

An Overview of Historical and Socio-economic Evolution in the Americas

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Edited by

Alberto Ciferri

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EDITORIAL OVERVIEW

This book reviews the most visible historical and socio-economic features of 28 nations in the American continent, which is characterized by the impressive coexistence of native groups living in restricted areas and advanced institutions where the most challenging advances in human knowledge are addressed. The specific characteristics that the authors planned to highlight include the ethnic conflicts that afflict multi-ethnic nations and the migratory processes, and intra-ethnic or class conflicts that continue to perturb the stability of several countries in the Americas. Several chapters deal with the native populations of America. The main objective of the book is to stimulate an appreciation of history and cultural identities. An enhanced harmony of social relations, together with appropriately balanced economic development, might result in an “authentic” increase in the quality of life.

The book arises from cooperation between professional historians and scientists familiar with the countries they describe. It is written in a plain and easily readable form and is directed to a general audience offering a concise reference on the origins of current conflicts and developments. The book is particularly addressed to young students at the high school and college level that are about to enter the struggle for power and the complexities of real life: the solution of the outstanding world problems is entrusted to them. Furthermore, the book could offer guidelines for local development projects based on the harmonization of cultural values with economic well-being in developed and developing countries.

The chapters of the book begin with the presentation of data on the territory, ethnic composition and current political/economic situation of the respective American nations. A typical chapter continues with a factual and concise description of historical events from prehistory to the present time. These history sections follow the conventional scheme of history books, but primarily evidence ethnic and

class problems and the evolution of national identities. A final section highlights and briefly analyzes the single most important cultural/economic feature that affects the success or the difficulties of the individual countries. These final sections attempt to relate the current development to the historical events of each country. The vastness of the subject does not allow detailed analysis. However, it evidences correlations and analogies that allow the reader to appreciate the origins of recurrent problems and to formulate their own ideas on possible remedies, and that stimulate interest in cultural courses at a more advanced level.

Teaching history and preserving cultural values for the benefit of new generations has been a goal motivated by several considerations. The decline of culture is reflected in a malfunctioning of the democratic processes. Moreover, there is consensus in considering social relations and economic well-being as the main factors that determine the happiness of people. However, these factors are not adequately distributed in the American nations. Affluent societies with prevailing Anglo-Saxon influence enjoy high income, but those emphasizing GDP and technological innovations promote materialism and jeopardize social and cultural values. They need to recover a more human dimension. On the other hand, nations with a definite Latin influence intensify social and family ties, and need to enhance contact with essential progress. In spite of a great variety of planned or ongoing development projects, the above differences are not abiding, and the socio-economic gaps among American nations are actually increasing.

The authors of this book believe that only a cultural systemic change might promote an improved balance between social harmony and economic well-being. Young generations in both affluent and poor countries need to be directly involved. The book highlights the problems, but does not practically contribute to their solution. Therefore, courses based on the book were planned to stimulate the participation of students in tentative models of development aiming towards a balance between social values and economic development. To elaborate these models, the students have at their disposal correlations

and analogies derived from the book and exemplified below. The viability of these tentative models will not be an essential requirement; the important result will be the promotion of a socio-economic culture based on a solid historical perspective.

Main events to have affected the Americas and the world

1492: European discovery of America. Beginning of colonization and modern era (chapters 15 and 16).

1787-1820: American Revolution in the North. French Revolution. End of the Spanish Empire. Democratization intensifies (chapters 3 and 5).

1861: American Civil War; End of Slavery. Industrial growth (chapter 3).

1914-1918: World War I. US attains international relevance. The Communist regime begins in the USSR (chapters 3 and 13).

1929-1939: The Great Depression shows the shortcomings of the capitalistic economy.

1939-1945: World War II. Reconstruction and development. The Cold War begins (chapter 3).

1970-1990: Communism spreads in South-Central American nations; Dictatorial regimes on the rise (chapters 7-10).

