

**Regional Worlds  
Cultural Environments and Development Debates  
Latin America**

**Introduction**

The Globalization Project at the University of Chicago, in collaboration with multiple international institutions and scholars, is exploring the conceptual, strategic and practical means for a new approach to area studies. Building on the results of a Ford Foundation-funded pilot year (1996) which considered new approaches to the study of South Asia, the Globalization Project's Regional Worlds initiative focused on Latin America during the 1997-98 academic year. As outlined in the foundational concepts of this initiative, three objectives frame the underlying goal of the Regional Worlds Project:

- (1) an intellectual commitment to develop a model for area studies based on "process geographies," a way to think of the world not as an aggregation of fixed, historically stable, geographically bounded civilizations, but rather as a cross-cutting map of diasporic identities, translocal interactions and large-scale resource flows;
- (2) the intention of creating a set of classroom procedures and curricular materials based on this process geographies model that will be widely applicable in post-secondary area studies teaching;
- (3) the development of the constituencies and structures within area studies units at the University of Chicago that will make this new analytical model a continuing feature of scholarship and teaching.

In pursuing this intellectual agenda, the study of areas and specific regions remains a central focus of the project since the serious, comparative study of global processes cannot ignore the specificities of place, time and cultural form. However existing geographical approaches frequently ignore significant boundaries, miss important interactions and are driven by obsolete assumptions about national interest, cultural coherence and global processes. In contrast, the Regional Worlds Project seeks to explore a new architecture for area studies based on a concept of process geographies that sees significant features of human organization as precipitates of various kinds of interaction and motion: trade, travel, pilgrimage, environmental and political dislocation, warfare, colonization, and exile. The areas that result from this perspective may not have the apparent coherence of the current "civilizations" that underpin current area studies curricula. But they have the advantage of alerting scholars and students that movements and processes of many kinds, over the *longue durée*, have precipitated multiple geographies and multiple, regional worlds. None of these can be examined without paying attention to specific languages, histories and cultural values. These specificities need not yield a single, immutable set of civilizations and regions, but rather the possibility of studying the world as a series of themes over space and time, with each theme yielding a different pattern of space, time and cultural form.

The materials included in this publication present a set of source documents designed to further these objectives using Latin America as an "anchor region." These documents include three annotated bibliographies accompanied by bibliographic essays that explore selected themes related to issues of environment and development in Latin America, and a model syllabus with annotated bibliography for an undergraduate "gateway course" that draws on the process geographies analytical model to introduce students to the dynamic historical, cultural and

environmental realities of Latin America. Together these documents represent an initial contribution of the Regional Worlds Project to the development of comprehensive curricular materials that offer a new approach to area studies.

During 1997-1998, the Regional Worlds initiative focused on specific themes linked to cultural environments, population flows and economic development in Latin America from the long-term perspective, and especially from the environmental, socio-political, cultural and economic contexts of contemporary Latin America. Specific issues that were emphasized during the course of the year included: (1) shifting patterns of political economy, territorialization, sovereignty and economic development, particularly in the humid tropics of the Amazonian countries; (2) the political, social and economic impacts of changing intellectual property regimes; and (3) the emergence of “new social actors” in environment and development in Latin America, particularly among indigenous and traditional peoples. Of course, these issues hold great salience for regional worlds beyond the Americas, and it is precisely this potential for cross-fertilization among scholars versed in the historical particularities and cultural nuances of distinct regions that stimulated our choice of themes.

A seemingly perpetual sense of social and economic crisis grips Latin America. The disturbing symptoms of that crisis—e.g., enormous social inequalities, massively skewed, class and ethnic-based patterns of income and consumption, and deepening impoverishment—have complex historical roots embedded in the precolonial and colonial periods. Today, population growth, inequitable land distribution, inadequate tenure security, market distortions, government policy failures and use of inappropriate technologies, among other factors, are generating extreme pressures on land, water and other natural resources. In response, developing countries in Latin America, and the multiple indigenous and traditional communities who reside in them have accelerated both reclamation of fragile lands and exploitation of renewable and non-renewable natural resources that will exhibit significant degradation or complete exhaustion under all but a limited range of human uses. The extreme fragility of land and resources is matched by the intensity of violent confrontation over access to and perceptions of the nature and social disposition of these “limited goods.” Continued degradation of soils, depletion of natural resources and accelerating rural poverty interpenetrate, generating volatile conditions of social and environmental instability.

Intense human pressures on natural resources have induced serious degradation of the environment. They also have contributed to massive shifts and territorial realignments of human populations throughout the region. These demographic movements are extraordinarily dynamic in time, space and social character, and are marked by complex migration patterns and population flows. Emerging trends of permanent, seasonal and oscillating migration, interlocal, interregional and even international domestic economies, dual urban-rural residence and multiple border-crossings generate a bewildering cultural landscape of great spatial and temporal dynamism. The increasing permeability of national and sub-national boundaries carries enormous social, cultural, economic and environmental implications for the stability and future trajectories of Latin American nations and the communities resident within them. These social, economic and environmental conditions have spawned an increasingly complex and often contentious mosaic of local, regional, national and international interest groups. Among the many categories of agents in this regard are grassroots community organizations, economic cooperatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government and municipal agencies at

multiple levels, local, national and transnational business groups and international financial institutions.

