

Latin America Since The Mid-20th Century

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The postwar world, 1945–80

In Latin America as elsewhere, the close of [World War II](#) was accompanied by expectations, only partly fulfilled, of steady economic development and democratic consolidation. Economies grew, but at a slower rate than in most of Europe or East [Asia](#), so that Latin America's relative share of world production and trade declined and the gap in personal income per capita separating it from the leading industrial [democracies](#) increased. Popular education also increased, as did exposure to the mass media and mass culture—which in light of the economic lag served to feed dissatisfaction. Military dictatorships and Marxist revolution were among the solutions put forward, but none were truly successful.

Economic agenda and patterns of growth

The economic shocks delivered by the depression and two world wars, in combination with the strength of nationalism, tilted [economic policy](#) after 1945 strongly toward internal development as against the outward orientation that had predominated since independence. The outward policy had been partially undermined by the trade controls and [industrial](#) promotion schemes adopted essentially as defensive measures in the aftermath of the depression and during World War II. Now, however, a reorientation of policy was explicitly called for by some of Latin America's most influential figures, such as the Argentine economist [Raúl Prebisch](#), head of the [United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America](#). Prebisch and his followers insisted that the terms of trade and investment in the contemporary world were stacked in favour of the developed industrial nations of the "centre" as against the developing nations of the "periphery." Their strategy therefore included emphasis on economic diversification and [import substitution industrialization](#) (ISI) for the sake of greater economic autonomy. They called for [economic integration](#) among the Latin American countries themselves, with a view to attaining economies of scale. And they recommended internal structural reforms to improve the economic performance of their countries, including land reform both to eliminate underutilized latifundios and to lessen the stark inequality of income distribution that was an obstacle to growth of the domestic market.

In the small Caribbean and Central American republics and also some of the smaller and poorer South American nations, the prospects for ISI were sorely limited by market size and other constraints, and governments still hesitated to promote manufacturing at the expense of traditional primary commodities. But in countries

accounting for a disproportionate share of Latin America's population and [gross domestic product](#) (GDP), the new approach received full play through protective tariffs, subsidies, and official preferences. Overvalued exchange rates, which hurt traditional exports, made it easier to import industrial machinery and equipment. Manufacturing costs generally remained high, and factories were overly dependent on imported inputs of all kinds (including foreign capital), but advances were not limited to consumer goods production. In all major countries the output of intermediate and capital goods rose appreciably too. For example, in Argentina the state undertook construction of a steel industry, and in numerous other ways national governments further expanded their economic role. Brazil nationalized its incipient oil industry in 1953, creating the state firm [Petrobrás](#) that eventually ranked alongside Mexico's PEMEX (outcome of the 1938 oil expropriation) and Venezuela's PETROVEN (1975) as one of Latin America's three largest economic enterprises, all state-run.

Starting in 1960 with agreements fostering economic union, such as the Latin American Free Trade Association and [Central American Common Market](#), and continuing with the Andean Pact of 1969, some progress was made toward regional economic integration, but the commitment to eliminate trade barriers was not as strong as in postwar Europe. Intra-Latin American trade increased, but probably not much more than would have happened without special agreements. In any case, quantitative economic growth was visible almost everywhere. It was evident even when expressed as per capita GDP—that is, factoring in a [population growth](#) that in most countries was accelerating, because death rates had finally begun to fall sharply while birth rates remained high. (In the 1960s in much of Latin America the annual rate of population increase came to exceed 3 percent.) But there were clear differences in economic performance among countries. Brazil, with a diversified economic base and much the largest internal market, and Panama, with its canal-based service economy, posted the best records, their GDP per capita doubling between 1950 and 1970; Mexico and Venezuela did almost as well, as did Costa Rica. But the Argentine economy seemed to stagnate, and few countries scored significant gains. Moreover, the [conviction](#) eventually grew in countries where ISI had been vigorously pushed that the easy gains in replacement of imports were coming to an end and that, to maintain adequate growth, it would be necessary to renew emphasis on [exports](#) as well. World market conditions were favourable for a revival of export promotion; indeed, international trade had begun a rapid expansion at the very time that inward-directed growth was gaining converts in Latin America.

