

Latin America: Revolution and Reaction in the 20th Century

Summary. Latin American nations in the 20th century shared problems with Third World countries relating to matters of economic development and relations with more powerful economic societies. The earlier political independence of Latin America and its Western-influenced political and social structures gave it distinct characteristics. Their economies, dependent upon Western investment and exports, were vulnerable to fluctuations in the world system. Economic dependency accompanied political and cultural dependency in national life. Latin Americans struggled to gain social justice, cultural autonomy, and economic security through either adopting foreign ideologies or formulating indigenous responses. Although agricultural and mineral production continued, industrial development increased worker organization, immigration and urban growth. An urban middle class appeared to join the political process. Economic expansion and preservation of the political status quo alternated with crisis periods when efforts were made break or political patterns and provide social justice. Despite the surface changes Latin America remained relatively unchanged as old institutions adapted to new influences. Very few revolutions resulted in marked political changes, but there have been significant alterations in social and economic matters.

The Mexican Revolution and the Great War. Two major events influenced 20th-century Latin American developments, the Mexican Revolution and World War I. Although most nations remained neutral, the war disrupted traditional markets and caused a realignment of national economies. A spurt of manufacturing occurred among nations forced to rely upon themselves. At the end of the war all had to face the emergence of the United States as the region's dominant foreign power.

Mexico's Upheaval. Mexico had been ruled since 1876 by Porfirio Díaz. Great economic changes had occurred as foreign concessions helped to develop railroads and mining and brought prosperity to the elite. Foreigners controlled much of the economy. The political system was corrupt and opponents among workers, peasants, and Indians were repressed. In 1910 moderate reformer Francisco Madero proposed to run against the elderly Díaz but was arrested as the president won a rigged election. A general rebellion followed led by Madero, Pancho Villa, and peasant rights proponent Emiliano Zapata. Díaz was driven from power, but the various factions could not agree. Zapata wanted sweeping land reform and revolted. In 1913 Madero was assassinated. General Victoriano Huerta unsuccessfully tried to restore a Díaz-style regime until forced from power in 1914. Villa and Zapata continued in control of their regions while more moderate leaders controlled the national government under General Alvaro Obregón. The Mexican revolution resembled other outbreaks in agrarian societies undergoing disruptive modernization. All had received large investments of foreign capital and became dependent on world financial markets. The world banking crisis of 1907-1908 then caused distress and stimulated rebellion. Civil war in Mexico ended by 1920; Obregón was the first of a series of elected presidents who tried to consolidate the regime and to rebuild from the serious losses of the civil war. A new constitution of 1917 promised land reform, limitation of foreign ownership, workers' rights, restriction of the role of the church, and educational reform. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) distributed over 40 million acres, mostly as communal holdings (*ejidos*), and extended primary and rural education.

Culture and Politics in Postrevolutionary Mexico. Nationalism and the concern for Indian culture stimulated many of the reforms. Education stressed Mexico's Indian heritage and denounced Western capitalism. Artists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco recaptured the past and offered a program for the future. Mural art mixed romanticism of the Indian heritage with Christian and communist ideas. Popular culture celebrated the heroes of the revolution. Some Mexicans opposed the changes, especially the church and clergy. They backed a conservative peasant movement, the Cristeros, during the 1920s. The United States, busy with World War I, had reacted minimally to the revolution. Arguments between the two nations culminated and were settled when Cárdenas nationalized the oil industry in 1934 and ran it as a state monopoly. The revolutionary leadership institutionalized the new regime by establishing a one-party political system. The forerunner of the present Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI) developed from the 1920s into a dominant political force. It incorporated peasant, labor, military, and middle class sectors into the party. The need to reconcile the various interests limited the worst aspects of one-party rule. Presidents were restricted to one six-year term. By the 1990s many Mexicans believed that little remained of the original revolutionary principles and new political parties challenged a weakened PRI. A very serious challenge to the regime was the 1994 armed guerrilla movement in Chiapas. Their demands for reform found wide support.

