



General History of Latin America

Preface

Federico Mayor
Director-General of UNESCO

When UNESCO was founded over half a century ago, one of the tasks assigned to it by its founders was the twofold mission of contributing to the study of all human groups and facilitating communication and understanding among nations. The *General History of Latin America* makes a relevant contribution to this international task, as it has involved a network of around 240 historians of different communities and intellectual approaches taking on and attempting to explain, in all its dimensions, the complexity of the concept that is “Latin America” today. Using the methodological instruments of current historiography, they have studied indigenous Latin American societies, their contacts with European culture, the shaping of the colonial order and the participation of groups of people brought from Africa, without forgetting the economic and political aspects and the struggles and agreements that led to the establishment of the nation States of the region.

Based on archaeological and ethno-historical accounts, the regional variations in the pre-Columbian era show the level of technological development, trade and political and military alliances that had been achieved by these societies. The way European culture was established changed the population dynamics of these indigenous communities, as a result of new diseases and initially incompatible cultural practices. The models of miscegenation obtained in the various areas of the continent developed from changes in religious patterns, eating habits and the use of new medicines, new institutional organization, a different urban layout and a distinct system for mining and crop production involving new exploitation techniques. These factors determined economic behaviour and certain social characteristics that linked the various forms of expression of Latin American societies.

Since these new societies first began to emerge within the vast continental area and islands that we know as Latin America, the region has always had a huge impact on the

rest of the world, and in particular on all sections of European society. It is difficult to pinpoint an area that has not come under this influence, which has been growing since the mid-sixteenth century. European philosophical thought and art; worldview and Christianity; economy and patterns of consumption and social customs were the setting for constant and fundamental instructive and rewarding exchanges, almost from the moment that the Spanish and Portuguese initiated what was known as “the American enterprise”.

This publication is therefore a total history, covering as it does all human productions (economic and political representations, formation of knowledge, art, religion, objects, myths and feasts) and shows that cultural pluralism is very much of the now in Latin America. At the same time, this publication describes how its components have become integrated and how far civil struggles have served to define the social role of indigenous groups, women’s associations, Afro-American cultures, artists, professional groups and artisans in the construction of multiple communities and the establishment of mechanisms for legitimization that enable them to live and grow in the cultural and geographical context that is Latin America.

By means of this important study, UNESCO is highlighting the contemporary relevance of historical reflection that enables us to assess what Latin America has been and what it has ceased to be, as well as to make forecasts about the societies that are forming in the region and the rest of the world.

Federico Mayor Zaragoza