Sociology of “Developing Societies”

Latin America

Sociology of “Developing Societies”

General Editor: Teodor Shanin

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF “DEVELOPING SOCIETIES”

Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin

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Sociology of “Developing Societies” Latin America

**edited by Eduardo P. Archetti,
Paul Cammack and Bryan Roberts**

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First published 1987

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Archetti, Eduardo P.

Latin America.—(Sociology of “developing
societies”)

1. Latin America—Social conditions—1945–

I. Title II. Cammack, Paul A. III. Roberts,
Bryan IV. Series

980'.038 HN110.5.A8

ISBN 978-0-333-36579-3

ISBN 978-1-349-18629-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-18629-7

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Contents

Series Preface	
<i>Teodore Shanin</i>	viii
Acknowledgements	x
Introduction	
<i>Eduardo P. Archetti, Paul Cammack, Bryan Roberts</i>	xiii
I. The “Dependency” Perspective	1
Dependency and Development	
<i>Ian Roxborough</i>	3
<i>Philip O’Brien</i>	8
<i>Fernando Henrique Cardoso</i>	13
II. The Colonial Experience and Independence	19
The Colonial Economy and Society	
<i>Carlos Sempat Assadourian</i>	21
<i>Enrique Tandeter</i>	26
<i>Steve J. Stern</i>	33
Slavery	
<i>William F. Sharp</i>	49
Colonial Politics	
<i>José Murilo de Carvalho</i>	55
<i>Frank Safford</i>	64
III. Export-led Development	71
Export-led Production	
<i>Arnold J. Bauer</i>	73
The Planter Class and Labour	
<i>Verena Stolcke and Michael M. Hall</i>	79
The Working Class	
<i>Alan Knight</i>	97
<i>Peter DeShazo</i>	109

IV. Latin American Populism	117
Populism and Class Conflict <i>Ian Roxborough</i>	119
Social Control <i>Steve Stein</i>	125
Ideology <i>Ernesto Laclau</i> <i>Agustín Cueva</i>	137 147
V. Agrarian Structure and Change	161
Peasant-Proletarian Transition <i>David Goodman and Michael Redclift</i> <i>Juarez Rubens Brandão Lopes</i> <i>Eduardo P. Archetti and Kristi Anne Stölen</i> <i>Cristobal Kay</i> <i>Carmen Diana Deere</i> <i>Arturo Warman</i>	163 171 177 186 196 212
VI. Urban Poverty and Survival	217
The Logic of Disorder <i>Lucio Kowarick</i>	221
Collective Consumption <i>José Alvaro Moises and Verena Stolcke</i>	229
Economic Growth <i>Alejandro Portes</i>	241
The Poor in the City <i>Bryan R. Roberts</i> <i>Gavin A. Smith</i> <i>Larissa Lomnitz</i>	251 258 266
VII. State and Society: Contemporary Perspectives	275
Military Rule and Popular Resistance <i>Alan Angell</i> <i>Maria Helena Moreira Alves</i>	277 294

Gender	
<i>Caroline Moser</i>	305
<i>Elena Buenaventura-Posso and Susan Brown</i>	321
The Internationalization of Capital	
<i>Rhys Jenkins</i>	329
Latin American Fiction	
<i>Gerald Martin</i>	335
Bibliography	345
Index	356

Series Preface

The question of the so-called “developing societies” lies at the very heart of the political, the economic and the moral crises of the contemporary global society. It is central to the relations of power, diplomacy and war of the world we live in. It is decisive when the material well-being of humanity is concerned; that is, the ways some people make a living and the ways some people hunger. It presents a fundamental dimension of social inequality and of struggles for social justice. During the last generation it has also become a main challenge to scholarship, a field where the perplexity is deeper, the argument sharper and the potential for new illuminations more profound. That challenge reflects the outstanding social relevance of this problem. It reflects, too, an essential ethnocentrism that weighs heavily on the contemporary social sciences. The very terminology which designates “developing” or “underdeveloping” or “emerging” societies is impregnated with teleology which identifies parts of Europe and the USA as “developed”. Images of the world at large as a unilinear rise from barbarity to modernity (or vice versa as a descent to hell) have often substituted for the analysis of actuality, as simplistic metaphors often do. To come to grips with a social reality, which is systematically different from that of one’s own, and to explain its specific logic and momentum, is a most difficult conceptual and pedagogic task. It is the more so, for the fundamental questions of the “developing societies” are not of difference only but of relationships past and present with the countries of advanced capitalism and industrialization. It is in that light that we encounter as analysts and teachers not only a challenge to “sociology of development”, but also a major challenge to radical scholarship itself.