Although misunderstandings and confrontation among competing interest groups continue, we have also witnessed over the past decade the emergence of unexpected alliances, unusual political coalitions and transcultural collaborations facilitated by the penetration of global telecommunications networks. Today, many indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, backed by international capital and technology channeled through environmental advocacy groups, have established virtually instantaneous links to opinion makers and policy centers via the internet. Indigenous organizations are now effectively deploying the worldwide web to exchange information, disseminate advocacy tracts and share political strategies for resisting encroachments by the state and private enterprise on their political autonomy, as well as to press their demands for a determinative role in managing the conservation and exploitation of natural resources in their territories. Political action by indigenous and traditional communities in Latin America no longer respects the conventional boundaries of nation-states. Multiple indigenous confederations, formal organizations and consultative groups have joined with global non-governmental organizations and environmental advocates to bring political pressure to bear on governments to secure a place at the negotiating table.

Various kinds of powerful hybridities (cultural, organizational and strategic) have emerged from these accelerating cross-cultural, transnational interactions. These new social and political formations break down familiar expectations that human societies can be understood in terms of uniquely specifiable “trait geographies.” This social, cultural and environmental dynamism presents extraordinary challenges to contemporary scholarship and to conventional curricular and geographical units of analysis. In this context of complex flows and unexpected linkages of people, capital, resources and political relationships, how are we to define meaningful analytical and interpretive boundaries?

During the 1997-1998 academic year, the Regional Worlds Project grappled with this problem by exploring the cross-cutting and mutually implicatory theme of human-environment relations across Latin America. Even more specifically we addressed the peculiarly urgent problematics of “development” (and, just as importantly, the culture and discourse of development) within a context of changing human-environment interactions over various temporal and spatial scales. Grasping the complex, interdependent relationships of culture, environment and development turns on the manner in which “culture” and “development” are conceived and defined. “Culture,” especially indigenous and traditional culture and cultural expression, is frequently viewed as a fixed repertoire of tradition and an unchanging reservoir of conservative social values. In this popularized notion of culture, changes in that repertoire are viewed as “cultural loss” or “disintegration of traditional values.” A more sociologically informed conception regards culture as a flexible capacity for collective adaptation and self-creation. From this perspective, traditional values and cultural expressions are dynamic and constantly shaped and reshaped by its practitioners. Changes in gender and intergenerational hierarchies, in patterns of communication and in educational choices are part of this reshaping. In response to changing social and environmental circumstances, living cultures devise new political and economic strategies and reconceptualize their relations to their environment in a context of vigorous internal debate and struggle.

Similarly, a more nuanced understanding of “development” demands that we reach beyond the material dimensions of economic production as the sole index of development to consider the entire matrix of social production that shapes and gives meaning to people’s lives. Development is as much about autonomy, dignity, the right of self-determination and the cultural meaning of production as it is about the material outcomes of production. A major *situs* of conflict among various interest groups concerns the model, modes and control of economic development, and, consequently, the dispositive power over capital to “develop” natural resources. A central point of contention turns on the often acrimonious debate between proponents of constant growth development models (favored by governments and international financial institutions) and advocates of sustainable development models. The crux of the issue is the convergence and social mediation of economy and ecology, and the relative value (in both social and economic terms) assigned to these terms. In the case of Latin America, with such a high proportion of fragile lands, placing a higher value on expansive growth may invite irreversible environmental degradation. At the same time, emphasizing sustainability may devalue the legitimate demands of growing populations for increased access to natural resources that ameliorate the conditions of chronic poverty. This debate continues to evolve in often unanticipated directions.

The essays and accompanying annotated bibliographies that follow address three salient issues that are enmeshed in this debate: (1) territory, land reform and tenurial relationships; (2) intellectual property rights regimes; (3) and the role of new social actors and social movements in the complex field of environment and development. Although this choice of themes responded in great part to the intellectual interests of participants in the 1997-1998 Regional Worlds initiative, the complex social and environmental issues they raise are current, central points of contention in Latin America’s pluralistic civil societies. As such, they provide exceptional *entrée* into the analysis and interpretation of contemporary social questions and trends. The bibliographic essays summarize current issues in each of these three thematic areas, while the annotated bibliographies provide source materials for further, in-depth exploration of these issues. Many of the bibliographic entries were chosen for their appropriateness as required or supplementary readings for advanced undergraduate and graduate level courses in environment and development.

Following the bibliographic essays, we include a model course syllabus grounded in perspectives drawn from the process geographies perspective. The syllabus is organized as a set of thematic modules over a standard 14 week undergraduate course. The course is targeted as an entry point or “gateway course” for undergraduates interested in pursuing the political, social, cultural and historical dimensions of contemporary world regions. The model course draws heavily from regionally based literature, but maintains, through a judicious selection of scholarly publications, novels, films and other source materials, a consistent engagement with contemporary theoretical debates and controversies. This gateway course is designed as a general framework for the kind of curricular component that the Regional Worlds Project is committed to developing. Of course, the implementation of a course designed along these lines will require substantial modification and refinement. As it stands, the modules err on the side of comprehensiveness, and it would be unrealistic to expect undergraduates to thoroughly master all of the complex literature we have included in the suggested readings. However, together with the annotated bibliographies, this model course provides a substantial corpus of materials for individual scholars to tailor to their own disciplinary perspectives, curricular needs and student interests. The principal theme uniting this literature is a focus on the mutability and fluidity of the social and physical worlds in which movement and change are the analytical watchwords.

The course and constituent modules were developed in concert with the Regional Worlds colloquium speakers and Midwest Faculty Fellows from six liberal arts colleges who participated in the 1997-1998 Regional Worlds initiative. We offer these materials as an initial foray into reconfiguring areas studies curricula according to a process geographies perspective.