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LAST100: VIDEO 1: “Where is Latin America?”

This course is an introduction to the study of Latin America. It is defined by the object of study (Latin America), rather than by any particular way of studying that object. Our approach is therefore interdisciplinary. Unlike in some other university courses, we will not restrict ourselves to any one aspect of what we are studying. Our efforts to understand Latin America touch on History, Geography, Anthropology, Politics, Sociology and so on. We will look at Language, Literature, Art, Film, as well as Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class. We range in *time* from 1492 (and before) to the present, and in *space* from the country to the city, the highlands to the coast, Mexico to Argentina, Ecuador to Brazil, Peru, Cuba, Nicaragua...

But an introduction to Latin American *Studies* is not simply an introduction to Latin America. It is also an introduction to the ways in which Latin America has been understood, represented, and constructed. For the thing about the object that we are studying, the object that gives this course its name and its purpose, is that it is by no means obvious what or where it is. Latin America is hardly a natural or God-given entity. Indeed, in some ways it is not really an entity or object at all. It might be better to say that Latin America is an *idea*, and that what we will be studying is as much the idea of Latin America as the thing itself, especially if (as we will see) this idea doesn't correspond all that well to any thing or object that we can easily pin down. So even a simple question such as “Where is Latin America?” turns out to be a puzzle.

But you can help answer it. Now, it's true that, because this is an introductory course, we don't expect any special knowledge of Latin America or Latin American Studies. You may or may not have taken a course like this before. You may or may not have travelled to or read something about Latin America. You may even live in or come from the region. If so, that's great; if not, no worries. There's no special advantage to prior

knowledge. In some ways it may be a *disadvantage*. Yet you must have *some* expectations, otherwise you wouldn't be here at all. The term "Latin America" must have some kind of resonance or association for you. In other words, you already have an idea of Latin America. So help me out.

With a pen and paper, write an answer to the question, "Where is Latin America?" And when you've done that, take another minute or two to write down three words or phrases that you associate with Latin America. Don't think about it too hard. The point isn't to get to the right answer. (Hint: there isn't one.) The point is to flesh out what your idea of Latin America looks like. So I say "Latin America" and you say...

OK, pause the video and write your answers. I'm off for a cup of coffee, but I'll be back.

[...]

So how did you do? Let's think about your answers to the question "Where is Latin America?" I suspect that there are various ways you might have answered it. (If I'm wrong, leave a comment.) The differences between these answers reflect the discipline or approach that, consciously or unconsciously, you chose to stress. You may have focussed on Geography, on Language or Culture, on History, or on Politics.

One answer, then, is what we could call geographical. You may have responded that Latin America is a region defined by spatial borders. For instance, you may have said that it begins in the North at the US/Mexican border, or the Río Grande. And you may have said that it ends in the South in Tierra del Fuego, or perhaps at Cape Horn. As with almost all the possible answers to the question, this one is pretty good as a rough and ready rule of thumb. But it's not long before you run into problems.

For instance, the Caribbean: you may have noted that Latin America also includes at least some Caribbean islands (Cuba, say, or Puerto Rico), but not all of them, because there are other islands (Jamaica, Martinique, Aruba) that aren't usually included, and are instead sometimes referred to as the (British, French, or Dutch) "West Indies."

But even if we stay on the mainland, there are a few pockets that don't seem to fit so well into our idea of Latin America. Belize, in Central America, for instance. Or the Guyanas (Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana), on the northeast corner of South America. Indeed, French Guiana--like Martinique--is officially part of France: its currency is the Euro; it's in the European Union; the French Guyanese vote for representatives in the European Parliament.

Then there are more problematic and contested areas: The Falkland Islands, for instance, in the South Atlantic, a British colony that Argentina claims as its own, calling them the "Islas Malvinas." Here, the Argentine claim is mostly based on geography, in that the Falklands/Malvinas are on the same continental shelf as Argentina; the British argument, however, invokes history, culture, and politics. The islands' 3,000 residents, after all, have not only voted repeatedly to keep the link with the United Kingdom. They are also mostly descended from British colonizers, drink tea rather than Argentine mate, eat mutton or fish and chips rather than steak, and overwhelmingly speak English. If it weren't for the geography, it would be hard to call them Latin American. So perhaps geography is not enough to answer our question.

A second approach to the problem of "Where is Latin America?" draws on language or culture. You may have responded that Latin America is the part of the Americas where people speak Spanish, or (in Brazil) Portuguese. This definition deals with geographical anomalies such as the Falklands/Malvinas or the non-Hispanic Caribbean.