The Sociology of “Developing Societies” series aims to offer a systematically linked set of texts for use as a major teaching aid at university level. It is being produced by a group of teachers and scholars related by common interest, general outlook and commitment sufficient to provide an overall coherence but by no means a single monolithic view. The object is, on the one hand, to bring relevant questions into focus and, on the other hand, to teach through debate. We think that at the current stage “a textbook”

would necessarily gloss over the very diversity, contradictions and inadequacies of our thought. On the other hand, collections of articles are often rather accidental in content. The format of a conceptually structured set of readers was chosen, sufficiently open to accommodate variability of views within a coherent system of presentation. They bring together works by sociologists, social anthropologists, historians, political scientists, economists, literary critics and novelists in an intended disregard of the formal disciplinary divisions of the academic enterprise.

Three major alternatives of presentation stand out: first, a comparative discussion of the social structures within the "developing societies", focusing on the generic within them; second, the exploration of the distinct character of the main regions of the "developing societies"; third, consideration of context and content of the theories of social transformation and change. Accordingly, our *Introduction* to the series deals with the general issues of comparative study, other books cover different regions, while a final volume is devoted to an examination of basic paradigms of the theories of social transformation. They therefore represent the three main dimensions of the problem area, leaving it to each teacher and student to choose from them and to compose their own course.

The topic is ideologically charged, relating directly to the outlook and the ideals of everyone. The editors and many of the contributors share a broad sense of common commitment, though there is among them a considerable diversity of political viewpoint and theoretical approach. The common ground may be best indicated as three fundamental negations. First, there is an implacable opposition to every social system of oppression of humans by other humans. That entails also the rejection of scholastic apologia of every such system, be it imperialism, class oppression, elitism, sexism or the like. Second, there is the rejection of "preaching down" easy solutions from the comfort of air-conditioned offices and campuses, whether in the "West" or in "developing societies" themselves, and of the tacit assumption of our privileged wisdom that has little to learn from the common people in the "developing societies". Third, there is the rejection of the notion of scholastic detachment from social commitments as a pedagogy and as a way of life. True scholarship is not a propaganda exercise even of the most sacred values. Nor is it without social consequences, however conceived. There are students and teachers alike who think that indifference improves vision. We believe the opposite to be true.

Acknowledgements

The editors and publishers wish to thank those who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material:

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Dependency Revisited, by Philip O'Brien from article of same name in C. Abel and C. Lewis, eds, *Latin America, Economic Imperialism and the State: the Political Economy of the External Connexion from Independence to the Present*. Athlone Press, 1984.

The Dependency Perspective, by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, from "The Consumption of Dependency Theory in the United States", *Latin American Research Review*, 12, 3, 1977.

The Spatial Organisation of the Colonial Economy, by Carlos Sempat Assadourian, in *El sistema de la economía colonial*, IEP, Lima, 1982.

Forced and Free Labour in Late Colonial Potosi by Enrique Tandeter, from article of the same name in *Past and Present*, 93, 1981.

The Struggle for Solidarity: Class, Culture and Community in Highland Indian America by Steve J. Stern from article of same name in *Radical History Review*, 27, 1983.

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Rural Workers in Spanish America: Problems of Peonage and Oppression by Arnold J. Bauer, from article of the same name in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 59, 1, 1979.

The Introduction of Free Labour on São Paulo Coffee Plantations, by Verena Stolcke and Michael M. Hall, from article of the same name in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 10, 2-3, 1983.

The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution, by Alan Knight, from "The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution c. 1900-1920". *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 16, 1, 1984.

The Development of a Revolutionary Labour Movement in Chile, by Peter DeShazo, from "The Valparaíso Maritime Strike of 1903 and the development of a Revolutionary Labor Movement in Chile", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 11, 1, 1979.