Economic Change and New Political Actors. World War I affected most of Latin America because of the interruption of European demand for its products. Some local industries formed to produce replacements for unavailable European products. A few exports had increased European demand. After the war the economy slowed, causing increasing political unrest. Population growth, swelled by heavy immigration, contributed to urban concentration and increased social problems.

Labor and the Middle Class. The political culture of Latin America altered as an urban labor force and middle class grew. The landholding oligarchy opened the political system to the middle class. They united to defend their interests against labor demands. During the 1920s the alliance met resistance from reformers, workers, and peasants seeking to redress the inequalities existing in society. Industrial workers, some of them immigrants influenced by European ideologies, gained influence on politics from the beginning of the century. Their efforts at organization and strikes usually were met by government force. The result was a growing sense of class conflict. Most workers, however, were agrarian and unorganized.

Ideology and Social Reform. By the 1930s the failure of liberalism in solving societal problems was apparent. Latin America's middle class had entered politics, but only in alliance with the existing oligarchy or the military. Liberalism's concepts simply were not suited to Latin American economic and social reality. Intellectuals began to look into their own cultures for solutions and lost faith in Western democracy. Socialist and communist parties formed. Criticism also came from a church opposed to the secularization brought by capitalism.

Populist Politics: The Case of Peru. Peru, with a predominantly Indian population, typified the ferment. It depended upon the export of nitrates and agricultural products; foreign capital controlled transportation and industry. The government was corrupt. Elites profited from the system while peasants were landless. Ongoing criticism of the system led to the formation of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) by Victor Raul de la Torre in 1924. The party drew inspiration from the Mexican revolution, socialism, nationalism, and Mussolini's fascism. It

wanted to spread throughout Latin America, but had its greatest success in Peru by the 1930s. The military and other sectors kept the APRA from power until Alan García won the presidency in 1985. APRA represented the new populist groups that mobilized mass support among urban and rural populations under the direction of personalist leaders who often were military or elite politicians. Once in power they often did not challenge the existing structure of government.

The Great Crash and Latin American Responses. The Great Depression emphasized the weaknesses of Latin America's dependent economies and political systems. Foreign investment ceased and purchase of export products declined. The liberal regimes lacked solutions for unemployment and economic dislocation. Within three years there were military coups in 12 countries. Experiments with corporatism, an ideology appealing to conservatives and the military, placed the state at the center and tried to avoid class conflict. Elements of fascism also were popular. Latin Americans were part of a world trend whereby governments moderated the principle of unbridled capitalism to attain some type of social reform.

Promises of Social Reform. Among the reforming regimes the most successful was Mexico's Cárdenas administration. Large-scale land reform created communal farms with a credit system to support them. Foreign oil companies were nationalized and rural education expanded. A new regime in Cuba was more typical. A revolution in 1933 aimed at social reform and breaking United States domination. Moderates won control and reforms resulted.

The Vargas Regime in Brazil. A contested election of 1929 led to civil war and the emergence of Getúlio Vargas as president. Vargas promised reforms to help ease the crisis caused by the collapse of coffee exports. He launched a centralized political program, prevented coups by communists and fascists, and with military support imposed a new constitution in 1937 that created an authoritarian regime based on ideas from Mussolini's Italy. Vargas joined the Allies during World War II in return for Allied aid. Little open opposition was allowed to his corporatist government. When reactions to his policies increased, Vargas sought support from labor and the communists. He was deposed by the military in 1945 but returned to the presidency in 1950 with support of labor and the left. A state oil monopoly was established as part of policies following nationalist and populist themes. Vargas, under criticism from right and left, committed suicide in 1954; he since has become a nationalist hero.

Argentina: Populism, Perón, and the Military. A military coup by a coalition of nationalists, fascists, and socialists ended the rule of the middle class Radical Party when the economy collapsed in 1929. The coup failed but the succeeding conservative governments, despite industrial growth, did not bring prosperity. The labor movement became stronger. In 1943 the military, nationalists who wanted to modernize the state, seized control. Juan D. Perón emerged as leader, gaining support by supporting worker demands. His wife Eva Duarte - Evita - became his spokesperson among the lower classes. Perón created a coalition embracing workers, industrialists, and the military, depending upon his personal charisma and repression to maintain rule. Foreign owned industries were nationalized. Perón's regime by the 1950s could not solve Argentina's growing economic problems. His coalition fell apart and a military coup drove him from office in 1955. The country remained under his shadow for the next 20 years as military governments attempted to solve economic and political problems. Labor groups continued to support Perón. He was elected president in 1973, but his death in 1974 returned Argentina to military rule.