The promotion of industrial exports was slow to appear. Brazil was the most successful, selling automobiles and automotive parts mainly to other less-developed countries but at times even to the industrial world. A slightly less

satisfactory alternative was the setting up of plants to assemble imported parts or semifinished materials into consumer goods that were immediately exported, thus taking advantage of Latin America's low labour costs, particularly for women workers. Such plants proliferated along Mexico's northern border (where they were known as maquiladoras) but sprang up also in Central America and around the Caribbean.

In other instances Latin Americans tried to develop new, nontraditional primary commodity exports. Colombian cut flowers were a highly successful example, promoted from the late 1960s through special incentives such as tax rebates; Colombia became the world's second leading flower exporter. It also assumed a leading role in the illicit narcotics trade. It enjoyed a brief boom of marijuana exports in the 1970s and in the following decade became the world's leading supplier of cocaine, which was processed in clandestine Colombian laboratories from leaf paste that at first came mostly from Bolivia and Peru, though eventually Colombia displaced them as producers of the raw material.

Developments in social policy

Continued advances in public health were the principal basis for the explosion of population growth, which in turn made more difficult the provision of other social services. Nevertheless, educational coverage continued to expand, and state schools increased their share of students at the expense of private (often church-affiliated) institutions. Social security systems were introduced in countries that previously had none and expanded where they already existed. Yet such benefits chiefly went to organized urban workers and members of the middle sectors so that the net effect was often to increase, rather than lessen, social inequality.

Moreover, structural land reform received more lip service than actual implementation. Extensive land distribution did occur in Bolivia following that country's 1952 revolution, and in Cuba large private estates were eliminated after 1959; but Mexico, which had been the leader in this area, now tended to favour capitalist agribusinesses rather than peasant communities. The poor were also hurt by the high inflation that in the 1950s and after became endemic in Brazil and the Southern Cone and was intermittently a problem elsewhere, resulting in considerable part from an inability or unwillingness to generate by taxation the fiscal resources needed for economic and social development programs.

The United States and Latin America in the Cold War era

Whatever policies Latin American countries adopted in the postwar era, they had to take into account the probable reaction of the United States, now more than ever the dominant power in the hemisphere. It was the principal trading partner and source of loans, grants, and private investment for almost all countries, and

Latin American leaders considered its favour worth having. Policy makers in Washington, on their part, were unenthusiastic about ISI and state-owned enterprises, but, as long as North American investors were not hindered in their own activities, the inward-directed policy orientation did not pose major problems. Moreover, as the Cold War developed between the United States and the Soviet Union, the great majority of Latin American governments sided willingly with the former, even though they complained of being neglected by Washington's preoccupation with the threat of communism in Europe and Asia.

A threat developed in Central America when the [Guatemalan](#) government of [Jacobo Arbenz](#) (1951–54), which frankly accepted the support of local communists, attacked the holdings of the [United Fruit Company](#) as part of an ambitious though ultimately abortive land reform. This combined political and economic challenge caused the United States to assist Guatemalan counterrevolutionaries and neighbouring Central American rulers in overthrowing Arbenz. The reversion to interventionist tactics featured use of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA) rather than landing of military forces. But it foreshadowed later CIA assistance to the Chilean military in ousting their country's Marxist president, Salvador Allende, in 1973, not to mention the U.S. vendetta against the Sandinista revolutionary government that took power in Nicaragua in 1979, only to be worn down by covert action and economic harassment to the point that it peacefully accepted defeat in a free election in 1990.

Impact of the Cuban Revolution

By most social and economic indicators, [Cuba](#) by mid-century was among Latin America's most highly developed countries. However, in the postwar period it was afflicted with lacklustre economic growth and a corrupt political dictatorship set up in 1952 by the same Batista who earlier had helped put his country on a seemingly democratic path. It was also a country whose long history of economic and other dependence on the United States had fed nationalist resentment, although control of the sugar industry and other economic sectors by U.S. interests was gradually declining. While conditions for revolutionary change were thus present, the particular direction that Cuba took owed much to the idiosyncratic genius of [Fidel Castro](#), who, after ousting Batista at the beginning of 1959, proceeded by stages to turn the island into the hemisphere's first communist state, in close alliance with the Soviet Union.

