

Knowing and Understanding Latin America is both a Challenge and an Opportunity

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### Introduction

Latin America is a region in the Western Hemisphere where a "cosmic race" (Zelms, 1988, p. 3) plays a significant role through its people, their interdependence, their dynamic objectives and their synergies as a collective whole within the region and with the rest of the world. Hence, according to the Columbia Encyclopedia, Latin America is composed of the Spanish, Portuguese, and French-speaking countries in North (except Canada and the USA), Central, and South America, and the West Indies also known as the Caribbean (Chernow, 1993, p. 1535). Those countries are Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay to the very south; right above and to the east are Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana which are also included since they speak a "Romance tongue" (Chernow, 1993, p. 1535) as well. Moving to the west are the "Northern Andean Countries" (Lye, 20072003, p. 128) such as Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The Caribbean encompasses many Romance-speaking islands but the main three are the Republics of Cuba, Haiti, and Dominican Republic. And finally, Mexico in North America, and Central America depicting Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize as yet another Romance-speaking country.

Thus, knowing the region of Latin America is a task that requires research in the geographical physical environment, the social structure of the region and its respective countries, the beliefs systems that inspire it, the economy that supports it, and the governing political structures leading it. However, understanding the "cosmic race" (Zelms, p. 3) is a formidable task demanding total emersion with its people, its partnerships, its platforms, and its power as an evolving and transforming race.

### Physical Environment

The physical environment of Latin America is as diverse as its original inhabitants, the Europeans that colonized it, the slaves brought from Africa to work the land, and as multicultural as its current people. According to the Atlas of the World, Mexico and Central America are made up of "seven small countries" (Lye, p. 116) constantly enduring the natural physical forces of volcanic eruptions, seismic activity, and seasonal hurricanes shaping the landscape and its people. Similarly, these same countries enjoy a dynamic global position between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans with a good "landmass [that] snakes from northwest to southeast, reaching its narrowest point at the Isthmus of Panama" (Lye, p. 116).

Moreover, the Caribbean is unique and geographically located in the Atlantic ocean, and between the northern area of South America, and the southeast of North America but not connected by landmass to either continent (Lye, p. 122). Nonetheless, these multitude of small islands are the physical repository of many "undersea volcanoes [along with] fertile plains, rolling hills, forests, and mountains" (Lye, p. 122) much like Mexico and Central America. Geographically speaking, the Caribbean is unique and special due to its total detachment of the mainland.

On the other hand, the "Northern Andean countries" (Lye, p. 128) of South America are greatly shaped by the Andes mountains that include "massive snow-capped volcanoes, gleaming glaciers, and wide, cool plateaus [that extend to] nearly 4,000 miles" (Lye, p. 128) of majestic mountainous terrain from Colombia to Chile which paradoxically holds the "Atacama Desert, one of the driest spots on Earth, where rain may not fall for years at a time" (Lye, p. 142). Also, the Pacific Ocean plays a major role in the climate and weather encased to its territorial countries. Likewise, this area not only endures volcanic movement but also seismic activity responsible for



past catastrophic disasters.

Next, and graciously placed is "Brazil and its neighbors [with] the world's largest rainforest, which covers an area of over 815 million acres" (Lye, p. 134), the particularities of the Caribbean currents, and the ubiquity of the forced-fed waters of the Orinoco, Amazon, and Parana rivers flushing out the entire area in its own multiplex way (Lye, p. 134).

Lastly, "Argentina and its neighbors" (Lye, p. 142) are pounded on the east by the Pacific Ocean, on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, and sliced by the Andes mountains thus creating an immense asymmetrical geography rich with natural environmental forces that shape its people and the region towards a social structure that assimilates, appropriates, and transforms Latin Americans individually and collectively to its unique and diverse cultural social structures.

### **Social Structures and Beliefs Systems**

Latin America has a contextual social structure deeply rooted in its people and culture that began long before the arrival of the Europeans. Such powerful molding was instituted through "the intensive cultivation of corn, potatoes and other crops, [and so] complex societies such as the Inca and Aztec empires, each with several million subjects, evolved. They were characterized, among other things, by urbanism, class stratification, and state religions" (Gabbert, p. 256). Moreover, Gabbert states in his article, "The Longue Duree of Colonial Violence in Latin America" that "the possibly 40-50 million inhabitants who peopled the Americas on the eve of the conquest in the late fifteenth century differed widely in language, culture, economy, and social organization" (Gabbert, p. 256) and thus the "cosmic race" (Zelms, p. 3) has been traversing the transfers of power from the high ranking Indians to the Crown's elite while keeping poverty and peasants with inequality among the rest (Gabbert, p. 257).

Sadly, such social structure of inequalities evolved to "citizen corruption permissiveness"

(Lavena, p. 345) with a variant degree depending on the Latin American country at hand, and as "associated with age, education, ethnicity, cultural values, and confidence in public organizations" (Lavena, p. 345). Moreover, Lavena states that such "corruption permissiveness" is the result and spillover from years of destructive government platforms violating human dignity and people's autonomy. In the same way, it affected the mutual interdependence among the population and religions (Lavena, p. 346) with what Maria Clara Lucchetti in her article "Desafios y Tareas de la Teologia en America Latina Hoy" called the pluralism of religions continuously evolving in a very segmented way through the European forced Christianity, and the many indigenous beliefs systems (Lucchetti, p. 402) that are now fully exposed with other world religions such as Judaism (Lucchetti, p. 419). In this matter, religion and social structuralism are in its very nature part of the classification status of people and partnerships that keep regular citizens with little influence very distant from progress or achieving societal status.