Radical Options in the 1950s. There were other responses to the problems of Latin American countries, but disagreement remained on how to improve economic and social conditions. Mexico continued one-party rule; the conservative PRI sacrificed social justice to economic growth. In Venezuela and Costa Rica reform, reform-minded governments triumphed in open elections. Others turned to Marxist socialism as a guide and became caught up in cold war struggles. Some radical and revolutionary solutions were attempted. In Bolivia a 1952 revolution supported by miners, peasants, and urban middle class groups led to mine nationalization and land redistribution. Fears of moving too far to the left brought the army back to power in 1964 and subsequent governments stressed order over reform.

Guatemala: Reform and United States Intervention. A first radical solution was tried in Guatemala, a predominantly Indian nation suffering from illiteracy, poor health conditions, and high mortality rates. The economy depended upon the export of coffee and bananas. In 1944 a middle class and labor coalition elected Juan José Arevalo as president. Under a new constitution he began land reform and improvement of worker and peasant life. Arevalo's reforms and nationalism led to conflict with foreign interests, especially the United Fruit Company. In 1951 the more radical Jacobo Arbenz was elected president. His reformist programs, especially a proposed expropriation of United Fruit land, led the Cold War American government to impose economic and diplomatic restrictions on Guatemala. In 1954 the CIA assisted military opponents to overthrow Arbenz and under the new government reform ceased. Continued violence and political instability followed.

The Cuban Revolution: Socialism in the Caribbean. Most of Cuba's population was descended from Spaniards and Africans; The nation had a relatively large middle class and better literacy and health conditions than others in the region. Since leaving Spanish rule Cuba had been subject to American influence in its politics and economy. The economy depended upon the export of sugar. Economic disparity between rural populations and the middle class was a problem. Cuba was ruled from 1934 to 1944 by Fulgencio Batista, an authoritarian military reformer. A 1940 constitution promised democracy and reform, but the government was corrupt and Batista turned into a dictator. In 1953 Fidel Castro launched an unsuccessful revolution; in 1956, with the help of Che Guevara, a new effort began. By 1958 students, labor, and rural workers joined in to drive out Batista. Castro's sweeping reforms included nationalization of foreign property, farm collectivization, and a centralized socialist economy. Relations with the United States were broken in 1961 and Cuba entered into a close relationship with the Soviet Union. An American-sponsored attack by Cuban exiles failed in 1961. When Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba a superpower confrontation threatened nuclear war in 1962. Cuba survived Cold War politics because of the support of its Soviet ally. Castro's revolution has a mixed balance. Its reforms greatly improved education, health, and housing, especially in rural regions. But industrialization efforts failed and Cuba remained dependent on sugar. Rising oil costs and falling sugar prices made Cuba dependent upon Soviet economic aid. The Soviet Union's collapse brought serious economic distress. Even with its problems, the Cuban revolution inspired many Latin American revolutionaries in their quest for change.

The Search for Reform and the Military Option. Economic and social structures remained unchanged in most countries, despite the various reform approaches, into the 1980s. Mexico's one-party system maintained prosperity, often through repression, until conditions changed during the 1980s. Others - Venezuela, Chile - followed Christian Democratic approaches. The clergy was divided politically, although many priests became activists for social justice.

Liberation Theology combined Catholic doctrines and socialist principles to improve life for the poor.