Latin American Populism by Ian Roxborough, from "Historical Unity and Diversity in Latin America", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 16, 1, 1984.

Populism and Social Control, by Steve Stein, from *Populism in Peru*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

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Achievements and Contradictions of the Peruvian Land Reform, by Cristobal Kay, from article of the same name in *Journal of Development Studies*, 18, 2, 1982.

xii *Acknowledgements*

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Westernization and the Bari of Colombia, by Elena Buenaventura-Posso and Susan Brown, from M. Etienne and E. Leacock, eds, *Women and Colonization*, Praeger, 1977.

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Introduction

The justification for the isolation of Latin America as an object of study lies in specific features of its history which give it a distinctive character, and a distinctive place in the emergence of the modern world. First of all, colonization by Spain and Portugal provided a degree of homogeneity which was both linguistic (with Portuguese spoken in Brazil and Spanish elsewhere) and cultural. The sense of a cultural community embracing the whole of Latin America owes much to the dominant role played since the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese by the Catholic Church, and the impact – enduring long after independence – of social practices and modes of thought established over three centuries of colonial rule. After independence, as the new states of the region were eventually drawn more tightly into the commercial orbit of the advancing industrial nations, a common sense of grievance over the subordination of local economies to those of the leading capitalist powers bred a new spirit of economic nationalism, but this was delayed and weakened for two reasons. First, the burst of export-led expansion which came after the middle of the nineteenth century produced a degree of stability and prosperity which persuaded many that closer links with the dynamic industrial economies spelt salvation rather than doom. Second, a powerful current of thought, with its roots deep in the colonial period, blamed the backwardness of Latin America on the colonial powers, and admired and sought to emulate the thrusting dynamism of Britain, and later of the United States. The significance of colonial rule and post-colonial export-led development could be variously interpreted and, as we will see, this fact is reflected in contemporary theories of Latin American development.

We need to turn directly to the political and economic history of the area, particularly from the nineteenth century on, to understand the central legacy of colonization. By the end of the colonial period, Latin America was set firmly on an economic path it would follow, if with difficulty at first, for a hundred years. It would supply Europe, and increasingly the United States, with its precious metals, minerals, and agricultural and pastoral products, in return for other primary commodities and the growing range of manufactures produced in the workshops of the world. From the very first, Latin

America had exported to Europe, and played its part in the genesis and consolidation of the capitalist world economy of today. The extraction of precious metals from Mexico and Peru (and in the eighteenth century from Brazil), sugar, cocoa, animal hides and various other goods was based on a thoroughgoing transformation of indigenous societies, leading to the breakup of existing patterns of social organization and the imposition of settlement patterns that facilitated the provision of labour for the new enterprises and the supply of foodstuffs for the mining and administrative towns. Where there was no available indigenous population, as in the case of Brazil, then slaves were imported from overseas.

The new settlement patterns were composed of a complex set of linkages: the administrative cities in which were located the colonial authorities, their garrisons and merchant communities; the mining towns and plantations which sent their export products along trade routes guarded and organized through the cities, and the large estates (*haciendas, latifundia*) and peasant communities that supplied the foodstuffs for the urban markets. The peasant community, indeed, sustained much of this complex edifice, supplying not only foodstuffs, but labour to the other enterprises and a fund of agricultural products and techniques that were to be adapted by the commercial enterprises and, in turn, exported to enrich the diet and agriculture of Europe. This pattern of linkages, the trade flows that resulted from it and the systems of production it sustained configured Latin American space in new ways, creating regional identities that were often based on a dominant city and the trade routes and production systems it and its élites controlled. Indeed, these "city states" often became the basis for the new Republics that emerged, with independence, in Spanish America.

These patterns of settlement, trade and production would later provide the basis for a dramatic response to the new and greatly multiplied demands created as the industrial revolution, and the urbanization in Europe and the United States that accompanied it, massively expanded markets for inputs to industrial processes, and for consumption goods. One particular factor deserves mention here: the colonial pattern of settlement and the export-orientation of the colonial economy gave especial prominence to the major cities of the continent, laying the basis for their rapid growth and the population and economic concentration in them of subsequent periods.