Furthermore, Lucchetti defines and explains religions as a consolidation of beliefs related to what humanity considers divine, sacred, and supernatural but it makes a clear distinction to the meaning of faith. Nonetheless, Lucchetti links faith as the force driver projecting a religion which in turn becomes the epitome of its members (p. 425). Thus, beliefs systems in Latin America are, therefore, dynamic, vibrant and with a strong essence of Christianity and a mince of African, and world traditions which also permits a degree of economic and political corruption that is deeply rooted in the collective beliefs systems.

### **Economy and Political Structure**

The Latin American economy has endured for many decades corruption, inequalities, weak governmental institutions, drug trafficking among other destructive mechanisms. However, such path is changing and bound to great opportunities for the near future. For example, in Medellin,



Colombia once the number one murder capital of the world, and epicenter of the world's cocaine cartels... has now emerged as the "Innovative City of the Year in a global competition developed by the Urban Land Institute, WSJ Magazine, and Citigroup" (McKinsey & Company, Medellín's metamorphosis: An interview with Mayor Anibal Gaviria, Interview, Fossaert & Morales). Medellín's strategy focused on a platform of security that reduced crime and violence by 80 % in the past 20 years; then, focused on inspiring the people of Medellín through platforms of better education enabling bilingual population, and then establishing partnerships in the areas of "health, tourism, fashion, energy and utilities, construction, and IT" (McKinsey & Company, Medellín's metamorphosis: An interview with Mayor Anibal Gaviria, Interview, Fossaert & Morales). Needless to say, but their last step empowered the people through "the local and regional authorities, the local universities, and the public sector" (McKinsey & Company, Medellín's metamorphosis: An interview with Mayor Anibal Gaviria, Interview, Fossaert & Morales). And so, it is living proof that cities like Medellín that focus on its people, its partnerships for the people, and build platforms that ensure and secure the power of the people... are better equipped to change and make a significant difference in the economy of Latin America.

Similarly, "The New Latin American Economy and its Priorities" show that "Latin American countries and their mutual cooperation and integration [have led to] exceptional diversification of regional and inter-regional cooperation [such as MERCOSUR, CARICOM, and many other emerging partnerships], which [are] achieving significant progress and results, in spite of fragmentation processes and the lingering effects of the world financial crisis of the global level" (Pajovic & Ivanoivic, 2011, p. 2). Hence, Latin American's challenge to true progress has always been the lack of focused unity within its people, the lack of partnerships and diplomacy within the governments of the regions and the constant disruptive drug trade power that weakens and

violates the integrity of governmental institutions as mentioned by Francis and Mauser, "Crime and corruption, the offshoots of narcotrafficking, are linked to a decline in the institutional integrity of a society. They undermine the social and economic capacity of a country and thus negatively affect the [legal] investment climate" (Francis & Mauser, 2011, p. 168). So, the Latin American economy is one that has been beaten by crime, corruption, and violence, tampered with inequality, subjugated by monarchies, autocracies and other eccentric regimes, and informally sustained through the drug trade primarily because the options are limited to more of the same... insecurity, violence and crime. Thus, marginalizing people and producing grave economic consequences that drive investors elsewhere, and the opportunities along with them (Francis & Mauser, 2011, p. 168). Nonetheless, hope and restoration are closer than before. And while the U.S. War on Drugs (WOD) policy has had its challenges and direct pushback from Latin American's governments due to its subjectivity for curtailment of drug supply in supplying countries, and congruent U.S. economic sanctions as well for transit countries failing to mitigate the drug logistics to North America... has also sparked a self-clean up and restoration effect in Latin American cities such as Medellin which took it upon itself to create the conditions for platforms of security, partnerships of innovation, and peoples that share the power at all levels... in search of true prosperity where the human element, its societies, and organizations become one single driving force of greatness.

In keeping with the "cosmic race" (Zelms, 1988, p. 3), Latin America's political structure has evolved over the years to multi-party democratic standards with the exception of Cuba, who remains a communist state. And thus, it is important to understand that democracy as explained by Rafael Roncagliolo should facilitate "electoral origin, constitutional functioning, and inclusive results" (2012, p. 112) "as proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948, conceptualized in terms of



civil, political, and social citizenship [meaning that] democracy must safeguard civil, political, economic, and social rights" (Roncagliolo, 2011, p. 112).

Moreover, as Latin America moves forward with more democratic policy actions it has also led reviews on "preexisting constitutional structures responsible for a history of dictatorship, political conflict, and human rights abuses" (Negretto, 2011, p. 1798). And so, as Latin America continues to grow as a "cosmic race" (Zelms, 1988, p. 3) with equality and prosperity by "achieving better representation of citizens' interests", forming partnerships, "promoting economic growth", building platforms, "providing public security", and "maintaining government stability" with democratic shared powers (Negretto, 2011, p. 1798).

### **Conclusion**

In closing, knowing and understanding Latin America imposes serious shared challenges and opportunities to the region itself, and the rest of the world dealing with it because Latin America will continue to endure mother nature's opposition to stagnant activity. And with it, the "cosmic race" (Zelms, 1988, p. 3) will continue to project more socialization interconnectedness to the inner and outer world while perpetuating beliefs systems consistent with geographical regions and groupings. Moreover, the economy and political structures will shape each other, will learn from the past as a way to change the future, good or bad; Latin America is a distillation of the rest of the world, and it's now on a journey to give back a reflection, a condensed version of its people, its partnerships, its platforms, and its power back to the world that enable it.



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