The Cuban Revolution achieved major advances in health and education, though frankly sacrificing economic efficiency to social objectives. Expropriation of most private enterprise together with Castro's highly personalistic dictatorship drove many members of the middle and upper classes into exile, but a serious decline in

productivity was offset for a time by Soviet subsidies. At the same time, thanks to its successful defiance of the United States—which tried and failed to overthrow it by backing a Cuban exiles' invasion in April 1961—and its evident social advances, Castro's Cuba was looked to as a model throughout Latin America, not only by established leftist parties but also by disaffected students and intellectuals of mainly middle-class origin.

Over the following years much of Latin America saw an upsurge of rural guerrilla conflict and urban terrorism, in response to the persistence of stark social inequality and political repression. But this upsurge drew additional inspiration from the Cuban example, and in many cases Cuba provided training and material support to guerrillas. The response of Latin American establishments was twofold and eagerly supported by the United States. On one hand, governments strengthened their armed forces, with U.S. military aid preferentially geared to counter guerrilla operations. On the other hand, emphasis was placed on land reform and other measures designed to eliminate the root causes of insurgency, all generously aided by the United States through the [Alliance for Progress](#) launched by President [John F. Kennedy](#).

Even though much of the reactive social reformism was cosmetic or superficial, the counterrevolutionary thrust was nonetheless generally successful. A Marxist, [Salvador Allende](#), became president of Chile in 1970, but he did so by democratic election, not violent revolution, and he was overthrown three years later. The only country that appeared to be following the Cuban pattern was Nicaragua under the Sandinista revolutionary government, which in the end could not withstand the onslaughts of its domestic and foreign foes. Moreover, the Cuban Revolution ultimately lost much of its lustre even in the eyes of the Latin American left, once the collapse of the Soviet Union caused Cuba to lose its chief foreign ally. Although the U.S. trade embargo imposed on Cuba had been a handicap all along, shortages of all kinds became acute only as Russian aid was cut back, clearly revealing the dysfunctional nature of Castro's economic management.

Political alternatives

Movement toward democracy

The Latin American countries that did not opt for the Cuban model followed widely varying political paths. Mexico's unique system of limited democracy built around the Institutional Revolutionary Party was shaken by a wave of riots in the summer of 1968 on the eve of the [Olympic Games](#) held in Mexico City, but political stability was never seriously in doubt. A somewhat analogous regime was devised in Colombia as a means of restoring civilian constitutional rule after a brief relapse in the mid-1950s into military dictatorship: the dominant Liberal and Conservative parties chose to bury the hatchet, creating a bipartisan coalition (called the [National](#)

[Front](#)) whereby they shared power equally between themselves while formally shutting out any minor parties. Once this arrangement expired in 1974, Colombia became again a more conventional political democracy, such as Costa Rica had been since before 1950 and Venezuela became in 1958 after the overthrow of its last military dictator.

In Latin America generally, the practice of democracy was somewhat sporadic, but, wherever regular elections took place, they involved an enlarged electorate. The last Latin American countries adopted [woman suffrage](#) in the 1950s, and literacy test requirements continued to fall (as did illiteracy itself). [Women](#) also began to occupy high political office, including the presidency in Argentina (1974–76), Bolivia (1979–80), and Chile (2006–10). Moreover, [Violeta Chamorro](#) won the Nicaraguan vote of 1990 that put a temporary end to Sandinista rule (in 2006 the Sandinistas took power once again when former president [Daniel Ortega](#) was reelected).

The advent of populism

The [amorphous](#) phenomenon of populism was another feature of the mid-20th-century political scene. Its [consummate](#) practitioner was [Juan Perón](#) of Argentina, who as a member of a [military regime](#) that seized power in 1943 took a special interest in social policy. Perón wooed Argentine labour by means of wage increases and bonuses, pensions and fringe benefits, while also exploiting widespread resentment of an [oligarchy](#) that in the 1930s had reasserted its political as well as economic dominance. He promised social [justice](#) without violent class struggle and national greatness on the basis of industrial and military strength. His message, delivered in popular language, won Perón a clearcut victory when he ran for president in 1946.

Perón was not the first Latin American leader to reward his followers with social benefits or to rail against native [oligarchs](#) and foreign imperialists, but he established a personal, charismatic link with ordinary citizens in a way that no one before him had done as successfully. “In the Argentina of Perón,” he boasted, “the only privileged ones are the children.” Yet Perón did not even pretend to be heading a revolution. As president, aided by his wife Evita until her death in 1952, he continued to cultivate mass support while signally neglecting to lay a sound basis for long-term economic growth. Perón nevertheless did not lack imitators and counterparts in other countries of Latin America.

