CHAPTER 27 - LATIN AMERICA: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE 1940s

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The political life of Latin America for over a century and a half has been characterized by a general trend toward instability. This portion of the world presents its own distinct set of problems. By the mid-1820s, Latin Americans had driven out their colonial rulers through wars of independence. But this movement had not been a popular, grass-roots effort. It had originated with the Creole elite, which hoped to preserve as much of the existing social structure as possible. They had differences among themselves, but stood united in their opposition to any substantial social reform. And although the racial codes of the colonial empires disappeared, the racial prejudice that lay behind them did not. Persons of white or nearly white complexion constituted the elite of Latin America. Most important, no major changes in landholding accompanied the wars of independence. With the exception of Mexico in 1910, no Latin American nation, from the wars of independence to the 1950s, experienced a fundamental revolution that overthrew the social and economic structures that dated from the colonial period. The absence of such social revolution is perhaps the single most important factor in Latin American history during the first century of independence.

The chapter then discusses the social structure in the nineteenth century. Most Latin Americans lived in the countryside. Agriculture was dominated by large haciendas, or plantations, whose owners ruled them as small domains and became very nearly a law unto themselves. The rural population experienced conditions of immense social and economic dependence and lacked any basic education or significant technological skills. During the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a remarkable growth in urban life as some movement from countryside to city was greeted with a major influx of European immigrants. Throughout this period, there was a political and social trade-off between rural and urban elites.

The economic demands, policies and goals of other nations continued for well over a century to shape Latin American economic life in the most fundamental manner. After the wars of independence and the consequent disruption of the Latin American economy, the British sought to break the old colonial monopolies and dominate trade in the region. To pay for needed imports and foreign services, Latin American nations turned to the productions of agricultural commodities and became more prosperous by 1850. But in the process, the relative prosperity of the export sector increased the dependence of the American republics on Europe. Foreign ownership of industry was a real indicator of the dependence and resulted in military and diplomatic intervention by the United States and Britain in
the political affairs of Latin America in order to protect their economic interests. By the 1920s, U.S. investments had become dominant as a result of two decades of "Dollar Diplomacy." Because of Latin American dependence on export commodities, major industrialization did not occur in the region until the 1940s. By this time, there were three major varieties of manufacturing in Latin America: 1) industries that transformed raw materials for export, 2) industries addressing local demands, and 3) industries dependent on the transformation of imported materials.

The new states in independent Latin America had little experience in self-government. In some countries such as Mexico and Brazil, monarchies were established. In nations with republican constitutions, the need for stability and the predisposition toward assertive rule resulted in the toleration of a strong executive branch. Few of these republican constitutions established stable political life, and as they were suspended or rewritten, strong leaders consolidated their power. Such figures who appeared throughout Latin America in the nineteenth century were termed caudillos.

The chapter concludes by detailing the history of three countries that illustrate the more general themes of Latin American history: Argentina, Mexico and Brazil.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **The Philosophy of Submission**: The political philosophies embraced by the educated and propertied Latin American elites discouraged any major challenge to the social order. Free trade-minded European liberals expected Latin America to produce raw materials and to import manufactured goods from Europe. Thus, they supported new land development and aggressive exploitation of resources, which argued against any change in the social structure of Latin America. In addition, the political ideas of the French positivist philosopher, Auguste Comte, which advocated the cult of science and technological progress, were popular among military officers, who believed that efficient dictatorial governments were the best vehicles for achieving modernization. Social or political groups that created disorder or that challenged the existing social order were regarded as "unprogressive." Finally, late-nineteenth century European theories of "scientific" racism were used to preserve the Latin American status quo and white dominance.
2. The Effects of the Great Depression on Latin America: The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 had a great impact on Latin America. There was a virtual collapse in commodity prices and fewer Latin American products were in demand. Many republics could not repay debts to foreign banks and suspended interest payments. The Depression led eventually to a new economic era in Latin America after 1945. It was marked by strong economic nationalism and a determination to create sectors of national economies that were not dependent on events and wealth outside Latin America. The success of this has been mixed, but the movement dates only from the turmoil of the Depression.

3. Latin American Caudillos: The caudillo or dictator was a common element in the political life of Latin American republics throughout the nineteenth century and still holds positions in some countries today. They have usually come from the ranks of the army and have based their rule on a need to suppress the disorder that threatened republican government. Caudillos most often supported conservative causes, but could also pursue liberal policies (such as the confiscation of church land or the development of education) if it suited their immediate purpose. Even when a caudillo was forced from office, the restored parliamentary regimes were not genuinely liberal and never democratic. Whatever political shifts occurred, life for the masses changed very little; Latin American politics has generally been run by the elite for the elite.

4. Latin American History in World Perspective: Latin America has often been viewed as somewhat of a paradox in the context of world history. Economically, it is a region rich in natural resources, yet plagued with extreme poverty. As other Western countries have moved toward liberal democracy and social equality, Latin America has been characterized by marked inequality, political repression and social dependence. Three major reasons have been set forth to account for these difficulties: 1) after the wars of independence, the colonial framework was never really abolished and Latin America has remained dependent on wealthy foreign powers for investment and markets; 2) Latin America must be viewed on the periphery of the Western world and has been a prisoner of its Iberian heritage, which tends toward dictatorship, uneven development, anticlericalism and social cleavage between urban and rural areas, as well as between elite and poor populations; 3) after independence, the elite sought to enrich themselves and to maintain their positions at the expense of all other segments of the population. These leaders linked their national economies to Europe and embraced European concepts of progress in
order to dismiss the legitimacy of Indian or peasant values. None of these explanations excludes the others and all are necessary for a satisfactory understanding of the region.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Latin-America - Intervention in Our Own Back Yard.* Alan Lansburg Productions. 29 min.

*Latin-America - Neighbors to the South.* Universal Education and Visual Arts Div. 17 min.

*Latin America, Part 1: Its Countries.* National Film Board of Canada. 26 min.

*Latin America, Part 2: Its History, Economy and Politics.* National Film Board of Canada. 33 min.

*Introducing the Latin Americas.* Teaching Films Custodians. 29 min.

*Nationhood for Mexico and Brazil.* Teaching Films Custodians. 29 min.