

## Migration in the Contemporary History of Latin America: An Overview of Recent Trends

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It is possible to tell much of the history of Latin America through the migrations that have taken place there. It is even possible to say that migrations are largely responsible for the social makeup of the region and for its economic evolution over time. This feat has been due not to the absolute size of successive migration flows but to their different composition, intent, and consequences. We can distinguish at least five types of migration into and out of the region:

- Colonizing migrations
- Coerced migrations
- Induced migrations
- Spontaneous inflows and outflows
- Refugee flows

Colonizing and coerced migrations defined the colonial era after the European conquest of the Americas. Europeans migrated to their “New World” in search of economic gain and social status. Many more Africans crossed the Atlantic in a forced labor migration of slaves, who in the plantations and low-altitude mines of Spanish and Portuguese America replaced a mistreated indigenous labor force that had been decimated by Eurasian epidemic diseases against which they had no defenses. This led to the re peopling of the Caribbean and Atlantic coast colonies/countries that transformed the demographic profile of the region. It shifted from a white-mestizo-indigenous mosaic to a predominately white-mulatto-black one.

The end of slavery in the nineteenth century produced a new shortage of labor in much of the region. The new mechanism devised to meet this situation was deliberate recruitment to induce migration. So successful were these recruitment programs that descendants of Italian laborers came to rival natives of Spanish

descent in Argentina and descendants of Indian indentured workers matched the population of African descent in the Guianas; meanwhile the Chinese became a visible component of the Cuban and Peruvian populations and the Japanese of the Brazilian.

Deliberate recruitment was also the system used by ranchers and growers in the newly acquired U.S. states of California and Texas to find Mexican labor for their expanding ventures. Over time, Mexican migration to the United States became a self-sustained flow. But its origins are in these deliberate recruitment efforts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the twentieth century, the colonizing, coerced, and induced migrations that had populated the continent for three centuries gave way to a new form of migration that did not depend on any deliberate effort on the part of the receiving societies. Instead, these societies found themselves in the position of regulating what economists came to label an “inexhaustible labor supply.”

### Spontaneous Migrations: Internal and External

Flows that begin with deliberate recruitment can reproduce themselves over time through the power of social networks. News of the opportunities in places of destination pass through word of mouth from migrants to kin and communities left behind, insuring a steady flow of new recruits. In North America the flows initiated by deliberate recruitment endured and became self-reproducing. Despite deliberate campaigns of deportation in the early 1930s, the mid-1950s, and now the 2000s, Mexican migrants continued moving north, becoming the mainstay of

American agriculture and, in time, the largest foreign minority in the United States. More and more, this flow became spontaneous and self-driven, rather than the result of deliberate recruitment.

With notable exceptions, the mostly rural population of Latin America stayed put in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. The economic lifeblood of the region consisted of the export of commodities—agricultural products and metals—and the import of industrial goods from Europe and, later, the United States. Economic production centered on the countryside, and that is where most of the population remained. Urban life was restricted to one or two main cities per country. Not surprisingly, most of these cities were also ports, channeling the flow of rural commodities for export and receiving and consuming most of the manufactured imports. Latin American elites, who derived their wealth from the land, lived in those cities, which is where the cultural and political life of the time was centered.

This simple urban/rural scheme was to change dramatically with the Great Depression and the subsequent advent of import substitution industrialization (ISI). Started by necessity because of the dearth of industrial exports from the core countries during World War II, import substitution industrialization was extended subsequently as a means to overcome the centuries-old dependence of the region on agricultural and mineral exports. Strongly advocated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America under the leadership of Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, import substitution promoted the emergence of new industrial elites in a number of large and medium countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico.

The ISI model also produced two fundamental features relevant to our story. First, industrial production was concentrated in the one or two cities per country where markets and productive infrastructures actually existed. Second, in due time, multinational corporations jumped the tariff barrier established by ISI policies to compete directly with domestic industry. Multinationals not only elbowed aside local industrialists but brought in technology that was capital- rather than labor-intensive.

The concentration of industrial employment in the largest cities then triggered a spontaneous flow of migrants from the smaller towns and the countryside. Slow at first, rural-urban migration became a flood by the 1950s and 1960s, rupturing the traditional urban order inherited from colonial times. Unable to afford housing within the established city, the migrant poor created their own solutions by the simple expedient of occupying vacant land in the urban periphery and building shacks on it.

Due to these massive internal migrations, the urban systems of Latin America came to acquire the profile with which we are familiar today: first, deep demographic imbalances, with one or two cities per country concentrating both population and economic resources; second, the emergence of vast belts of unregulated settlements surrounding these “primate” cities. Suburban shantytowns, with different names in each country but evocatively called *villas miserias* in Argentina, became signature features of Latin American urbanization in the late twentieth century.