The leading party of postdictatorial Venezuela, [Democratic Action](#) (Acción Democrática; AD), was basically reformist in orientation but with [populist](#) overtones. [Rómulo Betancourt](#) and other AD leaders were less personalistic in style than Perón, who was finally overthrown in 1955, but like him they stood for the granting of lavish benefits to the working and middle classes

within a general framework of capitalism. In Venezuela oil wealth ultimately encouraged the national government to squander resources without adequate regard for the future. A similar charge was leveled against [Juscelino Kubitschek](#), who became president of Brazil (1956–61) through his skill at old-style machine politics. He was technically not a populist but had the same bent for extravagant promises and freewheeling expenditure. Kubitschek's best-known achievement was the building of [Brasília](#), the architecturally striking but fabulously expensive new capital city. Its construction aggravated inflationary woes but nicely epitomized his pledge to bring "fifty years' progress in five."

Christian Democracy

A new feature since World War II was the appearance of a number of Christian Democratic parties, which offered a program of moderate reform inspired by Roman Catholic social teachings. Most were small splinter groups, but Christian Democrats eventually achieved power in Venezuela, El Salvador, and [Chile](#). In Venezuela they alternated with the social democratic AD and in their policies became almost indistinguishable from it. In El Salvador in the 1980s they were enmeshed in a preexisting struggle against leftist guerrillas. In Chile, where they came to power first, under President [Eduardo Frei](#) (1964–70), they launched an ambitious land reform and partially nationalized the copper industry. They received enthusiastic support from the United States via the Alliance for Progress as presenting a promising alternative to Cuban-style revolution, but they failed to extend their mandate, going down to narrow defeat in a three-way contest won by [Salvador Allende](#).

Bureaucratic authoritarianism

Allende as president combined Marxist assault on the owners of the means of production with populist lavishing of short-term benefits on his working-class followers, and on both counts he stirred violent resentment among upper- and middle-class Chileans as well as attracting the adamant hostility of the United States. In September 1973 he was ousted in favour of General [Augusto Pinochet](#), who proved the most successful exponent of a new style of military dictatorship defined by political scientists as bureaucratic authoritarianism. It was not, of course, a complete novelty. It reflected the 20th-century Latin America-wide phenomenon whereby the leadership of increasingly professionalized armies passed to sons of the middle class who had a commitment to modernizing the infrastructure of their societies. Such earlier dictatorships as that of [Carlos Ibáñez del Campo](#) (1927–31) during another Chilean relapse from constitutional rule had shown marked developmentalist tendencies. Bureaucratic authoritarianism, however, as practiced in Brazil after the coup of 1964, in Argentina by officers dedicated to keeping the Peronistas from regaining power, or in Chile under Pinochet, was a response to the perceived mismanagement of the economy by populists and other demagogues. It

rested on the conviction that no democratically elected regime could afford to take the harsh measures needed to curb inflation, reassure foreign and domestic investors, and thereby quicken economic growth to the point that untrammelled democracy could be safely practiced. While military men kept order with varying degrees of harshness and [human rights](#) violations, civilian economists and technocrats would direct most other policy—whence the term “bureaucratic authoritarianism.”

Under Pinochet, the guiding voice in Chilean economic matters was assigned to a group of economists, some of whom had been trained at the [University of Chicago](#) and who were strongly influenced by the [monetarist](#) school of [Milton Friedman](#), according to which [money supply](#) and interest rates rather than governmental [fiscal policy](#) primarily determine the [business cycle](#). Political authoritarianism stood in apparent contradiction to the generally free-market, laissez-faire policies prescribed in economic and social affairs; and, though inflation fell sharply, industrial production also dropped with the decline in the level of official protection. A similar combination of approaches arose under the military governments in Argentina in the 1960s and again from 1976 to 1983 and in Uruguay after 1973, again with mixed economic results. In Brazil from 1964 to 1985 military presidents and their technocratic advisers assigned a larger role in economic affairs to the state, while a Peruvian military regime that took power in 1968 undertook a radical program of social and economic reforms, giving way to a more typical bureaucratic-authoritarian regime only after running into serious economic difficulties. In these countries, political repression fell lightly on most of the population, but anyone suspected of engaging in—or simply encouraging—active resistance was liable to arrest, torture, and in extreme cases forced “disappearance”; this was a notable feature of the last Argentine military regime. Moreover, military rule of one sort or another did spread until by 1980 democratically elected civilian governments could be found only in Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and (by stretching the definition just a bit) Mexico.