1989: Berlin Wall comes down. Collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Russia becomes a free market economy; The Cold War ends (chapter 13).

1990: The Shanghai stock market reopens, and China accelerates its economic expansion. Its influence spreads to South-Central America. The new Socialist market economy (chapter 13).

2001 onwards: Islamic terrorism erupts. Middle East wars. Migrations intensify (chapters 3 and 5).

2008: Global financial crisis. First collapse of oil prices.
Excesses of capitalism (chapters 3 and 19).

Ethnic issues in the Americas

Remarkable attempts for the harmonization of different cultures occurred even before the Spanish conquest. The Incas used a strategy of ethnic fusion of the groups they conquered south of Lake Poopó (chapter 23). This strategy was counteracted by a strategy of resistance to integration. In more recent times, Spanish missionaries promoted the cultural compatibility of the indigenous and western cultures (chapters 5 and 10). In 1814, Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the first president of Paraguay, issued a marriage decree according to which European men would not be allowed to marry white women. He thus contributed to the extinction of the Spanish European identity in Paraguay, which is now regarded as a “mestizo and egalitarian nation” (chapter 24). Considering the worldwide increase of mixed marriages, and the irreversible increase of spontaneous and forced mass migrations, it is conceivable that global miscegenation (*mestizaje*) and a more peaceful and egalitarian society might evolve in the distant future of humanity. The following levels of ethnic compatibility are evidenced by the historic events presented in the chapters of this book.

1. Natural compatibility is evidenced, for instance, in the cases of the multiracial, multi-ethnic harmony prevailing in Brazil, where discrimination is limited to the color of the skin rather than genetic traits or ethnicity (chapter 26). This spontaneous compatibility can be attributed to both the fact that there was not a prevailing ethnic group when the Portuguese and black people arrived in the region, and the lack of strong competition between them.

2. Strong incompatibility is evidenced when great differences occur between the religious and fundamental beliefs of ethnic groups. For instance, between the Native groups in North/South America and the European colonists. In North America, the cultural incompatibility is mainly due to the desire of the Native Americans to preserve their traditions and

protect the environment for the next generations (chapter 1). Politically and administratively, the Native Americans are integrated into the US nation, but most of them are isolated in reserves. There is now a tendency towards a cultural model that unifies several native groups. Native Americans do appreciate useful technology and would agree to work directly with the federal government under a clearer statement of their cultural identity.

3. *Induced compatibility and first-generation migrants.*

Common interests between groups that maintain their cultural identity may assist ethnic compatibility. The task of the social scientist (or the proposer of development projects) thus becomes the identification of a common interest that can bridge different cultures. It corresponds to the current concepts of “sustainable migration” and a “global compact” for the distribution of migrants according to the needs and aspirations of newcomers and established residents (United Nations, 2018). Interests suitable for the promotion of compatibility may be based on a variety of *economical, educational* and *political factors*. For instance, economic advantages and compensating for labor shortages are the main motivations for the spontaneous migration of Mexicans to the US. The adoption of indigenous agricultural practices on the estates of Spanish settlers was a common goal that promoted reciprocal interest between partners (chapter 5). A first-generation immigrant who wrote the highlighted feature section in chapter 21 states that it is better to live with a “*divided heart*” (*see illustration on the cover page*). The underlying concept is that, in addition to a common interest, reciprocal tolerance and appreciation of the cultural identities of migrants and the host country might also be needed (chapter 21).

Undesirable results may also be produced by spontaneous migration and the slow dynamics of the compatibilization process. For instance, the mobility of Mexican migrants in the US brings about economic development in both countries, but is often accompanied by family breakdown in Mexico (chapter 5). Projects to mitigate the latter effect by supporting the reinsertion of migrants returning home have been promoted

by the Mexican government. The US government has established projects to facilitate the professional insertion of the migrants. Both types of project aim to reinforce the economic impact and facilitate a blend of the Mexican and US cultures.