The ISI model, perverted by the dominance of the multinationals, was incapable of providing suitable employment to the masses of internal migrants since the

industrial technology imported by the multinationals was labor-saving. As a consequence, the bulk of this population had to create not only their own housing solutions in the peripheral settlements, but also their own economic solutions through invented employment. Consequently, the informal economy of these cities exploded, becoming larger, in many instances, than that regulated by the state. The response of Latin American masses to the constraints of dependent economies and the defects of the ISI model, as applied in the region, came to dominate the physical, demographic, and economic landscape of Latin America to our day: gigantic urban heads on dwarfish bodies; pervasive poverty and economic informality; rising crime and increasing insecurity in both city and countryside represent some of the key features inherited from internal migrations in the twentieth century.

In due time, the poor and not-so-poor in a number of countries started borrowing a page from what Mexican peasants had been doing for decades, namely heading north. The onset of spontaneous migration flows from Latin American countries to the United States in the last half century had as immediate causes two factors: first, conditions of continuing economic scarcity, lack of employment opportunities, and rising public insecurity in the sending countries; second, the relentless penetration by the institutions of advanced capitalism, including multinational corporations, and the consequent diffusion of consumption expectations out of reach for the majority of the Latin American population. A logical way to right the balance between imported consumption aspirations and local economic scarcity is to move to the places where these aspirations originally came from, which is what an increasing number of people started doing. Contemporary migrations from

Latin America to the United States are overwhelmingly spontaneous. There is no need to recruit Dominican urban workers, Guatemalan rural laborers, or Colombian and Argentine professionals to come north. That “recruitment” is done by advertising through the media and by the levels of relative deprivation that they trigger. These self-driven flows from Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere in the region form the immediate precedent for the rapid growth of the Hispanic population of the United States, now approaching 60 million.

What goes around comes around. The distortions of Latin American economies by foreign capital, including limited employment opportunities, rising inequality, and unreachable expectations find their counterpart in the movement of a not inconsiderable part of the population to major cities and abroad. The neoliberal model that replaced import-substitution did not resolve the problems created by earlier policies. It compounded them. As a result, population displacements, internal and external, have continued to our day. About one-tenth of the Mexican population now lives in the United States, and comparable proportions of Colombians, Ecuadoreans, Peruvians, and Central Americans have also moved abroad. With some notable exceptions, Latin America has yet to find its way into and its place within the developed world. The continuing out-migration of its population reflects that reality.

### Refugees

The legal figure of “refugee” is a relatively recent creation under United Nations auspices. Almost since independence, a tradition existed in Latin America of providing asylum to those persecuted politically in another country. This legal figure was commonly used by the losing

side in interelite political struggles but was seldom employed on a mass scale. Mass international migration in Latin America has been primarily driven by economic incentives: from Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay to Argentina and from Colombia and Peru to Venezuela. Peasants and poor people escaping civil wars or other political violence were seldom granted a defined legal status in the receiving country, which handled the flow as best it could on an ad hoc basis.

The largest movement of people defined legally as refugees and granted resettlement assistance in the contemporary period is that triggered by the Cuban Revolution and received in the United States. Consequences of Cuban refugee migration over several decades have been momentous and would require separate treatment. It would suffice to note that the reception granted to Cubans in the United States was far more favorable than that awaiting subsequent claimants for asylum fleeing murderous civil wars in Central America. The U.S. government routinely denied these latter requests, confining Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and others to a precarious legal status if they remained in U.S. territory or putting their lives at peril if they were forced to return to Central America. This disparity shows clearly that the status of “refugee” does not depend on the situation of individuals but on the geopolitical priorities of the receiving states. Cubans were warmly received as U.S. allies in the global struggle against communism, even as Central Americans were routinely denied asylum as they fled right-wing regimes considered allies of the United States in that same global struggle.

### “The Wall” and Labor Immigration

The promise by U.S. President Trump to build a wall on the southern border plays well in conservative circles but it will be, at best, a costly redundancy. Since 2008, undocumented migration from Mexico has declined dramatically. Net Mexican immigration, taking into account arrivals and departures, is now estimated to be near zero. Agricultural and other unskilled labor demand, formerly sourced by undocumented migration, is now increasingly met by the H-2 program of temporary visas, greatly expanded by the Obama administration. In 2015, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 268,000 undocumented Mexicans. In the same year, U.S. Immigration Services (USCIS) granted 268,000 H-2-A visas for Mexican agricultural workers and another 95,000 H-2-B visas for other unskilled workers. In effect, the United States now has a temporary labor program. The only positive effect of the “wall” will be to provide employment for hundreds of Mexican workers who, inevitably, will be those who build it. ■