Latin America at the end of the 20th century

The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed a generalized economic crisis in Latin America, triggered in large part by external factors but aggravated by domestic mismanagement; in search of a way out, countries put their trust in [neoliberal](#) approaches favouring a free flow of trade and investment and reduction of the role of the state, all as recommended by the [International Monetary Fund](#) or other lending and advisory agencies. Even Castro’s Cuba hesitantly embarked on the neoliberal economic path—to the extent of inviting foreign investment and enlarging the scope of permitted private enterprise by Cubans—though Castro did not show equal enthusiasm for the parallel political tendency, which was a turn to democratic procedures.

Debt crisis

The ingredient of economic crisis that attracted widest attention was Latin America's inability to maintain full service on its foreign [debt](#), which had grown to dangerously high levels. Both Mexico and Venezuela, as major petroleum exporters, benefited from rising international oil prices during the 1970s, but, instead of concluding that foreign credit was no longer necessary, they assumed that any amount of indebtedness would be easy to pay back. Brazil's generals drew a similar conclusion from their country's better-than-average economic growth. Even where no such circumstances were present, foreign private and institutional lenders had lost their depression-induced caution in lending to Latin America, and they had at their disposal an ever-greater flood of dollars to be placed in world financial markets. Bankers used often aggressive tactics in pressuring Latin American governments to borrow, and the region's total foreign debt increased from 1970 to 1980 by more than 1,000 percent.

Developments in the world economy soon brought Latin America a rude awakening. Whereas commodity prices were generally favourable in the 1970s, a world recession in the following decade caused them to fall sharply. At the same time, interest rates rose in the United States and western Europe as governments sought to curb inflationary pressures and make other difficult adjustments. Latin America thus faced an increased debt bill, with fewer resources to pay it. Colombia alone managed to avoid [default](#) or compulsory rescheduling, and all countries faced severe fiscal problems. Domestic expenditures had to be cut back or financed through unsupported issues of paper money. Most of Latin America experienced slow or negative economic growth, together with [inflation](#); indeed, hyperinflation was the rule in Argentina and Brazil and in some smaller countries. Real wages fell everywhere except Colombia and Chile.

Return to democracy

Latin America's democracies, and quasi-democratic Mexico, were politically less vulnerable to economic hard times than the dictatorships: their governments could be and were changed by regular electoral procedures, whereas dictatorial regimes that encountered similar problems had to be removed by other means. Armed force, however, was seldom necessary, and in [Argentina](#) change came from outside, in the form of Great Britain's embarrassing defeat of the Argentine [military government's](#) 1982 attempt to reoccupy the [Falkland \(Malvinas\) Islands](#) that Britain had seized a century and a half before. That fiasco completed the discrediting of the Argentine regime and forced it to reinstate elective civilian government sooner than intended. A return to overt U.S. intervention assisted in the 1989 overthrow of General [Manuel Noriega](#) in Panama, who had run afoul of the new U.S. [obsession](#) with curbing drug trafficking. The United States also helped remove the military regime of Haiti in 1994, where the institutions of civil society were particularly weak. Elsewhere, the force of domestic opinion—aided by foreign

disapproval, internecine squabbling, and sheer discouragement on the part of ruling military officers—was usually enough to bring about a transition to democracy. Cuba's Fidel Castro was the longest serving dictatorial ruler in Latin America, and today Cuba remains the only country in the region under dictatorship. Even democratically elected presidents were sometimes high-handed in their style of ruling, and in three major countries—Peru, Argentina, and Brazil—they pushed through constitutional amendments to allow their immediate reelection, which would otherwise have been illegal. Significantly, in each case the incumbent's success in taming inflation helped make it possible to win the additional term without recourse to force or fraud. (Peru's [Alberto Fujimori](#) later obtained still another reelection but by slightly more-questionable tactics.) At the turn of the millennium, the most troubled country, politically, was Colombia, where a democratic regime had lost control over much of the national territory to illegal drug traffickers, leftist guerrillas, and counterguerrilla paramilitaries. The most important of the guerrilla organizations was the [FARC](#), or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, which enjoyed scant popular support but profited greatly from the sale of protection to drug producers and dealers.