Of equal importance is the fact that the failing power of Spain and Portugal within Europe, dramatically revealed in the period of the Napoleonic Wars, led them to lose their grip on all the mainland

Latin American colonies in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Just as the industrial revolution was gathering pace in Europe, a new group of distant and relatively impoverished and underdeveloped states came into being across the Atlantic. The wars of independence disrupted colonial patterns of production and trade, and 50 years would pass before the majority of them found any secure footing in the new world economy. It was the way in which this footing was achieved throughout Latin America which provides the single most important common characteristic of the area, and makes it a coherent object of study.

First of all, the countries of the region were drawn into the new international economy forged by the industrial revolution as producers on a considerably expanded scale of primary export commodities; this had radical consequences as regards the social constitution of the new ruling élites, and the relations between different classes. The interests of the élites were based squarely on the export relationship, making them natural collaborators with foreign merchant interests and, on the whole, uninterested in the development of a local industrial base since they also profited from the import of cheap manufactures. There was little basis, then, for the development of an industrial bourgeoisie or of an urban working-class. The mines would be worked by labour that was drawn from the rural areas and which returned to the villages after a period of years. The plantations were also rural institutions worked mainly by seasonal migrants from peasant communities or – in the case of the coffee plantations of São Paulo – by successive waves of immigrants who, in the face of low wages, moved on to other rural areas or to the towns.

Second, they did so as politically independent units recently emerged from the tutelage of once dominant but latterly weak mercantile European powers, Spain and Portugal. The new nations had little internal coherence and their governments had relatively little control over the regions and the classes that dominated in them. Poor communications and a weak fiscal base weakened central government in the new Republics and, consequently, its ability to resist the encroachment of foreign interests. In many of the Republics, in the early nineteenth century, foreign merchants and diplomats bypassed central governments and negotiated directly with regional élites, at times even fomenting rebellions against the government of the day.

It is this virtually unique combination in the nineteenth century of political independence and primary commodity-led incorporation into the international capitalist economy which provides the starting

point for an understanding of Latin American society and politics from independence to the present day. It was, however, part of a single global process dominated successively by the rise to industrial pre-eminence of Great Britain, rivalry between the leading capitalist economies from the late nineteenth century on, two World Wars centred on Europe, and the subsequent emergence of the United States in a position of unrivalled supremacy within the capitalist world. No understanding of Latin America can be gained outside the context of that global process. But at the same time it has to be understood that the factors which make the Latin American experience comprehensible are highly specific to the region.

It is as foolish to assume that the nations of Latin America have been following independently, if belatedly, the same path to industrial maturity as has been traced out by the first industrial nations (as some of the simpler exponents of modernisation theory would have us believe) as it is to claim that the role of primary producers is one forced upon an unwilling sub-continent by scheming European powers, and bound to endure for as long as the sub-continent remains within their commercial and political orbit (as the crudest dependency theorists would seem to believe). The truth is that the development of Latin America has been complementary to that of the most advanced industrial nations, and is hence incomprehensible except within that broader global picture, but that at the same time it has had its own complex internal dynamic, varying from region to region, arising primarily out of the secular struggle between the different class forces spawned by that complementary pattern of development.

The industrial revolution in Western Europe meant the rise to political prominence of the bourgeoisie, and the subordination to its interests and to its command, to one extent or another, of the formerly dominant landowning élite. This does not mean, of course, that the bourgeoisie ruled alone. As the histories of Britain, France, Germany and Italy show, a variety of complex class alliances were possible, each with different consequences for the evolution of political regimes and the role played by the state itself. But, in each case, the pivotal role in the formation of alliances and the constitution of the regime was played by the bourgeoisie, and particularly by the industrial bourgeoisie; other social classes took up their positions, either within the circle of power or outside it, with reference to this class. In Latin America, as we have seen, the counterpart of industrial development in Europe was export-led development, based upon the land, or upon the exploitation of mineral resources. This meant that throughout Latin America the landed class played the

role played in many parts of Europe by the urban bourgeoisie. Whereas in Europe, then, the industrial revolution often meant the displacement of the landed élite from political power, in Latin America it meant that the hold of this class on power and on the state was strengthened. Of course, the landed élite was substantially transformed in the process. Equally, it did not rule alone, any more than the European bourgeoisies were able to do. But it played the crucial pivotal role, and it is in its fortunes and changing strategies, as the countries of the region turn from the mid-nineteenth century on to expanded export-led development, that we find the secret of the array of social forces within the political and economic regimes of the period.

