The History of Latin America, 1500 to the present day
Paper Convenor Dr Gabriela Ramos

This paper offers an overview of the most relevant issues shaping the history of Latin America from the time before European arrival in the fifteenth century to the present. The paper studies the complex interface between the region and the global processes that have outlined its history. Through the study of specific cases we aim to understand the experience of individuals, groups, and nations as they dealt with internally grown affairs and the global scene. The programme of lectures aims to present a broad range of themes that include the multifaceted character of colonialism, the crucial role of religion, the pervasiveness of ideas and practices about race and racism, diverse experiences of reform, revolution, and dictatorship, the Cold War, and the present challenges the region faces at a juncture of significant economic growth paired with the world’s deepest social inequalities. We approach these questions chiefly through the lens of history, but will also make use of contributions from other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and the arts. The main themes of the paper will be presented in sixteen lectures. Four seminar-style discussions will focus in exploring in depth subjects that run across the history of the region, with the support of the historical literature and the analysis of primary sources. Students taking this paper are entitled to six supervisions.

1. Introduction

General Reading:

Leal, Claudia, José A. Pâdua and John Soluri, eds. New Environmental Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean. RCC Perspectives, 2013, n. 7. [EnvironmentalLAC].

2. The Pre-Columbian World

Silverman, Helaine and William Isbell, eds. The Handbook of South American Archaeology, especially Part VII: States and Empires of the Central Andes, chapters by Alan Covey (Inca empire) and Gary Urton (Khipus). Springer, 2008. Available at ebooks@cambridge.

Primary Sources:


Sahagún, Bernardino de. Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain.


Sample questions:

- What was the role of religion in Aztec and Inca imperial ideology?
- What does archaeological evidence teach us about pre-Columbian history that written sources do not?

3. Conquest: significance and consequences

Interpreting the Spanish Conquest


Restall, Matthew. Seven myths of the Spanish Conquest. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Also available online through ebooks@cambridge.


**Primary sources:**

Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*. (Also published as *The Conquest of New Spain*).

https://archive.org/stream/bernaldiazdelcas00cunnuoft/bernaldiazdelcas00cunnuoft_djvu.txt


**Population, Disease, and the Environment**


Covey, R. Alan, Geoff Childs and Rebecca Rippen, “Dynamics of Indigenous Demographic Fluctuations: Lessons from Sixteenth-Century Cusco, Peru.” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 52, n.3 (June 2011), 335-360. *Covey. Dynamics*


**Empire**


**Primary sources:**


**Sample questions:**

Have historians overestimated the importance of technology in assessing the conquest of the New World?

How widespread was indigenous collaboration in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru?
4. Forms of colonial rule


Metcalf, Alida C., Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.


Ramos, Gabriela. “Indian Hospitals and Colonial Government in the Andes”. Medical History. Ramos-Indian Hospitals


Sample questions:
How successful were the Spanish in reforming the use of space to assert colonial rule?

Given that in colonial Spanish America there were no armies or police during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, did coercion play any role?

How important were ideas about race and honour for colonial government in Spanish America?

5. **Church, Missions and Conversion to Christianity**


Durston, Alan. *Pastoral Quechua*. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006


**Primary Sources:**

Acosta, José de. *De procuranda indorum salute*. Translated and edited by G. Stewart McIntosh. 2 vols. Tayport: Mac Research, 1996
Ruiz de Alarcón, Hernando de. Treatise on the heathen superstitions that today live among the Indians native to this New Spain, 1629.
Sell, Barry D., and John Frederick Schwaller, A guide to confession large and small in the Mexican language, 1634 (Don Bartolome de Alva), Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

Sample questions:
‘The evangelization of Spanish America owed principally to the image and only secondarily to the word.’ Discuss.
Why did missionaries describe indigenous religion and popular religious practices as idolatry?
How did Spanish missionaries deal with the Challenger of language Diversity in the New World?

6. Slavery and mining

Slavery

Mining

Primary Sources:

Sample question:

How did the slave trade and African slavery transform the New World?
Why did the silver boom not create wealth in colonial Latin America?

7. Reform, revolution and the crisis of the colonial regime


Sample questions:

‘The Bourbon Reforms were an attempt to re-conquer the New World.’ Discuss.
What has been the role of race in the uprisings and revolutions of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century?
8. Independence and the new nation states


**Sample questions:**

1. Why was monarchy as a form of government popular in Latin America after independence?
2. To what extent were the origins of Spanish American independence solely the result of external power relations?

9. Latin America in the nineteenth century and the changing global order


Sample questions:
How did Latin America’s relation with the global economy change after independence?
To what extent were free trade policies beneficial for Latin America’s economy in the nineteenth century?

10. The Mexican Revolution and the land question in Latin America


Sample questions:
1. Why has land reform in Latin America been closely linked to the concept of state formation?
2. To what extent was the Mexican Revolution a bourgeois revolution?

11. The Cuban Revolution and its impact on Latin America


Sample questions:

‘It was mass mobilisation, not Castro and the nationalist leaders, that pushed Cuba toward socialism.’ Discuss.

What circumstances led to the idea that the Cuban Revolution could be exported to the rest of Latin America?

12. Modernisation, populism and the rise of mass political movements


Sample question:

‘The rise of populism in Brazil and Argentina reveals the difficult relationship between modernisation and democracy in Latin America’. Discuss.

13. The Cold War and the age of military dictatorships


Sample question:

‘Historians have paid insufficient attention to the grassroots dynamics and meanings of the Latin American Cold War.’ Discuss.

14. Latin America’s tortuous return to democracy

Film: ‘No’. By Pablo Larraín (2012).

Sample questions:

How should historians interpret the mixed results that Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have had in the transition to democracy in several Latin American countries?

‘The Shining Path does not represent the failure of reform but the failure of Marxism to solve the problems of inequality in Latin America’. Discuss.

15. Neo-Liberalism, populism, and social movements

Sample questions:
- To what extent has neoliberalism been responsible for the resurgence of populism in Latin America?
- How can historians account for the flourishing of identity movements in some Latin American countries and not in others?

16. Economic growth and inequality: Latin America in the 21st century

Film: La Zona, directed by Rodrigo Plá.

Sample questions:
- To what extent has economic growth contributed to furthering democracy in Latin America?
- What does spatial segregation in cities reveal about Latin American institutions?