

Iverson, Peter. *“We Are Still Here”: American Indians in the Twentieth Century*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1998.

## Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, since 1945

The phrase “indigenous people” refers to the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas, alternatively known by a variety of labels including Indians and natives. However, these colonial and globalizing terms mask the wide diversity of languages and cultures that have flourished across the region. Defining who is an Indian is a complicated question in Latin America, particularly given the varying degrees of cultural and biological mixing that have occurred over the past 500 years since the Spanish Conquest. Anthropologists have typically used external characteristics such as language, clothing, residency, occupation, and religious practices to determine ethnic affiliation. Depending on definitions, about 40 million people, or about 10 percent of the population, is indigenous, with the majority concentrated in southern Mexico, Central America, and the Andes. Identity remains overwhelmingly local, and many indigenous peoples identify with their own group rather than with a pan-ethnic construction. Although past observers had predicted the disappearance of indigenous peoples, at the beginning

of the twenty-first century their cultures remained strong and vibrant.

Indigenous peoples, with populations based in rural areas, had long been marginalized from mainstream politics and economics. Elites descended from European conquerors controlled most of the profitable arable land, with Indians crowded onto small and degraded plots. Indians suffered from malnutrition and a lack of health care, resulting in high infant mortality rates and short life expectancies. Most Indians did not have access to education, and governments used their illiteracy as a mechanism to deny them the vote. Indigenous peoples were only first allowed to vote in Peru in 1978, in Ecuador in 1979, and not until 1991 in Colombia.

The late twentieth century witnessed a heavy migration away from indigenous rural areas and toward urban areas that were traditionally white spaces. This did not necessarily correspond with an erosion of ethnic identities. Urban areas could be politicizing spaces as Indians who faced common issues and concerns met. Gaining a university education provided organizing tools that facilitated a politicized ethnic agenda. Similarly, in recent decades large numbers of indigenous communities have converted to evangelical Christian religions. Guatemala, for example, is now heading toward a Protestant majority. Commonly critics have assumed that this would lead to an erosion of ethnic identities, but often, instead, the adoption of evangelical Christianity created spaces in which to preserve indigenous cultures. When missionary groups, for example, translate their Bibles into local languages, it helps to reinforce and valorize ethnic identities.

Numerically speaking, the largest surviving indigenous groups in the Americas are the Maya and the Quechua. Both are language families that include diverse cultures and traditions spread over a broad geographic area. In Guatemala the country’s small nonindigenous elite held a monopoly on economic and political power. In the 1980s the Guatemalan military launched a genocidal war against the country’s majority Maya population. In 1992 Maya leader Rigoberta Menchú, who had become widely renowned for her testimonial *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her defense of indigenous rights in the country.



Zapatista military leader Subcomandante Marcos (center), and a security detail walk around the grounds of the meeting site between the Zapatista command and the CONAI, the mediation group involved in peace talks, September, 1995. (Oscar Leon/AFP/Getty Images)

## INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS OF THE AMERICAS

The size of indigenous groups in the Americas has been a hotly contested issue from the time of the European conquest to the present. Most famously, at the time of the Spanish Conquest Father Bartolomé de las Casas placed the aboriginal population of Hispaniola at 4 million inhabitants. Some scholars have criticized his statement as an inflated estimate of an overzealous defender of indigenous rights designed to emphasize the abuses of the Spanish colonists. Subsequent demographers have lent more legitimacy to his figures. The cultural and biological mixing of indigenous peoples, Africans, and Europeans in the Americas has made it difficult to determine the ethnic category of Indian. Individuals can slide back and forth between categories based on varying criteria, definitions, and the political expediciencies of the moment. Following the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, for example, the percentage of Mexicans willing to identify themselves as indigenous doubled. The following numbers, therefore, are only a rough guide to the distribution of indigenous peoples throughout Latin America and should not be taken as an accurate and scientific determination.