It is in this context that the significance of the political independence gained across Central and South America in the early decades of the nineteenth century becomes apparent. When it came to restoring order and stability, and securing political arrangements which would allow a sustained response to the new opportunities created by the industrial revolution, the new élites of Latin America were left to work out their own salvation. The twin process of restoring political and social order, and organizing production and commercialization, absorbed the energies of successive generations of élites. In the course of the process, alliances were made, and patterns of production established, which would leave their mark long after the first World War and the crash of 1929 had put an end to the period of export-led development across the region. Without anticipating in detail the general consequences of this common and unique set of circumstances, we may say that the massive expansion of primary production for export in Latin America from the mid-nineteenth century, on which was based Latin America's own contribution to the industrial revolution, transformed and strengthened the landed élites of the region, while the late, secondary and relatively feeble development of industrial production made for a weak, dependent and subordinate bourgeoisie. At the same time, the weakness of industry and the central importance of the production of primary commodities for export meant that relations of production in the leading sector of the economy were not rapidly transformed into pure wage-labour.

Entrepreneurs faced two major problems in obtaining the labour that they needed. First, the highly labour-intensive nature of primary production made it necessary to keep wages as low as possible to ensure profits. In the case of these export enterprises in which labour demand was seasonal – as in the case of most plantation crops – entrepreneurs did not need a permanent labour force.

Second, much of the available labour in Latin America was embedded in peasant communities and semi-subsistence farming and these farmers were reluctant to sell their labour on a full-time basis. These two factors reinforced each other: low wages were insufficient to maintain a whole family, but the village economy provided a subsistence base which would permit the labour migration, for varying periods, of males – and, as in the case of Peruvian cotton production, females.

Even so, entrepreneurs initially had to resort to a variety of devices to secure their labour supply, of which debt peonage was one strategy. In those regions such as Argentina and Southern Brazil in which there was no available labour force, workers were imported in their millions from Europe. Even in these cases, however, wage labour was rarely “pure”. In Argentina, the wheat of the Pampas was harvested through complex tenantry arrangements and in São Paulo’s coffee plantations workers, though paid a wage, were granted land to cultivate for their subsistence. Given the division of labour which emerged internationally, Latin America’s insertion into the capitalist world economy thus did not mean the inevitable spread of wage-labour throughout its national economies. At the same time, late and limited industrialization produced only a small modern working-class in the cities, heavily outnumbered by artisan producers who retained some access to the means of production. Whether in the countryside or the town, the proletariat proper was small. Even today, the consequences of this pattern of development have yet fully to work themselves out.

It is the specificity of Latin American political and economic development within the global process of the emergence of an international capitalist economy over the last five centuries which makes it a suitable object of study. The study of the region from this perspective is justified by the crucial part it has played in the emergence of the contemporary world economy, not simply through its early exports of bullion, but as a provider of essential and cheap raw materials and, latterly, as a market for the technology of the advanced industrial countries. The Latin American development experience illuminates aspects of the nature and impact of this world economy, particularly the enduring structures of inequality that it has created. This spatial structure of inequality with its implications for the poverty and political and economic backwardness of the underdeveloped world deserves as much recognition as an integral part of the process of global capitalist development as do Western democracy, world war, and the welfare state.

Latin America: Uniformity and Diversity

Thus far we have sought to draw attention to the common characteristics of the Latin American nations. These common characteristics, however, only provide a common framework within which the history and experience of each particular nation can be approached. It does not follow from what we have said that we should expect each Latin American nation to have followed a similar evolution, any more than we should expect to find identical patterns of political development among the advanced industrial nations. It is only when we move from the abstract to the specific, and examine the manner in which the different factors identified interact with each other in particular cases, that we are able to trace the implications of the general argument sketched out above.