4. *Evolution of compatibility and integration.* Children of first-generation migrants are often citizens of the hosting country and therefore their political and administrative integration is granted. However, several features of their original culture will be lost through successive generations whereas the ethnic features of the new country will eventually prevail. Nevertheless, some of the cultural features of the migrants will be retained and shared within the evolving multi-ethnic culture of the new country. Interviews with several-generation descendants of Europeans who migrated to the US reveal that most of them profess an “American identity” based on a prevailing British-European ethnicity. The dominant characters of other multi-ethnic identities include German in Chile (chapter 28), Italian in Argentina (chapter 27), Portuguese in Brazil (chapter 27), African-British in the Bahamas (chapter 16) and Amerindian in Peru (chapter 22). In spite of their long struggle and continuing episodes of discrimination and limited opportunities, Black Americans in the US are reasonably well integrated, as evidenced by the two-term election of Barack Obama who was a strong supporter of the politics of the American Democratic Party (chapter 3). The concept of America as a melting pot of many ethnic groups able to integrate might represent a model for the unified society of the future.

Multi-ethnic nations

The constitutions of several American states formally support ethnic minorities. Bolivia has the largest indigenous component in South America (62%) distributed over 36 different ethnic groups (chapter 23). In 2009, the indigenous president, Evo Morales, proposed a new constitution in which these groups were defined as “*nations*” with cultural and territorial identity within the Multinational State of Bolivia. A main objective of the new constitution was to preserve ethnic cultures and languages and confer some political and

territorial identity. Territorial autonomy is indeed included in a study by the World Bank that analyzes approaches for the preservation of ethnicities in danger of extinction (chapter 7). However, in the context of a large nation, the enhancement of ethnic compatibility does require constructive interactions, not just territorial separation.

The organization of indigenous groups that prevails in Peru, where 45% of the inhabitants are descendants of the Andean civilizations, is consistent with the latter considerations. In the 1920s, the reformist president Augusto Leguía began a process of permeation of the components of the Peruvian society. The result is that the indigenous and mestizo people now define the national identity, and are main engines for the growth of the country. They appear to be able to implement efficient development projects consistent with their traditional culture (chapters 20 and 22).

The administrative and political autonomy of minority ethnic groups *within the context of a developed nation* is a viable and interesting process that was considered in French Guiana and in Puerto Rico. French Guiana is now an overseas region of France and of the European Union (chapter 18). Puerto Rico is now a free state associated to the US. Repeated referendums revealed that in both countries the majority of people advocated full union with the country with which they had been associated as colonies. In the case of French Guiana, good harmony is reported between the cultures of the majority black and mixed-race people (ca. 66%), white people (ca. 12%), the Chinese, Brazilians and Amerindians. The small number of inhabitants (ca. 260,000) and the French presence since 1634 has facilitated an acceptable relationship and the identification with France. In the case of Puerto Rico, a major obstacle to statehood is possibly the reluctance of the Republican US congress to accept the economic and political cost associated with full statehood (chapter 17).

Intra-ethnic compatibility

Incompatibility occurs between **social classes** even within a single ethnic group. Social classes are defined by sociologists

as hierarchical structures of rather homogeneous groups of people based on an economic, cultural or power status. A typical conflict is that occurring between the poor and the rich classes. The poor have limited opportunities and magnify the goods that they possess, notably family relationships (chapter 8). The conflict between the rich and the poor classes is at the basis of the communist ideology (chapter 13).

More extensively considered in this book are the conflicts between classes differing in political or military power that seek government control. The occurrence of **extremism** within the conservative and liberal classes in Latin America, compounded by the superimposition of foreign economic and political interests, has produced conflicts, civil wars and military dictatorships that have often hindered economic development. Nicaragua is a remarkable case of a country that during nearly 180 years of independence has experienced a civil war, repeated invasion by the US, half a century of dictatorship and a revolution (chapter 10). A path of ethnic and class reconciliation and a renunciation of extremist policies are not yet taking hold.

