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LAST100: VIDEO 5: “Caudillos Versus the Nation State”

Over the past few weeks, we have traced the challenge of representing Latin America, from Christopher Columbus to José Martí and beyond. Last time we specifically looked at political representation: the process by which decisions are made or articulated by some people on behalf of others. For Simón Bolívar and the creole elite arguing for independence from Spain, the promise of political representation was both that it enabled them to take charge of their own economic affairs (taxation and trade), and also that it might stave off a greater threat to governance brewing from below.

Bolívar re-purposed a discourse of rights and representation that had ricocheted between the Old World and the New, South and North, from the North American colonists and their Second Continental Congress to the French Revolution’s “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” and the Haitian Revolution. It was not that Bolívar wanted Latin Americans to emulate the Haitian slaves; on the contrary, he spoke for a social class that sought to avoid any such upheaval at all cost. Then in reading Martí’s “Our America,” written at the very end of the nineteenth century, we saw the discourse of rights replaced by a far more literary appeal to creativity. At the same time, Martí identified a potent new threat to the region: from the North, and the increasing influence of the United States.

But let us return to the early to mid nineteenth century, and to the newly-founded Latin American nations’ complex internal politics. Independence brought neither order nor stability. Indeed, Bolívar feared as much and prophetically commented that governing Latin America was like trying to plough the sea. His dream of a “patria grande” uniting the former Spanish colonies was shattered by internecine strife and periodic warfare. Large political units were broken up, as when “Gran Colombia” devolved into what are

now Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador, or when the "Federal Republic of Central America" dissolved into its constituent parts.

There were also wars *between* these new nations: for instance, the bloody conflict between Paraguay and the "Triple Alliance" of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, in which well over fifty per cent of Paraguay's adult male population were killed. Or the "War of the Pacific," in which Peru was over-run by the Chilean army, and Bolivia lost its access to the sea. Not that every nineteenth-century conflict was solely the Latin Americans' fault: Mexico lost much of its territory in the Mexican-American War, and was later invaded by the French; the British skirmished off Central America, creating the short-lived "Miskito Kingdom" on its Caribbean Coast, as well as sending frigates to the River Plate and snatching the Falklands from Argentina.

Finally, there were a series of civil wars within nation-state boundaries, such as the decade or more of conflicts between "Blancos" and "Colorados" in Uruguay, or the endless infighting between Conservatives and Liberals in Colombia. Elsewhere, states violently suppressed indigenous and other peoples, as with Chile's campaign against the Mapuche of Patagonia, Argentina's "Conquest of the Desert," Mexico's long-running "Caste War of Yucatán," or the destruction of the millenarian settlement of Canudos in Brazil. With these operations, the independent nations of Latin America prolonged the colonial project left incomplete by their former Spanish masters.

Nineteenth-century Latin America was often a violent place, not unlike what the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes as a "warre [. . .] of every man against every man" (185). To be fair, matters weren't much better in Europe, with conflicts such as the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s or the Italian Risorgimento. But in general, the nineteenth century in Europe and North America saw the gradual acceptance of liberal doctrines and Enlightenment principles--at "home," if not in the colonies abroad. By contrast, in Latin America liberalism has never really flourished.

Liberalism involves a commitment to abstract principles of rights and freedoms based on the notion of a social contract. These rights include parity under the law, freedom of expression, the right to vote, and so on. They are abstract because they presume

equality between citizens: whatever "natural" differences between us in terms of physical strength, constitution, status, gender, race, and so on, or whatever differences we may have of religion or belief, liberalism tells us that by coming together in a social contract we have granted the state or sovereign the power to mediate when there is disagreement or infractions against the law. Moreover, the sovereign is also an abstract or ideal role: no matter who happens to occupy the seat of government, the rule of law should continue and is guaranteed by mechanisms such as the separation of powers.

There is much to say about the virtues and vices of liberalism. Many of its ideals are praiseworthy. But in practice, liberal societies consistently fail to live up to them: it took a long struggle, for example, for women to gain the right to vote; and do we really think even today that (say) African-Americans in the USA, First Nations in Canada, or Moslems throughout the West enjoy equality before the law? In any case, for our purposes the point is this: in North America and Europe, from at least the late nineteenth century, liberalism seemed to be the governing principle, the norm accepted by almost everyone whatever its glitches in practice. In Latin America, this was not so.