A shift to neoliberalism

One of the last countries to return to democracy was [Chile](#), where the Pinochet dictatorship had been more successful than most in economic management. After first imposing harsh readjustments and committing its share of mistakes, it had launched the country on a steady course of economic growth that made it a much-admired model in Latin America and continued even after the dictator finally turned over the presidency (though not control of the armed forces) to an elected Christian Democrat in 1990. The Chilean model was based, in any event, on the application of neoliberal policies—reduction of trade barriers, privatization of state companies, encouragement of foreign as well as domestic private investment, and lessening of regulation generally—that to one degree or another were ultimately adopted by all countries, including (within limits) the surviving communist dictatorship of Cuba. A clear example of the new approach to economic affairs was Mexico's joining [Canada](#) and the United States in the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA), which went into effect in 1994. Intra-Latin American free-trade arrangements moved forward too, with [Mercosur](#) (Mercado Común del Sur, "Common Market of the South")—which was organized in 1995 by Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay—easily the most important. Country after country sought private buyers for inefficient state-owned firms, and several countries, led by Chile, moved to privatize social security systems. There were nevertheless certain limits to neoliberal reforms: in Mexico and Venezuela, for example, state oil firms were exempt from the privatization process (though not in Argentina, a second-string oil producer). Neither did bureaucracies and government expenditures shrink very rapidly, if they shrank at all.

Results of the new economic policies were, not surprisingly, mixed. Latin America remained vulnerable to the vagaries of world markets, and the greater opening to international trade often led to a dangerous upsurge in nonessential imports. At the end of the 20th century, the region's share of world exports hovered around 6 percent, less than half what it had been in 1950. In the final decade of the century, most countries experienced a resumption of modest economic growth after the disastrous 1980s, an often dramatic fall in inflation, and a strengthening of the private sector of the economy. Social changes, however, impacted different groups within each country. In the short term at least, efforts to become more competitive in capitalist markets contributed to record levels of formal unemployment in many countries and, at the same time, widespread subcontracting of operations to home workers, chiefly women, who laboured for subsistence income. In Mexico, for instance, the reorientation of economic policy aggravated the plight of Indian peasants in the southern state of Chiapas, who unleashed a renewal of guerrilla insurgency just as the country was entering NAFTA. Yet Latin America's revitalized commitment to political democracy—which did not mean sudden elimination of all human rights abuses and other deficiencies any more than in the rest of the world—appeared to face few serious challenges.

Religious trends

[Roman Catholicism](#) continued to be a powerful force in the second half of the 20th century. Its influence could be seen in the continuing prohibition, almost everywhere, of [abortion](#) and in the tendency to play down official support (which nevertheless existed) for [birth control](#) campaigns. Relations of the Roman Catholic Church with the state and with society at large were meanwhile affected, however, by new currents within the church itself. The movement of renewal and reform undertaken by the [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962–65) favoured mainstream Catholic teaching and practice at the expense of popular “folk Catholicism” yet led to a somewhat more tolerant approach toward other denominations. In addition, coinciding as it did with the impetus given to leftist movements by the Cuban Revolution, the call for renewal inspired an influential minority of priests and nuns to seek a synthesis of religious faith and political commitment under the banner of [liberation theology](#). Some priests actually joined guerrilla bands, while others laboured to “raise the consciousness” of their flocks concerning social injustice. This brand of activism met with general disapproval from Latin American governments, especially military regimes, some of which brutally persecuted the clergy involved. It also divided the church, and without gaining the widespread popular [allegiance](#) that “liberationist” clergy had hoped for.

In the late 20th century the principal religious development was a rapid expansion of [Protestantism](#), especially the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. With a primary emphasis on individual spiritual improvement and salvation and a closeness between ministers and laity that neither traditional nor renewed

Catholicism could match, the Protestants rapidly increased their numbers throughout Latin America. In countries as diverse as Brazil and Guatemala there were by the end of the century more Protestants than actively churchgoing Roman Catholics. Protestantism was not strong among traditional elites or in intellectual circles, but its adherents were beginning to attain positions of influence. One of them, General [Efraín Ríos Montt](#), briefly served as military dictator of Guatemala (1982–83).

