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Latin America: Does It Exist?

A chaotic mess of telephone wires. Brightly colored dancers at folkloric festivals. A Christ overlooking a dimly lit church interior. And people on the streets going about their daily lives. Twenty-one photos stretch along the entrance of Chile's School of Latin American Social Sciences. Above them is a single title: "Latinoamérica: ¿existe?"

This might seem like an odd question, but it's one that has challenged David Mares for much of his life. Based on a new book by the Hispanic photographer and political scientist, the photography exhibit has profound cultural-political undertones that challenge the spectator to ponder the very existence of an entity they've always taken for granted.

An American of Mexican heritage, Mares says he never gave the idea of Latin America a second thought while he studied its politics and literature in the 1960s. But as a professor at the University of California, San Diego, he has seen the onslaught of globalization and its homogenizing effects challenging the region's existence.

"Globalization is this huge process that's happening internationally that's pulling people out of their communities and throwing them into the marketplace, where they're only factors of production or consumers, so that their identity as something distinct gets all melded into 'They're just human beings who produce and consume,'" explains Mares.

At the same time, globalization produced a counter-reaction that has led people to seek refuge in local traditions or nationalist identities and ideals, he adds.

Mares says he began to hear a mounting refrain in academic circles. People were losing faith in the idea of a Latin America as a region. He started hearing people say the concept of Latin America wasn't useful anymore—a trend Mares says worried him.

Mares argues that a greater regional identity is necessary if Latin America is to have any bargaining power in a globalized society. Globalization is a negotiated process, and what matters when you're negotiating is your bargaining power, he underscores.

"The U.S. has bargaining power because it's the only superpower. Europe has bargaining power because it's a group of powerful countries," says Mares. "If Latin America is going to be able to negotiate its insertion into globalization, so as to get more social security out of it, so as to get more productive opportunities out of it—If it's going to negotiate that, it has to negotiate as a group."

Mares says that even within the U.S., Hispanics have been able to get attention and support only when others see them as a group —as "the Hispanic market" or "the Hispanic vote."

"If we remained the Mexican-American vote or the Cuban market it would be more difficult to convince others to pay attention to our rights, needs and wants," says Mares. "Same thing happens in international economic and politics. So if Latin America can negotiate market access to the U.S. jointly, they will be able to offer the U.S. access to a big market in return. The larger the market, the more attractive it will be for investors and for politicians."

Mares saw the need to depict Latin America as a region for economic reasons, but also to try to foment some kind of regional unity. He set out to prove that there is something that unifies the continent, and to depict its essence in photos.

His efforts were published this March in a new book he says illustrates Latin America's existence as something more than a geographic region and reveals deep-rooted cultural, economic, political and other similarities that go beyond language.

Staring at the ensemble of images, you notice that you need to look down at the text below to know where each photo was taken. Exactly the point, says Mares.

"These images could be anywhere in Latin America, and therefore they tell us that we all have something in common."

—Jen Ross