

Textbook Discussion Questions
Chapter 8: Latin American Economic Development
and US-Latin American Relations

What is Latin America?

1. Have you traveled to Latin America? Why did you go? What were your pre-travel expectations? How did your experience differ from those expectations?
2. What is the meaning of the saying, “When the United States catches a cold, Latin America sneezes”?
3. How did Latin America get its name?
4. What three distinct geographical territories are usually thought of as comprising the region known as Latin America? Why are they grouped together? What common features do they possess?
5. What are the two dominant languages spoken in South America?
6. What is the difference between the terms Central America and Middle America? Why do we make the distinction?
7. Into what two regions do social scientists usually divide the Caribbean?

Historical Sketch

1. When we write the history of Latin America, we refer to events happening in either the pre-Columbian or post-Columbian era. What do these terms refer to?
2. What do you think of this method of defining the region’s history? What are the drawbacks versus the advantages to this system of time-keeping?
3. Why might we wish to speak of two cultures’ “encounter” with one another, rather than one culture’s “discovery” of a new land?
4. Name three indigenous peoples who inhabited Latin America at the time of the European Conquest, and identify where they lived.
5. What is the phenomenon common to travelers in Latin America that is somewhat facetiously referred to as “Montezuma’s revenge”? Who is the historical figure this phrase refers to, and why might he be seeking revenge?
6. How did European colonial powers justify to themselves their conquest of Latin American lands and their subjugation of its native peoples? What technologies did the conquistadors possess that made it possible for them to carry out this task?
7. What remnants of the social systems set up by colonial powers in the New World can still be found in modern-day Latin America?
8. When the native populations of Latin America began to die from the European-imported diseases, where did the colonial powers go to find a new source of cheap labor?
9. By the early 1800s, what obstacles were the Iberian royals facing to their continued colonial rule in the Americas?
10. The term *caudillismo* refers to a specific type of political structure. How would you describe it? What does the Spanish word it comes from, *caudillo*, mean?
11. How would you portray the current situation of the indigenous peoples remaining in Latin America today? What progress is being made? What problems remain?

Dominant Themes in Latin American Studies

1. What is “dependency theory,” and what is its critique of the so-called “free market” theory as a model for Latin American development?
2. In the main, Latin America had relied on agricultural and extractive economies throughout its history. What did the ISI strategy propose to add to the mix?
3. Was the ISI experiment a success? Why or why not? Give examples to support your answer.

The Debt Crisis and “The Lost Decade”

1. What is the nature of the Latin American “debt crisis”? Who do the countries of Latin America owe money to? How did their economic situation come to be so grim?
2. Why did Western banks agree to lend such large amounts of money to Latin American countries in the 1970s?
3. Why do economists call the 1980s the “lost decade”? What happened?

Structural Adjustment and Neoliberalism

1. Give two examples of an IFI, or international financial institution.
2. What is meant by a “structural adjustment program”? Who instituted them, and why? What were they designed to do? What consequences did they have?
3. How did institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF justify the economic hardship that ensued after they instituted structural adjustment programs?
4. Define “neoliberalism.” Why is it currently the dominant economic model?

US-Latin American Relations

1. In what way are the United States and Latin America linked economically? Politically? Culturally?

Cuba

1. Describe the intervention (and attempted intervention) on the part of the United States in Cuban affairs in the last 40 years. Why was the U.S. so interested in shaping the future of this particular country? In what ways has U.S. interference had an effect on Cubans’ daily lives?
2. On July 31, 2006, president Fidel Castro handed the reins of the Cuban government over to his brother, Raul Castro. Fidel had been repeatedly re-elected as leader of this island government for 47 years, despite the sometimes intense economic hardships of his people. How was it possible for him to stay in power?

Alliance for Progress

1. What was the “Alliance for Progress” program? When did it begin? What did it seek to accomplish? What were its actual contributions to the region?

Central America

1. What was the relationship established between the U.S. (under the administration of Ronald Reagan) and Central America in the 1980s? Cite specific examples.
2. What was the Iran-Contra affair? What lessons does it provide about U.S.-Latin American relations?

3. The Reagan administration was on record in the 1980s as supporting democracy in Central America. Did it, in fact, champion democracy there?