The proper functioning of a democratic system seems to require that the vision of the governing and opposition parties should not be uncompromisingly extremist (chapter 9). Due to extremist visions, the alternation of progressive and conservative governments in several American countries has not always produced constructive development, but rather a “doing everything again” (chapter 8). It is evident that those nations which have experienced a reduced incidence of internal conflicts are usually those that have produced the largest economies (US, Canada, Costa Rica, Chile), even when not particularly successful in preserving traditional cultural values. Remarkable is the case of Chile where a dictator was deposed by referendum, not by a revolution, and his economic policies were maintained (chapter 28).

A study by the Justice Study Center of the Americas evidenced that the proper administration of justice resolved a large number of social conflicts. The readers of our book will

appreciate that the ultimate solution to class conflicts is a cultural evolution toward *justice, tolerance and rationality*.

Compatibility and economic development

The enhancement of intra- and inter-ethnic compatibility by common goals and tolerance, discussed above, could ideally enhance constructive interaction between traditional cultures and economic development. However, economic development often conflicts with traditional values. The achievements of the capitalistic and free-market system, inspired by the Anglo-American culture and highlighted in chapter 3, are indeed outstanding. Many enjoy highly paid employment, participate in the system through shares and pension schemes, and benefit from unprecedented advances in medical care and education. To reduce the unequal distribution of wealth, governments have established *taxation and regulations* that the advocates of a free-market would like to reduce (chapter 3). However, the many problems associated with the **excesses** of the capitalist system mitigate its achievements. Because of the lure of economic progress and the search for new markets, promoted by free international trading and sophisticated advertising, the capitalist philosophy is expanding into other parts of the world. This expansion generates tensions and even conflicts between cultures, such as those with religious inspiration, that are not ready to accept free-market capitalism and related aspects of the Anglo-American culture.

Problems that have been mentioned include the stability of families, the isolation of the elderly, consumerism, materialism and an excessive emphasis on increasing GDP. In addition, the current emphasis on digital technologies and artificial intelligence is causing the disappearance of a growing number of activities, with a significant increase in unemployment. The opposite argument is that the flexibility of the human being will create adjustments in the form of new jobs or cultural innovations. Nevertheless, no-abiding preoccupations are generated by the rapid succession of innovations, the globalization of processes, the exacerbation of inequality, the excessive role possibly played by thinking machines and the confusion between the know-how produced by a useful

technology and the know-why that derives from true cultural progress.

The future

From the above considerations, the conclusion emerges that social harmony requires not only the sharing of common interests, but also an appreciation and reciprocal tolerance of the differences that characterize cultural identities. Traditional values, particularly family ties, friendship and religion, are based on a fundamental need of man – “***not to feel alone***” – that innovations may often exacerbate. Today we live in a world in which outstanding technological, biomedical and space achievements are counteracted by concern over fundamental issues such as the future of the economic system, of democracy, of the ecosystem and of humanity. The leadership of new generations will need to consider ***new development models*** that will mitigate excesses, so that capitalism and innovations can better fulfill human expectations (chapter 8).

There is modest but growing evidence that a new development economy is gaining strength. Traditional agricultural and handicraft activities are being rejuvenated (chapters 21 and 22), social enterprises are on the increase (chapter 20), ecosystem protection is growing and Rights of Nature Movements, pioneered in Ecuador, have spread to over 100 countries (chapters 11 and 21). Renewable energies are expanding (chapters 11 and 24), and courses on development economics are being offered by major universities (chapter 20). The reduction of profit might cause a reduction of GDP, but the wealth distribution and the harmony of individuals with themselves and with others could improve.

