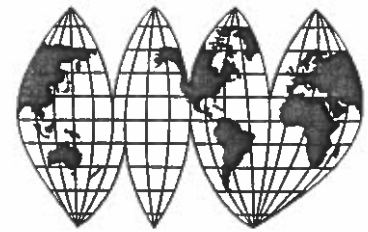


30. Latin America: The Independent Nations



TEACHER BACKGROUND

Latin America is an area that has been troubled by political instability. It is dangerous to generalize, but certain features seem to be common. Historically, Latin America has no experience of democracy. The Indian governments were not democratic, nor were the Spaniards. Since then, democratic governments have been rare and short-lived. Democracy is usually associated with stable, prosperous economies. Latin America lacks that base.

Latin American economies often are based on exporting raw products, either farm products or minerals. Brazil, for example, gets over half of its export dollars from coffee. Coffee also represents over half of the exports of Colombia and Costa Rica. Bolivia depends on tin for over half its exports. Chile has over half its export value in copper. Venezuela relies on oil for over half its exports. Ecuador depends on bananas for over half its exports. These products can provide a good living when the market is up, but the market also swings down. Downswings produce economic misery and political instability.

Many Latin American economies are simply poor. The people in these countries do not get the basic necessities for a healthy, normal life. Haiti is the worst example. In the 1990's Haiti had a gross domestic product per capita of \$340. This means that on the average, every Haitian has to live on \$340 per year. The average United States citizen has about \$21,000. Poverty takes a toll. The average Haitian man lives to age 43; women average 47 years. That's roughly 30 years less than the average citizen of the United States. Education in Haiti is poor, with only 53 percent of the population literate. Given the misery that these statistics show, is it

any surprise that the political history of Haiti has been one dictator after another?

Although it is located near Haiti, Cuba is a more prosperous island. Cuba has made a good living exporting sugar to the world. Cuba's per capita gross domestic product in the 1990's was \$1370. Life expectancy in Cuba is high, age 75 for men and 79 for women. Education reaches most Cubans. There is a 99 percent literacy rate. Cuba is a case of government changing the economy. In 1959, Cuba had a revolution that brought in Fidel Castro as dictator. Castro developed an alliance with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Cuba received aid from the Soviet Union and helped the Soviet cause. Cuba supported revolutions in Latin America and Africa. Cuba was also the center of a crisis when the Soviet Union tried to install missiles on the island. Castro's socialist ideology stressed helping the poor, so education and medical care became available to poor Cubans for the first time. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cubans have lost their major source of outside aid. The Castro dictatorship has extracted a price in loss of freedoms. Thousands of Cubans have fled to the United States.

Another dictator who based his career on helping the poor workers of his country was Juan Perón of Argentina. Perón was part of a coup by a group of army officers, but he built his support among the poor peasants and workers called "shirtless ones." He married a radio actress known as Evita. She was very popular, and is still an admired figure in Argentina. The Peróns ran generous charities and provided health and welfare benefits. Evita died in 1952 and Perón seemed to lose a lot of his fire. The

army removed him from office in 1955. Perón went into exile, but in 1973 he returned with a new wife, Isabel, and was elected president. He died suddenly in 1974, and Isabel became president. The military replaced her in 1976.

The Argentine military was faced with continued economic problems. They created one of their own problems when they attacked the Falkland Islands. The British, who had ruled the islands for years, responded to the attack by sending a fleet. The Argentine military was humiliated, and soon the government was replaced. All this chaos went on in what is a relatively prosperous country, by Latin American standards. The Argentine per capita gross domestic product is \$3,400. The literacy rate is 95 percent. Life expectancy is 68 for men and 75 for women. The military role in politics was very active, which happens relatively often in Latin America.

During the Cold War, Latin America was a contested area. Castro was supporting revolutionaries. The United States, on its side, would oppose any leader who seemed to be a communist. Salvador Allende, for example, was elected president of Chile in 1970. He was a Marxist, and the United States opposed him. In 1973, he was overthrown by the Chilean military.

In the twentieth century, Mexico has been an island of relative stability. Paradoxically, this is the result of the Mexican revolution (1910–1920). Since then, Mexico's government has been run by the revolutionary party known as PRI. But the Mexican economy has experienced ups and downs. Poor Mexicans have emigrated in large numbers to the United States. Not all of the immigration has been legal. In November 1992, Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This joins the Mexican economy with that of the United States and Canada in a free trade zone. This should give Mexico an opportunity to develop a more prosperous economy.