And certainly the vast majority of the countries that tend to fit with our idea of Latin America have either Spanish or Portuguese as official languages. In Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Bogotá, or Rio de Janeiro, street and shop signs, everyday conversation, newspapers, novels and political discussions, are all almost entirely in one of the two Iberian languages. And though there are cultural differences between these places, there are also some broad commonalities in matters of, for instance, religion or cuisine.

But new problems arise. First, if we define it according to language or culture, Latin America starts to spill out of its geographical borders. For it is not just in Mexico City or Lima that Spanish is spoken. The same is true of Miami, Florida, or many parts of New

York or Chicago, let alone much of California and the US Southwest. Indeed, with around 45 million Spanish speakers, the United States is (after Mexico) the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, and many of its substantial Hispanic or Latino minority retain many of the same cultural characteristics as their neighbours in Mexico, Cuba, or the Dominican Republic. So is the USA part of Latin America?

The second problem with this linguistic/cultural definition is that there remain large populations *within* "Latin America" (defined in these terms) that do *not* share these characteristics. In highland Guatemala or Andean Peru, for instance, everyday language remains largely pre-Hispanic: Quiché or Quechua, respectively. And the cultures of indigenous communities from Bolivia to Ecuador, Mexico to Paraguay, have been affected by the long Hispanic presence but not completely obliterated by it.

If we define the region only in terms of the language and customs of the colonizers, we ignore (or consign to a prehistoric past) those whom they colonized. Indeed, if we add the contributions of the many millions of African slaves and their descendants (in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or Cuba), then in linguistic and cultural terms a better name for the place might be "Afro-Indo-Latin America."

So a third answer to the question "Where is Latin America?" stresses history or politics. You may have written down that "Latin America" is that region of the Americas that was colonized by Spain or Portugal. But note that this would still include large portions of the United States. And Iberian colonization was also very uneven, focussed on resource extraction (above all, mining) administered from large cities. Some parts of the region were, if you like, colonized more intensely than others. Yes, colonial history and postcolonial politics have shaped what we now call Latin America, but in very different ways in different places.

But the question (and its answer) is also historical and political in another sense. The origin of the idea of Latin America is itself political: it was invented, in fact, by the French, during the Napoleonic period. France promoted the idea of a "Latin" America, whose allegiances and interests lay with countries whose languages derived from Latin, as a geopolitical counterweight to "Anglo" America, those parts of the Americas under

the influence of Great Britain. In this, original, version of the concept not only would French Guiana be integrally part of Latin America, but also (say) Louisiana and Quebec.

The fact that few people would now include Quebec within Latin America shows, then, that this definition is also historical in the sense that it is outdated. Or rather: that the idea of Latin America has its own history. What we define as (and what we think about) Latin America changes over time. Each generation constructs its own idea of Latin America. This is a mobile, malleable, elusive term that can never quite be pinned down, not least because it is more idea than reality.

Look at the words you wrote down that you associate with Latin America. Perhaps you included sun and salsa, rum or tequila; you might have mentioned Aztecs or Incas, football or fajitas; maybe narcotraffic and nationalism, poverty or protests. The point is this: your answers would have been very different 25 years ago, and even more different 25 or 50 years before that.

This is not so much because Latin America has changed (though it has), as because our idea of the place has changed. For much of the twentieth-century, for instance, the region was associated with coups and revolutionaries, and high cultural icons such as Pablo Neruda or Gabriel García Márquez; now, however, we tend to think of pop culture from sport to music to movies. North Americans are more likely to have been on a package tour or all-inclusive to Cancún or Costa Rica, and so to think of beaches rather than mountains, sunshine instead of glaciers.

And as our idea of Latin America changes over time, so Latin America, itself an idea, also changes. For just because Latin America is an idea, a construction or invention, this doesn't mean it is not *real*. Ideas *are* real, and have real effects and consequences, for both good and ill. Over time, as our expectations and definitions shift, or our sense of what Latin America is changes, so the range of actual possibilities or outcomes for the region also change, even as we wrestle with the fact that the idea never fully accounts for or can be reduced to what the region is or could be.

Latin American Studies is an attempt to chart this complex relationship between an ever-changing, slippery, and always political idea of Latin America and the diverse range of experiences and histories that this idea tries to encompass and predict. And at the end of this course, I can't promise that we will be any closer to defining Latin America, or even to answering with any certainty the question of "Where Latin America is." But at least we will have a better sense as to *why* such a simple question has no simple answer. And perhaps we will have a better sense of the kind(s) of Latin America we want to construct, now and in the future.

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