Use of the book

This book is available in a hard and an electronic version in English. Extensive references and cross-references are included. A preliminary reading of the *Highlighted Features* sections is suggested for an efficient appreciation of the scope

of the book. The book should interest distinct classes of readers. Educated, non-specialized audiences of individual readers, students and families may use the book as an updated, coordinated reference on historic and current events of the 28 American nations and on the origins of national identities.

A minimum, objective of the book is an appreciation of the reasons for development problems, assessed by *qualitative comparison* of the socio-economic situations of different countries. A more ambitious project is pursued by the **courses** that have been designed to *stimulate new models of development*. These courses are currently offered in selected schools in Central America, and their expansion to leading learning institutions is planned. The courses are based on the book, but include preparatory material and a phenomenological framework that facilitates an efficient handling of sociological and economic parameters. Details regarding the methodology adopted by the courses may be found in “Socio-economic inequalities in the Americas: A mitigating educational approach” (A. Ciferri, Journal of Education and Development Vol. 2, No 3, December 2018, doi:10.20849/jedv2i3).

A modified Spanish version is also available in a digital Kindle version and a hard, non-commercial edition. The Spanish edition is currently used in general culture courses offered in Guatemala, and has stimulated great interest and active student participation. The text will be frequently updated, thus characterizing the Spanish edition as a *living book*. Hard copies or electronic versions of selected chapters, propaedeutic material and instructions to teachers will be provided free of charge by the Jepa-Limmat Foundation to schools interested in implementing similar courses.

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I. NORTH AMERICA

The term “North America” is often restricted to the three independent nations of Canada, the United States and Mexico (Fig.1)¹⁻³. Greenland is an autonomous nation, part of the Kingdom of Denmark. It is the largest island in the world with a surface area of over two million km², three quarters covered by permanent ice, and a population density of only 0.16 inhabitants/km² on ice-free land¹. Early inhabitants of North America are believed to have come from Central Asia, crossing the Beringia Bridge between Siberia and Alaska during the end of the last glacial age some 13,000 years ago. Recent genetic studies suggest secondary waves of migration before the modern migration of the Inuit and the Yupik in the arctic⁴. The early inhabitants established various clans characterized by specific cultural traditions and language. In chapters 1 to 3 the history of the Native American tribes in the area of Canada and the US is described. Attempts to coordinate these groups in larger political entities are still going on now. In the warmer areas of Mesoamerica great civilizations emerged such as the Maya and the Aztec (Olmec, chapter 4), which were disrupted either by natural events or by the European colonists (chapter 5). The descendants of these civilizations are still attempting to assert their cultural heritage.

In the sixteenth century, the Spanish conquest of the Americas reached Mexico. Other European colonists, primarily British and French, later dominated the northern regions. The interest and the culture of the invaders greatly enhanced the development and the population of the region, and also originated profound differences still evident between the North (Canada and US) and in Mexico or Mesoamerica. The Spanish interest was mostly on expanding Catholicism and on exploiting the richness of the colonies (initially gold, plantations later). The British came instead to develop a new country for themselves, as freemen or political and religious refugees. At

variance with the Spanish, the British did not introduce only agricultural activities and monocultures, but had an interest in efficiently developing a new nation. The fur trade initially motivated the interaction between the French and the native ethnic groups and eventually contributed to the development of Canada, French Canadians being now a significant component of the country. Eventually, the Spanish and English colonists found it necessary to import workers, initially slaves from Asia and particularly from Africa, to expand their agricultural and mining activities. The British first abolished slavery in 1833 but African descendants remain an important component of the present population of the US. Between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries the former colonies became independent from Spain (Mexico) and from England (first the US, later Canada). The independent colonies were further opened to European immigrants who brought new experiences and who could easily integrate. The influx of migrants from all parts of the world to Canada and the United States is continuing at the present time, ethnic differences notwithstanding.