Out of the Barracks: Soldiers Take Power. The Cuban Revolution worried individuals fearing reform within a communist system. As the military became more professionalized, soldiers adopted a creed that made them the true representatives of the nation. During the 1960s they intervened directly in politics. In 1964 the Brazilian military took over the government when the president proposed sweeping reforms. Soldiers took over in Argentina in 1966 and in 1973 the military in Chile overthrew the socialist government of Salvador Allende. Similar coups occurred in Uruguay in 1973 and Peru in 1968. The soldiers imposed bureaucratic authoritarian regimes that were supposed to provide economic stability by submerging selfish interests. The military controlled policy and resorted to repression and torture. Thousands were tortured and killed in Argentina. Economic policies fell heaviest on workers since any economic development came at their cost. Basic structural problems persisted. All regimes were nationalistic, but other policies varied. Peru's leaders had a real social program, including land redistribution. Chile and Uruguay were militantly anticommunist. Argentina fought an unsuccessful war with Britain over the contested Falkland Islands that contributed to the regime's loss of authority.

The New Democratic Trend. By the mid-1980s some military governments were returned to civilian control. Continued economic problems and growing internal dissent contributed to the change. Fears of populist or communist movements declined. There were elections in Argentina in 1983; Brazil chose a popularly elected president in 1989. The democratization process was not easy or universal. In Peru the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) leftist guerrillas disrupted government into the 1990s. Uneasy truces continued between governments and former rebels in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The United States demonstrated its power by invading Panama. Latin American governments continued to face major problems. Large foreign loans had produced a massive debt burden. High inflation provoked social instability, while compensatory programs had social and political costs. The international drug trade created cartels that threatened or corrupted national governments. Still, by the 1990s, it appeared that democratic trends were well-established.

The United States and Latin America: Continuing Presence. The United States had emerged as the predominant power in the New World after World War I. American investors pushed ahead of European rivals. There was direct involvement in Cuba and Puerto Rico; in other lands the Americans frequently intervened - over 30 times before 1933 -to protect economic, political, strategic, and ideological interests. The interventions usually were followed by support for conservative, often dictatorial and corrupt, governments friendly to the United States. The actions produced a growing nationalist and anti-American reaction. The United States changed course in 1933 when President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the Good Neighbor Policy; direct interventions stopped. After World War II cold war thinking led to new strategies, including participation in regional organizations and the support of democratic, anticommunist administrations. Direct or indirect interventions occurred against governments considered unfriendly. The belief that economic development would eliminate radical political solutions led to programs such as the 1961 Alliance for Progress. The approach had limited success. During the 1970s and 1980s the United States was willing to deal with military dictatorships. Under President Jimmy Carter an effort was made to influence governments to observe civil liberties and an agreement gave eventual control of the Panama Canal to Panama. Policy became more interventionist under conservative presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

In Depth: Human Rights in the 20th Century. The tortures and killings committed by repressive Latin American and other governments has drawn attention the concept of human rights: universal rights justified by a moral standard above national laws. The concept of natural law, perhaps extending back to ancient Greece, also appeared during the 19th century. The movement to abolish the slave trade was a part of the movement. In the 20th century the concept was attached to the United Nations and its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights guaranteeing basic liberties. Under 20% of U.N. members have a consistently good record in upholding the declaration. The supervising U.N. commission lacks enforcement powers. Differences in cultural and political values between nations causes varying interpretations of what constitutes human rights. Priorities and strategies in international relations have similar results.

Societies in Search of Change. Social relations in Latin America have changed slowly during the 20th century because gender, ethnicity, and class issues remained influential. Population growth, urbanization, and worker migration continued as persistent problems. Widespread discrimination against Indians and Afro-Americans persists.

Slow Change in Women's Roles. The role of women has changed slowly. They first gained the right to vote in Ecuador in 1929, but some regimes did not grant the right until the 1950s. Reformers at times feared that women, because of their ties to the church, would become a conservative political force. Women were supposed to remain focused on the home and family. Activist feminist movements worked to secure political and other rights, but gaining the right to vote did not mean an ending of male prejudice against equal participation of women in political life. Women faced similar problems in the labor force. In some countries they controlled small scale commerce in markets and in others became an important component of the service sectors. By the mid-1980s the position of Latin American women was closer to the Western pattern than to that of other world areas.