Material resource endowments vary widely across Latin America, as did the density and level of development of indigenous populations and civilizations at the time of colonization. Spanish and Portuguese needs and practices varied, as did their intentions and their ability to promote them within the vast territories to which they laid claim. Contrasts arising out of the degree and nature of development experienced under colonial rule may have been modified or further reinforced in the early independence period, depending upon the degree of disruption caused by the transition to independence, and the re-establishment of order thereafter. The ability of local élites to respond to the new opportunities created by the industrial revolution in Europe varied in accordance with all these factors. Above and beyond all this, though, what was most decisive in setting the different Latin American nations on different political and economic trajectories in this period was the combined effect of the class and regional nature of the political alliances under which export-led development was pursued, and of the manner in which the problems of organizing production were resolved. Nations such as Peru and Bolivia thus developed through the exploitation of mining and plantation enclaves or the export of other primary products in which foreign interests gained substantial control in alliance with national entrepreneurs, while urban industrial development was slow to begin. In contrast, Brazilian landowners controlled the coffee production of São Paulo, and imported labour from Europe, and both their profits and their workers helped stimulate the rise of São Paulo as Latin America's first industrial metropolis.

As patterns of class alliance and class conflict varied from nation to nation, so did the types and sequences of political regimes which

were created. Even regimes that have been categorized in similar ways, such as the "populist" governments of Vargas in Brazil and of Perón in Argentina, show significant differences, the former based on regional and class alliances in which the industrial working class was a subordinate actor and the latter permitting more independent power to organized labour. The inevitable consequence of this was that the successive "external shocks" felt by the region as a whole at irregular intervals – the first and second World Wars and depression which came between them; the Cold War; the oil price rises of the 1970s, the recession and debt crisis of the 1980s – provoked not *uniform* responses, but varied and sometimes diametrically opposed consequences. The record which has to be explained is one of *diversity*. The commonalities described above form an essential part of the explanation, but they provide only the starting-point for detailed and systematic explorations of distinct national trajectories.

This is nowhere more clearly seen than in relation to the record of liberal democracy in Latin America. Theorists of political development in the area have tended to draw conclusions with regard to the viability of democracy which they apply uniformly to Latin America as a whole. However, the most striking characteristic of the area is that of sharp contrast between types of regimes at any one time, and over time. Some nations experience general instability, with alternating short periods of democracy and dictatorship; some enjoy relatively long periods of stable democratic rule, only to collapse, at fairly high points of economic development, into dictatorship; some move from extended democracy to extended dictatorship, or from instability to stability, at the very moment when others are moving just as firmly in the opposite direction. Others again achieve stability over long periods of time not under regimes of competitive democracy, but under dominant or single parties closely associated with the state. The very least we might ask of an approach to the sociology of Latin American development is that it offer some hope of explaining this diversity.

A starting point is the substantial transformation of Latin American societies during this century. At the beginning of the century, all Latin American countries were predominantly rural in the settlement of their population and most of their populations were engaged in agriculture. By the 1980s, Latin America was predominantly urban with almost half the population living in cities of over 100 000 people. In only a few countries, such as Honduras, Guatemala and Ecuador, were more than half the economically active population working in agriculture: the services, construction and manufacturing industry are now the occupations of the majority of the area's

people. This transformation did not occur at the same pace or at the same time throughout the region. Nor did the transformation occur in the same way: contrast, for example, the large-scale migration of Europeans into Argentina and Brazil that populated their cities with the rural-urban migrations that fed those of other countries. Moreover, the fit between urbanization and industrialization differed depending both on the timing and scale of rural modernization that ejected the peasant populations and the timing and scale of the industrial development that provided work for part, at least, of the rural exodus. Some countries, notably Brazil and Mexico, have in recent decades been relatively successful in expanding employment opportunities in the cities; others, such as Peru or Ecuador, have been notably less successful.

It is this pattern of economic growth, and its diversity, that explains much of the political volatility and the distinct patterns of political development in Latin America. Though there are few examples of successful political organization among the peasants and working-classes of Latin America, there has, in this century, been a mobilization of both rural and urban populations that has made them political factors, though also pawns in the political game. The old structures of control have disappeared in the face of economic and political centralization, based on landholding, vertical relationships of dependence and poor communications. An early example of the consequences of the undermining of existing power structures by capitalist development was the peasant rebellions of Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the north and centre of the country, peasants reacted violently to their ejection from land or to being forced to produce under increasingly arduous and insecure conditions, as capitalist enterprises expanded and disrupted traditional strategies of survival. Though these peasant rebellions only marginally affected the outcome of the Mexican Revolution, they were the spark that allowed new political structures of control to emerge, in particular Mexico's dominant party, the PRI.