A changing society

Despite the expansion (sometimes impressive, sometimes not) of the middle strata of Latin American society, by the late 20th century, progress toward reducing historically high levels of social inequality was disappointing almost everywhere save in communist Cuba. Also, the poorest countries of western Europe enjoyed greater per capita income than the wealthiest in Latin America. Yet, with regard to such social indicators as literacy and [life expectancy](#), Costa Rica, Cuba, and the nations of the Southern Cone approximated the standards of the industrialized world, and, for Latin America as a whole, the lag was substantially less than in 1900 or 1950.

The rate of [population growth](#), having peaked in the third quarter of the century, fell significantly with wide variations among countries. In parts of northern Latin America, a factor contributing to this decline was [emigration](#) to the more prosperous and politically stable United States, where large metropolitan centres—such as [New York City](#), Los Angeles, and Miami—were home to large and growing Latin American communities. By the beginning of the 21st century, the population of Latin America and the Caribbean was more than 550 million, with about four-fifths of the population residing in urban areas. Latin America also contained two of the world's largest metropolitan areas—Mexico City and São Paulo. The region's principal cities grew more slowly than intermediate centres; in Venezuela, for example, Maracaibo and Valencia were expanding faster than Caracas. In the cities, where literacy and then access to television were nearly universal, people were exposed more and more quickly to new trends and ideas emanating from the United States or western Europe; to a lesser degree the same forces, and the continuing improvement of road transportation, were also decreasing the isolation of rural Latin Americans.

With social and economic modernization came changes, too, in gender relations. In most of Latin America [women](#) achieved full legal equality with men only gradually and usually later than winning the vote. In Argentina, for example, wives gained equal authority with husbands over minor-aged children only after the return of democracy in the 1980s. Traditions of [patriarchy](#) remained strong, and Latin American women's groups were more prone than those in the United States or western Europe to exploit the symbolic discourse of motherhood in gaining their

objectives. No significant number of women in this predominantly Roman Catholic region took up the cause of women's ordination to the priesthood. As in most of the world, furthermore, equal pay for women remained elusive. Yet women did take advantage of increased educational and employment opportunities to gain more control of their lives. As many women as men were enrolled in secondary education, and the traditional alternatives for those women who chose or were obliged to work outside the home—e.g., domestic service and prostitution—had been supplemented by an array of clerical, professional, and light factory jobs. From the 1960s to the '90s the proportion of women in the general labour force increased substantially. Falling birth rates likewise indicated that women were pursuing new options. The fact that domestic servants were still relatively inexpensive made it easier for middle- and upper-class women to pursue professional careers. Servants, however, were less inclined than they once were to accept their position as permanent; realistically or not, they dreamed of something better and to that extent epitomized a more general yearning for personal and social improvement that posed a challenge for all Latin American nations.

Ethnic minorities also sought greater opportunities and respect from society at large. Afro-Latin Americans increasingly questioned the long-accepted notion that racism did not exist in their countries and that such discrimination as existed was merely class-based; across Latin America, they formed social movements demanding their economic and political rights. In some countries, minority groups formed militant organizations. In Colombia, Afro-Latin Americans obtained rights to special legislative representation (as did Indian communities) in a new constitution in 1991. The peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, was the best-known example of greater militancy among indigenous peoples. Yet even more striking was the appearance of a strong nationwide Indianist movement in Ecuador, which sought not only immediate improvements for Native Americans but also formal recognition that Ecuador was a multiethnic, multicultural nation. By the end of the 20th century, these Ecuadoran indigenous groups had already gained influence in national politics and demanded economic improvements. In 2000 a coup led by indigenous Indian leaders and military members briefly toppled the ruling government, removing the president from power. However, the coup leaders eventually agreed to let Vice President Gustavo Noboa Bejerano ascend to the presidency, which effectively ended the coup. This agreement emerged partly from military opposition of a junta-ruled government and also from the adamant refusal of the United States to accept a new government imposed by unconstitutional means. The last has not been heard from the indigenous movement in Ecuador—or elsewhere in Latin America.