Moreover, even when and where liberalism gained a foothold in the region, it was what the Brazilian cultural critic Roberto Schwarz calls a "misplaced idea." Schwarz argues that, in Europe, liberal ideas could appear convincing in that, under industrial capitalism, workers are notionally free to sell their labor power, however exploitative the ensuing contract. In a place like Brazil, by contrast, where slavery was not abolished until 1888, liberalism "did not even correspond to appearances" (20). Liberal ideals were patently fictitious when men and women could still be bought and sold. And the same could be said of other parts of Latin America--such as southern Mexico or the Andean highlands--where hundreds of thousands of indigenous people lived in what was essentially indentured servitude. In such circumstances, Schwarz suggests, liberal ideas were merely decorative, ornamental trappings of "modernity and distinction" (28) while real social change was postponed to a distant future.

In place of liberalism, then, we get what Schwarz describes as "favor," or the kinds of clientelism typical of the *caudillo* system. Here, you relate to others not as an equal citizen before an abstract sovereign, but as a client whose relative well-being is

determined by how close you are to one or more powerful patrons: these patrons provide favor or protection, and in return clients provide political or other forms of support. Everything is concrete and specific rather than abstract or ideal: it matters who you know and how well you know them. With a powerful patron, you (or your community) might receive preferential services from the state, or exemption from a rule of law that is applied unevenly and unequally. Rival patrons may make your life difficult or (alternatively) offer you a better deal.

In such a system corruption and (often) violence are rampant. It seems to fall far short of our sense of fair play or democracy. In its nineteenth-century Latin American variant, the regional strongmen known as "caudillos" ruled the roost, and we can get a sense of what a liberal thinks of such an arrangement in Esteban Echeverría's short story, "The Slaughterhouse": mud and blood, superstition and prejudice, cruelty and caprice all combine to constitute a "barbarism" that blocks enlightened "civilization." Yet, as Alexander Dawson stresses, caudillos were perhaps surprisingly popular. It is worth taking a moment to consider why this might be so.

Pause this video and reflect on the following questions: Why was post-independence Latin America such fertile ground for *caudillos*? Why were *caudillos* especially popular among the poor and powerless? And does even Echeverría show them some grudging respect? While you do that, I need a glass of water. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

So what did you come up with? I won't go over all the possible reasons that Dawson mentions--or others that you might add. Feel free to mention them in the comments. But let's note a couple of things. First, that the rewards of clientelism are often both concrete and immediate. In "The Slaughterhouse," for instance, in a time of scarcity the *caudillo* Rosas (though he is never mentioned by name) bends the Lenten rules to make meat available to his supporters. Echeverría suggests this smacks of hypocrisy, but it is hard to see those who benefit from such inconsistencies complaining about them.

Second, Dawson mentions "a sense of closeness, of fictive kinship" (54). Echeverría is scathing about the people who gather in the slaughterhouse. He sees them as an uncouth and inhuman mob: "bestial," "horrific," "horrendous," "barbaric," "grotesque," and "boorish" (adjectives all taken from just one page: 65). Moreover, their recalcitrance to reason is inflected by both race and gender: Echeverría makes much of the role of black and mulatto women, "mythical harpies" (61) "as ugly as the viragos of legend" (64). But these very attitudes from the liberal elite only helped drive the objects of their sneers towards local strongmen who promised a sense of community and the feeling that someone had their back. This is the *affective* dimension to *caudillaje*: both Echeverría's disgust and the scene that he is portraying are intensely visceral, corporeal, embodied. So though Dawson describes the *caudillos'* role as interlocutors, their appeal lay less in what they *said* than in the *feelings* to which they appealed or that they encouraged.

But there are signs of ambivalence even in Echeverría's account. For one thing, much of his imagery is borrowed from those he opposes. Despite his condemnation of so-called Catholic superstition, and his championing of "education" and "enlightenment" (71), the vision he presents is basically a religious allegory. He draws on everything from the story of Noah, to a version of Sodom and Gomorrah, to a concluding image of a band of impious "apostles who by dagger and fist spread the gospel" conjured up by "the patron of their brotherhood" (71).

Most obviously, the unlucky young man who falls victim to the mob is presented as a Christ-like figure, "tied [. . .] down in a crucified position" in his agony (71). Yet it is hard to feel much sympathy for him. In part, this is because the story is so resolutely told from the perspective of the "barbarians": the "civilized" man is little more than a cipher. (Something similar happens in Domingo Sarmiento's classic *Facundo*: the liberal critic is enticed by the sheer flair and energy of the savagery he sets out to denounce.) Moreover, the victim, too, is ultimately defined by an excess of feeling: he dies because he "burst[s] with rage" (71). It is as though the moral of the story were that affect is always more fundamental than reason.

No wonder it was such a struggle to impose liberal ideas on the region. Perhaps the *caudillos* had a better sense than their critics of what politics is all about.

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