Latin American societies have long been multicultural in their composition, yet until recently ethnic difference did not feature explicitly in the region’s politics or legal and administrative arrangements. However, during the last decade of the twentieth century ethnicity became a key focus of political concern, as demands for reform of the state to accommodate indigenous peoples’ demands gathered pace. This development was prompted by three interrelated factors. The first of these was the emergence of indigenous political movements onto the national and international political stage during the 1980s and 1990s. The second was a developing international jurisprudence, which increasingly characterised the rights of indigenous peoples as human rights. The third factor of signal importance was the constitutional reform process that took place in many Latin American countries during the last 15 years of the century, and which recognised – at least in principle – the multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of those societies. Ethnic claims were propelled centre-stage, at least in part, by the radical changes in economic and social relations engendered by the twin processes of economic and legal globalisation. These ongoing transformations also provide the context within which the politico-juridical recognition of difference across the continent is taking place. At the start of the twenty-first century, this new ‘politics of difference’ is profoundly challenging accepted notions of democracy, citizenship and development. This volume examines some of the key features of this unfolding process and explores the analytical and policy questions it raises.

Most estimates concur that indigenous people now number approximately 40 million people in Latin America – roughly 8 to 10 per cent of the region’s overall population. The vast majority, some 85 per cent, is concentrated in Mesoamerica and the central Andes. In Bolivia and Guatemala indigenous people constitute over 50 per cent of the population, in Ecuador and Peru between 30 and 40 per cent, and in Mexico between 10 and 15 per cent (this last, at approximately 11 million individuals, is the numerically largest
indigenous population in Latin America). The question of precisely who is defined as indigenous remains a question of some controversy. Under international law, the broad criteria remain threefold: self-definition as a person belonging to an indigenous community, subordination to dominant society, and historical continuity with pre-colonial societies. Indigenous identity, though evidently fluid and constantly changing, is linked to a prevailing sense of cultural difference and to discrimination by dominant society: in other words to a complex dynamic of self-identification and ascription. In the majority of cases, poverty is a defining feature of indigenous identity – according to all social indicators indigenous people are among the poorest sectors of Latin American society and, in many cases, are getting poorer.

Indigenous livelihoods remain dependent on access to land, albeit far from exclusively so. During the twentieth century indigenous people in Mesoamerica and the central Andes organised as peasants, or campesinos, to defend and secure land resources. They were mobilised by civilian and military elites in favour of nationalist modernising projects, guided by a developmentalist ethos, which varied from revolutionary to counterrevolutionary in intent, depending on the country in question. Where agrarian reforms were implemented, indigenous communal authority structures were reorganised around inalienable and collective land holdings, for example the ejido in Mexico after the 1930s, and the comunidades campesinas or comunidades nativas in Peru after the 1969 agrarian reform of the Velasco Alvarado government. In effect these agrarista structures provided some protection for a subordinated communal autonomy and group rights to land, although in many cases these rights were weakly enforced. However, during the 1970s and 1980s land poverty increased as a consequence of population growth, sub-division and encroachment by commercial agriculture. This, together with civil conflict (in the cases of Peru and Guatemala), stimulated rural out-migration and the flight of many indigenous people to the cities. Less and less tied to a spatially located ‘indigenous community’, the vast majority of these migrants were integrated into an increasingly globalised market on highly disadvantageous terms. Huge numbers ceased to be rural inhabitants, forced instead by rural impoverishment to scrape a living within the informal sector of Latin America’s cities.

The decade of the 1980s witnessed an upsurge of ethnic organising and indigenous protagonism, as the transition from authoritarian rule across the continent allowed for new forms of protest and organisation. Many democratising reforms – such as, for example, the enfranchisement of illiterates in Peru and Ecuador, which occurred in 1979 and 1980, respectively – directly incorporated indigenous people for the first time into national politics. In addition, since the 1970s the formation of indigenous grass-roots organisations was supported across the region by domestic and international NGOs and by the Catholic Church (Van Cott 1994; Brysk 2000). Following the transition to electoral democracy, specifically indigenous demands emerged...