

Latin American Communities

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This course introduces anthropological perspectives on Latin America (referring here to those areas of the New World colonized by the “Latin countries”—Spain and Portugal—and consisting of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean). The course will focus on those groups that have been marginally integrated into the resulting nation-states, including: indigenous and mestizo peasant societies, Afro-Caribbean peoples introduced as part of the colonial slave labor force, as well as less obvious communities, such as women and sexual minorities (who, increasingly, are organizing and participating in the social and political life of Latin America).

The course is divided into three parts. First, we begin with a brief summary of native societies in Latin America at the time of the Conquest in order to convey an appreciation for the richness of the indigenous base encountered by Europeans. We will discuss the policies and institutions of the invading European powers, and how these impacted native societies to create the culture of mixed ancestry that today exists throughout Latin America. The second (and most substantial) part of the course is structured around a basic contrast between two principal social and ecological regions: the Highlands and the Lowlands. Within these regions, unique environmental characteristics have conditioned the development and adaptation of local groups, the impact of colonialism upon these communities, as well as the ongoing processes of integration into colonial and post-colonial nation-states. Through a mix of ethnographic case studies and theoretically-oriented studies, communities in both regions are discussed in terms of broad patterns of economic life, social and political organization, religion and worldview. The third part of the course closes with a discussion of contemporary changes and processes of globalization as they affect people’s lives in rural communities. We will focus on economic change and social transformation in Chiapas, Mexico, in order to illustrate some of the processes affecting rural agrarian communities throughout Latin America.

Readings have been chosen to provide both a conceptual and ethnographic understanding of the major characteristics of both regions. Rather than providing simply a “bottom up” view, these readings tack between macro- and micro- levels of analysis, implicitly focusing on relations of dependency and internal colonialism, and the impact of the processes on local communities. This balance between richly contextualized ethnography and a substantive conceptual focus on long-term processes of social stability and change provides a diverse set of “mental tools” for thinking about current events in Latin America, as well as the many challenges facing contemporary Latin American communities.

Possible Texts:

- 1) Chasteen, John. 2005. Born in Fire and Blood: A Concise History of Latin America
- 2) Heath, Dwight. 2002. Contemporary Cultures and Societies of Latin America.
- 3) Johnson, Allen. 2003. Families of the Forest: The Matsigenka Indians of the Peruvian Amazon. University of California Press.
- 4) Collier, George. 1999. Basta: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas. Food First.