For 100 years, from about 1850 to 1950, heavy immigration of both unskilled and highly skilled migrants accompanied foreign capital investments and the growth of export industries in Latin America. The underpopulated continent helped relieve European population pressures, and provided refuge for discontented or persecuted minorities. Latin America's Spanish and Western cultural roots, its empty spaces, and its relatively unexploited economic potential facilitated that migration. Most of which came from Europe. Immigration to Latin America continues, but at a much slower pace. Since 1950 two overriding patterns of international migration have emerged in the region. First, migration between regions has increased dramatically. That flow has been stimulated by growing economic inequalities, by sharp differences in population densities and natural resources in contiguous countries, and by changing political circumstances. A common culture, relatively uncontrolled borders, and improved transportation and communication have encouraged the intra-regional flow. Although most intra-regional migration has been of unskilled labour, high-level migration of professionals, scientists, scholars, and senior business executives also increased in the 1970s. Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, and Ecuador were main receiving countries for educated migrants, especially those from Southern Cone countries.

After 1950, a second migration pattern developed: that of professionals and intellectuals moving from Latin America to industrialized nations, and particularly to the United States. This migration has been a subject of concern to many Latin American governments, and they characterize emigration as a "flight of talent" adversely affecting local development, and as an indirect subsidy by the poor to the rich. Despite the fact that most high-level migration is visible and legal, and should therefore enter regular statistics, determining the volume of such migration is very difficult. Sorting out temporary from permanent migration creates counting problems. So does inconsistency in the definition of what characterizes a high-level migrant. Some countries do not publish statistics.

Susana Torrado gives a very rough idea of the migration flow from Latin America to industrialized nations in a recent publication of the Centre for Migration Studies, dealing with global trends in migration: "Between 1961 and 1972, 20,300 highly skilled migrants (scientists, engineers, and doctors) emigrated from Latin America to three industrialized countries (United States, Canada, and Great Britain). However, these figures do not fully represent the total brain drain volume from the region since they do not include semi-professional technicians who constitute a major share of the highly skilled emigrants. For example, between 1961 and 1970, approximately 61,000 Latin American professionals and technicians (in addition to scientists, engineers, and doctors, this group also includes architects, medical auxiliaries, accountants, etc.) emigrated to the United States."

Torrado provides figures but also illustrates the definitional difficulties mentioned. She omits European countries of destination other than Great Britain, nor does she include business executives. And these figures must be placed in perspective. If related, for example, to the number of university graduates produced annually in the region, the numbers do not appear so alarming overall. Circumstances differ so much by country, however, that regional reporting probably distorts more than it helps the analysis of so-called "brain drains."

When one moves beyond counting migrants to examining reasons for migration and to assessing impact, the picture becomes even fuzzier. Most analyses stress the economic determinants and outcomes of migration. Indeed, the "brain drain" is at root an economic concern. Clearly, differential employment opportunities and pay scales among nations influence the volume and direction of migration. That is evident in the "pull" of industrialized countries and oil-producing Venezuela and Mexico during
the 1970s as main destinations for Latin American migrants. It is evident also in the seductive power of international organizations with their high salaries. However, economic explanations of migration are at best partial.

Changes in migration laws, political events, and the maintenance of open political and social climates have been underrated in the study of high-level migration in general and in analyses of Latin American migration in particular. Since the end of the 18th century, nations have set policies governing the exit and entry of migrants. Even with a policy of selective migration favoring high-level migration, a quota in the United States limits immigration. Venezuela has recently tightened its rules on entry, making it no longer a primary country of destination — at least for the time being. Chile has very carefully controlled the exit as well as entrance of migrants since 1973. These policies, set in the interests of countries, not individuals, strongly affect the ability of individuals to respond to economic incentive to migrate.

Political events can exert a dominant influence on migration, independent of economic circumstances. That influence is illustrated by the out-migration of professionals from Argentina between 1950 and 1968. Political upheavals in 1956, 1962, and 1966 were followed by a marked increase in high-level emigration from Argentina, peaking in each case approximately 18 months after the changes occurred.

Contemporary Chile provides a dramatic example of political influence on migration. Following the coup in 1973, many Chilean professionals whose political beliefs were at odds with the military had to leave, sometimes to preserve life as well as liberty, or because they were dismissed from their jobs for political reasons. Intellectuals in Uruguay and Argentina encountered similar problems.

The Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) administered several special programs of study or job placement in 1974 and beyond, to aid Southern Cone intellectuals affected by changes in political climates. CLACSO reported that within two years following the Chilean coup, it had received requests from 1926 individuals and had aided placement of 1230. Despite the fact that a main purpose was to enable scholars to work at home or within the region, 947 of the placements made were outside the Southern Cone Of these, 570 were in Europe, the United States, or Canada. Migration of another approximately 900 individuals was aided by the World University Service of Canada. Many other professionals left Chile on their own or with the aid of other organizations. The total number of emigrants is not known.

The long-run effect of these politically induced migrations is not obvious. Repatriation efforts are under way. An undetermined number of temporary exiles will return home of their own accord. Some will stay "abroad," but within the region. One long-run effect of the migrations may be to build a stronger, more integrated, Latin American scholarly community. Meanwhile, migrants will turn up in statistics as part of a "brain drain" from their home countries.

To the obviously politically induced cases of migration, one must add less obvious instances resulting from cultural or ethnic discrimination. In most Latin nations one encounters pockets of ethnic and religious minorities — oriental, black, Jewish, or Protestant. Studies of international migration have not determined the extent to which such minorities are "over-represented" in the migration flows, but there is some evidence that discrimination influences migration. To illustrate: in a survey of Peruvians studying in universities in the United States, fully 25 percent of those intending to remain abroad were Protestant or Jewish, even though the total percentage of such groups in Peru is less than five percent. In the same survey of Peruvians, there was a correlation between ethnic minority status (Chinese or Japanese origin) and the intention not to return. Similarly, Judith Laikin Elkin makes the general point in her study of the Jews of Latin American republics that the insecure position of Jewish migrants has often led to further migration. That seems to be a hidden factor in high-level migration from Argentina during the last two decades, as sons and daughters of Jewish immigrants who left Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s now move on to other locations.

When one adds political repression and socio-cultural discrimination to economic concerns, the "brain drain" balance sheet for Latin America versus the rest of the world is not so clear. In some cases, individuals have been forced to migrate or have left with the blessing of governments — a siphoning off of discontent. That is as true on the left as on the right of the political spectrum. In some cases, individuals encountering discrimination cannot find reasonable employment in a tight market at home, and decide to leave at little cost to productivity in the home country.

Counterflows of professionals and technicians from the North to Latin America, and education subsidies provided to Latins studying abroad further complicate this calculation of migratory gains and losses to the region. According to the annual census of foreign students in the United States, the number of Latin Americans in institutions of higher education has increased from 6010 in 1950 to 42,280 in 1980. Some students will not return. Most will. In cases where foreign study is sponsored by a government or by an international organization, upwards of 90 percent will return home. Their education will have been subsidized in part by the institution attended. Some non-returnees will stay abroad for political reasons.

The relatively recent phenomenon of the "brain drain" from Latin America will continue to be of concern. However, taking into account the political and cultural dimensions of migration, and considering possible "brain gains," one is left with a question: Is there more rhetoric than substance to the simple notion that a significant and hurtful Latin American exodus is occurring? We are left also with the challenge of providing better information to put in perspective analyses of both gains and drains to Latin America from international migrations.