Also, as we noted above, capitalist development in the various countries of Latin America has differed in the extent to which a permanent wage-labour force exists and thus provides the basis for the emergence of trade unions or political parties that are committed to advance the interests of the working-class. Nor, for that matter, has economic development produced a substantial "middling" class in all Latin American countries, whose interests differ from both rich and poor. Contrast, for example, the relatively polarized-class structures of the Central American Republics with the differentiated

ones of Brazil, Argentina or Mexico. Furthermore, even in those countries where class-based political organizations have emerged, they vary in the extent to which they include all the working population. The so-called "marginal populations" of the cities are, for example, rarely given institutional representation in any political organization.

There is, in general, only a weak development of political institutions in Latin America which represent, in a stable fashion, the interests of different classes of the population. Instead, urban and rural populations are, in varying degrees, available to the various political parties or interest groups that compete for their allegiance. The stability or instability of government in Latin America, and the extent to which it permits popular participation must, then, be analysed in terms of the flexibility of national political institutions in responding to and co-opting the diverse interests that urban-industrial development has created. Equally important, however, are the specific social and economic pressures present at a given stage of a country's development.

There is one last issue which we must briefly cover since it has been central to the debates over Latin American development. Latin America is classed among the underdeveloped regions of the world, but there remains considerable controversy over whether or not some or all of the countries of the region will become developed. The theorists of modernization, in the 1950s, saw this as primarily a problem of economic and social engineering, ensuring the right mix of investment, appropriate educational systems and efficient state institutions. Subsequently, early theorists of dependency, such as Andre Gunder Frank, demonstrated the mechanisms through which the underdevelopment of Latin America was both produced and maintained by its exchanges with the core capitalist countries. Neither position now seems correct. Modernization theorists were over-optimistic with respect to the benevolent intentions of the developed world and its corporations toward the development of the underdeveloped world and, for that matter, overestimated the interest and capacity of entrepreneurs and governments in underdeveloped countries to devote resources to economic take-off. Yet much dependency theory ignored both the real economic growth that had taken place in the region, and the diversity of patterns of growth.

Until the debt crisis of the 1980s, there seemed a good prospect that countries such as Brazil and Mexico would continue to grow rapidly and approach some of the poorer developed countries in terms of their Gross National Product *per capita*. Also, this economic growth was accompanied by some indications of a rise in the living

standards of the population as a whole. Surveys of the urban poor showed that most informants saw their position as having improved over that of their parents, and they had similar expectations for their children. The range of consumer goods present even in urban slums indicated a general "trickle down" effect of economic growth. Recently, extensive public welfare systems have begun to emerge in such countries as Brazil which cater for both urban and rural poor. It remains, however, an open question whether these indicators of increasing wealth represent a genuine improvement in the life conditions of the bulk of the region's population. The increasing overcrowding and poor infrastructure of Latin America's great cities can imply a relative deterioration in standard of life, even when compared with the impoverished rural areas from which many of the population have come.

This debate draws attention to one fact of Latin American development and that is the diversity of development experiences. The contribution of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his colleagues to the sociology of development lies precisely in their analysis of the different types of dependency situation created historically in Latin America. He also stresses, as we will see, that these situations are constantly changing and evolving. The poor, agriculturally-based countries of Central America are quite different in their dependency situation to the industrial giants such as Brazil and Mexico. This diversity, and the economic and class forces that have shaped it, based as it is on a historically specific evolution, requires attention if we are to speak with any confidence about development or underdevelopment in Latin America.

The selections in this volume are either extracts from longer works, or substantially edited down from original articles. We are grateful to the authors concerned for their tolerance and cooperation. In particular, it should be noted that much supporting evidence relating to sources has necessarily been omitted. Readers are therefore referred to the original books and articles, all of which are listed in the concluding bibliography.