Country	Indigenous Peoples (Millions)	Percentage Indigenous
Argentina	0.41	1.1
Bolivia	4.92	60
Brazil	2.67	0.2
Chile	1.07	7
Colombia	0.78	2
Ecuador	2.20	17.2
Guatemala	6.52	53
Honduras	0.94	13
Mexico	9.5	9.5
Nicaragua	0.33	7.5
Panama	0.24	8.3
Paraguay	0.11	2
Peru	12.5	51
Venezuela	1.39	5.7

—Marc Becker

### Source

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In neighboring Chiapas, Maya rebels shocked the world on January 1, 1994, with an armed uprising against the Mexican government. Organized into the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), so-named after Mexican Revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata, their demands were much broader than indigenous rights. Led by 12 Maya *comandantes* (commanders) and a charismatic nonindigenous Subcomandante Marcos, who also served as spokesperson, the rebels demanded an end to neoliberal economic policies that robbed them of their lands and livelihood.

Quechua peoples thrive along the spine of the Andean mountains on South America's Pacific coast. Bolivia has the highest density of indigenous peoples in the Americas and has long been home to the cultivation of coca leaves used for medical and ritual purposes. Because coca is also one of the raw ingredients in the production of cocaine, this cultivation was targeted in a so-called war on drugs. Indigenous farmers defended

their right to grow coca. Coca leader Evo Morales won the presidency of the country in 2006 as the candidate of the Movement to Socialism Party, becoming the first indigenous person to be chief executive in that country.

Indigenous organizations in Ecuador formed one of the continent's best-organized social movements. Beginning in the 1920s they worked together with leftist political parties to agitate for land, education, political recognition, and other rights. They gained newfound visibility in 1990 when they launched a peaceful uprising against the government. Led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), militants demanded social, economic, and political changes, including changing the constitution to recognize the pluri-national nature of the country. Indigenous activists commonly used marches, strikes, and road blockades to press their demands. In 1995 CONAIE founded a political party called Pachakutik to run candidates for office. They

realized some electoral success but often had more impact as a social movement, including the use of street protests to force President Jamil Mahuad from office in January 2000. In Ecuador and elsewhere, indigenous peoples emerged at the head of popular struggles against neoliberal economic reforms that shifted resources away from a country's poorest peoples.

Environmental issues often have become key to indigenous struggles for survival. Amazon indigenous groups are more diverse and dispersed than those in the core Maya and Andean areas. European conquerors had less success in subduing the Amazon, and some isolated groups still have little or no contact with the dominant culture. In 1993 the Cofáns, Secoyas, and Sionas in the Ecuadorian Amazon sued Texaco in New York for polluting their lands. In Brazil the Kayapós used modern technology such as video cameras in their struggles against the damming of the Xingu River. They gained an international profile when British rock star Sting rallied to their cause.

For centuries indigenous peoples have used state structures to petition for redress and in recent decades have gained notable successes. In 1987 Miskitu Indians on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast signed an autonomy agreement with the leftist Sandinista government. Even though Colombia has one of the smallest indigenous populations in the Americas, well-organized social movements gained significant concessions in the 1991 constitution including recognition for their territory and cultures and representation in congress. Similarly in Venezuela, many indigenous rights were codified in the 1999 constitution, including recognition of their languages, organizations, and lands. Political openings have ensured rights for indigenous peoples, facilitated their survival, and even helped them to flourish in the early twenty-first century.

—Marc Becker

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#### Indigenous Groups of Oceania since 1945

The indigenous ethnic groups of Oceania consist of Aboriginal Australians (along with Torres Strait Islanders), the Maoris of New Zealand, the peoples of the Melanesian and Micronesian archipelagos, the Polynesian groups of the South Pacific, and the various peoples who constitute Papua New Guinea. After the Second World War, many of these indigenous ethnic groups attained varying levels of autonomy from their respective colonizing powers, with outright independence in some cases. Most of the Polynesian island groups, most notably Fiji and the Solomon Islands, attained their independence from their European colonizers. In contrast, the indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand remained under the political control of their respective colonizer governments but attained higher levels of autonomy vis-à-vis the state with mixed results in terms of economic and social advancement. The indigenous peoples of Oceania share in common various traits with other indigenous peoples in other world regions, especially in regard to their social and economic position relative to the former (or current) colonizing power.

Many of the postwar Pacific island nation-states in the Oceania region were originally populated by Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian peoples before European colonial expansion brought many of these under their control in the late nineteenth century. However, during the late twentieth century many of these former colonial holdings attained their independence and were formed into viable nation-states (i.e., Fiji, the Solomon Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau,