

# 4.

## POSTCOLONIAL BLUES

Liberty. Equality. Popular sovereignty. America for Americans. These ideas, loosely grouped under the banner of liberalism, had made Latin American independence possible. They had inspired patriot dreams and justified revolt by explaining why Americans should rule themselves. They had solidified the patriot alliance with vague promises of future equality, and they became basic premises for the constitutions of a dozen new republics. In 1825, only Brazil remained a monarchy. Even the Brazilian emperor, Pedro I, considered himself a liberal.

All across Latin America, liberals came forward to put their ideas into practice—with disastrous results. Many liberal governments were overturned by force within only a few years, and then presidents and constitutions followed one another at dizzying speed. It is during these years that Spanish America (Brazil had better luck, as we shall see) gained a reputation for political instability, a bitter disappointment of patriot dreams. What happened?

In a nutshell, the first governments of independent Spanish America possessed few resources and faced tremendous obstacles. Liberal dreams of prosperous, progressive new countries soon dissolved in disappointment and economic failure. Hopes for true democracy were crushed by old habits of conservative



**ENSLAVED WOMEN.** In this photo, taken by a French traveler to Brazil, enslaved women are preparing food for the midday meal of field workers. In spite of independence, Latin American societies remained models of social inequality, in which hierarchies of race and class defined people's lives. The persistence of slavery is among the most extreme examples. But only in Brazil and Cuba did outright slavery continue long after independence. Elsewhere in Latin America, social inequalities took a more subtle and more enduring form. In *Charles Riveyrolles*, Brazil pittoresco, Paris, 1861.

1828	1829	1830s	1840s	1848
Remaining Spaniards expelled from Mexico	Rosas takes power in Argentina	Conservative trend throughout region	Guano boom in Peru	US troops occupy Mexico City

hierarchy. Recurring patterns of political violence and corruption alienated most people from the governments that supposedly represented them. Politics became, above all, a quest for the personal benefits of office. In sum, the first postcolonial generation (1825-50) saw Latin America going nowhere fast.

#### LIBERAL DISAPPOINTMENT

From the outset, Latin American liberals suffered collectively from a split personality. The Creole leadership of the patriot armies had waved the banner of liberalism, but governing by liberal principles was not so easy. The liberal emphasis on legal equality for all citizens had radical, disruptive implications in societies that were still fundamentally hierarchical. It is important to observe that liberalism grew out of social and economic transformations (such as the rise of capitalist trade, manufacturing, and a middle class) that had occurred more in England and France than in Spain and Portugal. The new Spanish American republics and Brazilian monarchy inherited strongly traditionalist societies. For generations, Spanish and Portuguese thinkers had emphasized collective responsibility over individual liberties and religious orthodoxy over religious freedom. Spanish American and Brazilian societies were much further from the liberal model than was US society at independence. The exception was the US South, which, with its plantation economy and slave system, looked rather like Latin America. At any rate, the liberal vision was more difficult to implement in strongly hierarchical societies with exploitative labor systems.

A formal public commitment to legal racial equality, for example, had been the price of mass support for Latin America's independence movements. In the generation following independence, the various mixed-race classifications typical of the caste system were optimistically banished from census forms and parish record keeping. In republics, all but slaves were sup-

posed to be citizens, equal to all other citizens. Slavery receded everywhere in Latin America, except in nonrepublican Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. In practice, however, very few elite Latin Americans, who remained in leadership everywhere, could accept the idea of broad social equality. The basic contradiction between political theory and social reality fatally undermined the stability of the new republics.

Theoretically, liberals sought "government of the people," but in Latin America, liberal leaders, who were typically white and upper class, had mixed feelings about "the people." They considered indigenous people and their lands a national problem, never a national asset. Admiration of Europe made liberals Eurocentric, and their interest in new political ideas made them ideological. Despite the importance of liberal thought in the recent struggles for independence, liberalism remained an exotic plant on Latin American soil. Conservative leaders soon rose to challenge the liberal agenda. In contrast to liberals, conservatives openly proclaimed that the common people should "know their place" and leave governing to their "betters." Even so, conservative defense of traditional values appealed to many common people.

Church-state conflicts offer an excellent example. The church represented reverence for colonial traditions in general. So liberals called for freedom of worship and the separation of church and state. Conservatives, on the other hand, wanted Catholicism to remain the official religion of the new republics. Liberals believed in public schools, whereas conservatives were satisfied to let the church retain its dominant role in education. And so on. The liberals had Protestant merchants and educational reformers on their side on this issue. But the defense of the Catholic Church was highly popular with pious, tradition-minded peasants and landowners alike. The church issue became the chief litmus test distinguishing liberal from conservative cultural outlooks, and it was a winning issue for conservatives.

Gradually, all Latin America divided along liberal versus conservative lines: the liberals, oriented toward progressive—especially US, English, or French—models; the conservatives, harkening back toward colonial or Spanish models. Popular sovereignty, enshrined by the wars of independence, was the one political principle espoused, at least publicly, by everyone. But how would “the people” become engaged in the political process? Formal party organizations—often, but not always, called the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party—formed slowly. After all, partisan politics—with electoral campaigns, newspapers, and speeches—was new in Latin America (and in the rest of the world, too, for that matter). Under colonial rule, there had been few forums for public debate. Meanwhile, there was much to be debated. These new nations faced enormous difficulties, both economic and institutional.

Horrendous economic devastation had occurred during the wars of independence. Hardest hit were the Mexican and Peruvian silver mines. Their shafts flooded, their costly machinery wrecked, the mines needed major injections of capital. Yet there were only a handful of banks in Latin America before 1850. Local moneylenders charged astronomical interest rates, and, after some initial failures, London bankers showed little interest. They had safer investment opportunities in industrializing, railroad-building, commercially booming England and the United States. Colonial Latin America had produced much of the silver in world circulation, but the region ran very short of capital after independence. As for trade, colonial restrictions had ended, and nobody regretted that except the Spanish merchants who lost their former monopoly. But control of import/export trade passed from the hands of Peninsulars directly into the hands of British, French, and US traders. Creoles had little experience in commercial business and preferred to invest in land.

Another major economic problem was the lack of transportation infrastructure. With few navigable rivers—Mexico, for

example, had none to speak of—and lots of steep mountains and tropical forests, transportation was costly indeed. Colonial merchants had responded by keeping quantities small and profit margins high. A few mules loaded with silver or with the luxury goods that mine owners imported did not need much of a road. Transporting bulky agricultural products for the new high-volume trade of the mid-1800s was a different matter. British traders offered consumer goods, such as cotton cloth and steel tools, at low prices. This trade could not prosper until crates of sugar, stacks of hides, bolts of cloth, and bags of coffee could be transported more cheaply. Adequate port facilities, roads, and bridges—not to mention railroads, which belong to a later period of Latin American development—did not yet exist. Without capital to build them, Latin America had to wait half a century to realize its trade potential. Meanwhile, Latin American economies grew slowly or, as in Mexico and Peru, even experienced decline.

So much to be done, and fledgling liberal governments had few practical assets. Everywhere but in Brazil, the governing institutions had to be rebuilt from scratch, an expensive undertaking. Meanwhile, another institution, the army, was already overdeveloped—another negative impact of the protracted independence wars. These armies were frequently top-heavy with salaried officers who got testy when their pay was late. And wobbly new states possessed little political legitimacy to inspire obedience in societies made turbulent by war. The vogue of republican institutions such as constitutions was recent, their efficacy untested. Most ordinary people had heard of constitutions, presidents, and legislatures but regarded them as newfangled importations. When push came to shove, nobody was sure whether constitutions would be binding. Loyalty to the king had taken generations to develop, and so would loyalty to republican institutions.

In the meantime, the new republics were fragile. And fragile, understaffed governments found it hard to administer (that is,

make people pay) taxes. Latin American states relied on import/export tariffs, high-yield taxes that could be charged at the docks by a few inspectors and a handful of soldiers. But tariffs were only as lucrative as the meager import/export trade they taxed. To meet basic needs, revenue-starved liberal governments borrowed what money they could. Often, they defaulted.

Overall, the deck was stacked against the liberals who held the reins of government in Spanish America after independence. Their vision implied sweeping change, but they had neither the resources nor the allies they needed to achieve it. They presided over countries wracked by war—militarized societies where many had new guns and old grudges—and their innovative plans often offended powerful vested interests and provoked violent confrontations. The postindependence period of liberal ascendancy ended in most countries after only a few years. Conservatives cried “Anarchy!” and called on generals to impose order and protect property. The rapid fall of Latin America’s first republican governments further undermined their legitimacy and set a tragic precedent, as one constitutional president after another was overthrown militarily.

Between independence and the 1850s, strings of presidents held office for only months, or even days. Few governments were able to implement their programs. Conservatives—in the ascendancy by the 1830s—basically wanted things *not* to change. And many, conservatives and liberals, saw politics mostly as a path to office and personal enrichment—the traditional colonial approach. Their objective was to take over the government and distribute the so-called spoils of office, a pattern that also characterized US politics of the day. People in power could distribute spoils to their friends and followers to reward their loyalty. These spoils, also called *patronage*—government jobs, pensions, and public works—loomed large in societies with sluggish economies. Spoils fueled the “patronage politics” and caudillo leadership that characterized postcolonial Latin America.

#### PATRONAGE POLITICS AND CAUDILLO LEADERSHIP

Patronage politics made corruption (channeling government benefits to one’s cronies and clients) a necessary part of the system. Patronage flowed through personal relationships, sometimes replacing party platforms altogether. A local justice of the peace—whom we can call Don Miguel, as a hypothetical example—would use his office to secure benefits not only for his extended family, but also for his political allies (in return for past and future favors), for his informal “clients” (for example, his godchildren and their families), and for his faithful servants and employees. These people’s support of Don Miguel and his party had little to do with abstract principles of liberalism and conservatism. Loyalty was what counted. At election time, clients held up their end of the patronage bargain by voting the way their “patron” wished. If the patron joined a revolution, his clients would be expected to pick up weapons and follow him. Don Miguel, in turn, received favors and honors from a patron wealthier and more powerful than himself—a cabinet minister, say, or the state governor—and so on, up to the highest patron of all, the party’s national leader, or *caudillo*.

A caudillo in office would be president; in opposition, he was the second most powerful man in the country. Caudillos were typically large landowners who could use their personal resources for patronage or for maintaining private armies. The first caudillos rose to prominence during the wars of independence and then carried their wartime fame as leaders of men into peacetime politics, which were not especially peaceful, as we will see. Caudillos were often war heroes who embodied ideal masculine qualities—bravery, loyalty, generosity, and sexual glamour—in their followers’ eyes. A string of romantic conquests and mistresses only enhanced a caudillo’s reputation. Most caudillos were from well-off families, though some rose from the ranks. Either way, they generally cultivated a “common