The Movement of People. Declining mortality and high fertility brought great population expansion to Latin America. By the 1980s internal migration and movement between countries soared as individuals sought work or basic freedoms. The process was influenced by the fact that mechanized industry that did not create enough new jobs. The 20th century also has been marked by movement from rural to urban areas. By the 1980s some cities reached massive size: Mexico City had 16 million inhabitants. The rate of growth created problems since urban economies do not provide enough employment. Shantytowns provided terrible living conditions. The lack of jobs has prevented migrants from becoming part of a unified working class movement.

Cultural Reflections of Despair and Hope. Most Latin Americans remain Roman Catholics and Hispanic traditions of family, gender relations, and social interaction continue. Popular culture, drawing upon Indian and African traditions, shows great vitality. Latin American music and dance, such as the tango, samba, and salsa, have an international audience. Poets and novelists, often drawing upon internal social, economic, political themes, also have world wide appeal. The general failure to gain social justice in the region caused many writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, to abandon traditional forms.

Conclusion: Struggling Toward the Future. The search for economic growth, political stability, and social justice continues. Deeply entrenched class interests, international conditions, and political power struggles hindered or blocked revolutionary change. Important results occurred in Mexico and Cuba and influenced others. Different nations - Bolivia, Nicaragua, Peru - attempted radical efforts at change. New ideas, such as Liberation Theology, appeared. Latin America remains the most advanced sector of the developing world.

KEY TERMS

Third World: term for nations not among the capitalist industrial nations of the 1st world and the industrialized communist nations of the 2nd world.

Francisco Madero: moderate democratic Mexican reformer; challenged Porfirio Díaz in 1910 and initiated a revolution after losing fraudulent elections; assassinated in 1913.

Pancho Villa: Mexican revolutionary leader in northern Mexico after 1910.

Emiliano Zapata: Mexican revolutionary commander of a guerrilla movement centered at Morelos; demanded sweeping land reform.

Victoriano Huerta: gained power in Mexico after the death of Madero in 1913; forced from power in 1914.

Alvaro Obregón: became leader of Mexican government in 1915; elected president in 1920.

Mexican Constitution of 1917: promised land and educational reform, limited foreign ownership, guaranteed rights for workers, and restricted clerical education and property ownership.

Lázaro Cárdenas: Mexican president (1934-1940); responsible for large land redistribution to create communal farms; also began program of primary and rural education.

Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco: Mexican artists working after the Mexican Revolution; famous for wall murals on public buildings that mixed images of the Indian past with Christian and communist themes.

corridos: popular ballads written to celebrate heroes of the Mexican Revolution.

Cristeros: conservative peasant movement in Mexico during the 1920s; a reaction against secularism.

Party of Institutionalized Revolution (PRI): inclusive Mexican political party developing from the 1920s; ruled for the rest of the 20th century.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): agreement between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada that lowered trade barriers.

Victor Raul Haya de la Torre: Peruvian politician; created the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance in 1924; gained power in 1985.

Getúlio Vargas: became president of Brazil following a contested election of 1929; led an authoritarian state until deposed in 1945; became president again in 1950.

Juan Perón: dominant authoritarian and populist leader in Argentina from the mid-1940s; driven into exile in 1955; returned and elected president in 1973; died in 1974.

Eva Duarte (Evita): wife of Juan Perón; the regime's spokesperson among the lower social classes.

Juan José Arevalo: reformist president of Guatemala elected in 1944; his programs led to conflict with foreign interests.

United Fruit Company: most important foreign company in Guatemala; 1953 nationalization effort of some of its land holdings caused a U.S. reaction.

Fulgencio Batista: authoritarian ruler of Cuba (1934-1944).

Fidel Castro: revolutionary leader who replaced Batista in 1958; reformed Cuban society with socialist measures; supported economically and politically by the Soviet Union until its collapse.

Liberation Theology: combination of Roman Catholic and socialist principles aiming to improve the lives of the poor.

Salvado Allende: Chilean socialist president; overthrown by a military coup in 1973.

Banana republics: conservative, often dictatorial, Latin American governments friendly to the U.S.; exported tropical products.

Good Neighbor Policy: introduced by U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 to deal fairly, without intervention, with Latin American states.

Alliance for Progress: 1961 U.S. program for economic development of Latin America