and inflation. However, once the politicians left the scene, the situation turned violent. Protesters reportedly threw rocks and police sprayed them with tear gas. The demonstration escalated to the extent that one student, police officer, and by-stander were killed. However, due to Venezuela’s limited freedom of press, little is known about the overall aftermath of the demonstration. Currently, both sides are still engaged in peaceful demonstrations.

Related Resources:

OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

General Resources

- [http://www.lanic.utexas.edu](http://www.lanic.utexas.edu) A great place to start looking for anything related to Latin America.

- [http://lib.nmsu.edu/subject/bord/laguia](http://lib.nmsu.edu/subject/bord/laguia) Internet resources for Latin American news, organizations, and searchable databases.

- [http://www.pewhispanic.org/](http://www.pewhispanic.org/) The Pew Hispanic Resources Center publishes reports on a variety of topics related to the Hispanic population in the US.

News Sources

- [http://www.zonalatina.com/Zlpapers.htm](http://www.zonalatina.com/Zlpapers.htm) Zona Latina: Latin American Newspapers organized by region. This listing is comprehensive!


- Washington Office on Latin America: [www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org)

Maps

- [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas.html)

- [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/southamerica.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/southamerica.jpg)