The natural resources of North America are impressive⁵. Large mines of metallic materials exist: iron in Michigan, Quebec and Mexico; copper in British Columbia, Arizona and Mexico; nickel and cobalt in Manitoba; and bauxite and precious metals such as gold and silver in Mexico and Nevada. In various parts of North America, important deposits are found of coal (Wyoming and Mexico), oil (Mexico, Canada, Texas, California and Alaska) and natural gas (Texas and the Gulf of Mexico). Agricultural resources include the fruits, vegetables, cotton and tobacco predominant in the warm, subtropical zones of northern Mexico and the United States. Hardy fruits, such as apples and peaches, dairy products, corn and wheat, are produced in cool temperate zones. Livestock ranching prevails in the dry zones of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.

The US and Canada have developed diversified and very advanced economic systems⁶. The order of importance of the traditional sectors of the economy has been completely inverted, in Canada and in the US the service sector (formerly

the tertiary sector) being the most important one contributing ca. 78% of GDP⁵. The service sector includes retail, banks, hotels, real estate, education, health, the supply of utilities, tourism, communications, social work and networks, and computer services. Second in importance is the manufacturing sector (formerly the secondary sector) contributing ca. 20% of GDP. New industrial activities such as aerospace, robotization, information technology and the digitalizing of everything are developing⁷. The manufacturing sector includes industries engaged in the chemical, mechanical or physical transformation of materials into consumer or industrial goods. Third in importance is the agriculture sector (formerly the primary sector) contributing ca. 2% of GDP. The importance of the continuous development of new economic activities is well evidenced by the companies that have recently emerged at the top of the Dow Jones list in the NY Stock Market. Companies such as Apple, Alphabet, Amazon and Facebook have replaced well-established traditional companies such as General Electric, General Motors, Exxon and IBM.

Table I includes gross domestic product data for the three nations. In terms of the 2016 GDP, both nominal and adjusted for dollar purchasing power, the US appears by far the dominating economy. When GDP is normalized by the number of inhabitants, the US has an estimated GDP per capita (purchasing power parity – PPP) of 52,800 USD, Canada has 43,100 USD and Mexico 15,600 USD. Canada's value appears to be comparable to that of the US whereas Mexico's value is about one-third of the US figure. Mexico has both modern and outdated industrial operations, but is upgrading sectors such as energy production, telecommunications and communications. The North American Treaty for Free Trade (NAFTA) signed in 1992 by the US, Canada and Mexico eliminated trade barriers between the three countries and greatly enhanced the development of Mexico.

2015/6 Economic data for the US, Canada and Mexico			
	US	Canada	Mexico
GDP nominal (billion \$)	18,000	1,550	1,050
GDP (PPP) (billion \$)	18,000	1,600	2,300
Population (millions)	325	36	122
GDP (PPP)/capita (\$)	57,500	42,300	15,500



Fig. 1. Map of North America. Wiki Commons. Public domain.

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CHAPTER 1

THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF NORTH AMERICA

NAILA CLERICI

The history of the colonization of the New World, as it is narrated by Euro-American sources, relegates the natives to the role of supporting actors, extras and obstacles to the development of a more advanced society. To hear the native voice is not only an act of justice for peoples oppressed by political and cultural domination lasting over five hundred years, but should be a prerequisite to the shedding of light on a controversial historical period that remains subject, as few others, to propagandistic exploitation. It is not only a question of proposing a different version of facts, but of understanding that the methodology of the historical storytelling is different where different cultures are involved¹.

The Native Americans' perception of the world does not correspond to that of Euro-Americans: I cite, for example, the categories of space and time, the line between myth and history, the human relationship with the environment and ways to communicate. The traditional values of the indigenous peoples of the Americas are very different from those of the western cultures. If we really want to understand them and, at the same time, see the story in a new light, we have to stop ignoring the world's perception of the natives and try to understand what the issues are to which they give importance and why. Thanks to the media, writing and visual arts, and to our historical, philosophical and political elaborations, "white people" have not only materially oppressed or dominated the native cultures, but have also exerted an even stronger form of domination, that of cultural identity denial. They have often