COLONIAL INSTITUTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA:

Social and Cultural Life

CHARLES GIBSON*

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/774080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

In Latin American history a familiar observation concerning the colonial period relates to its duration. The Spanish and Portuguese empires persisted in America for more than three centuries, and this extended time span not infrequently evokes a grudging admiration for the administrative systems that sustained them. Whatever else we may say about the Hispanic empires, runs a familiar comment—and the implication is that we may say a great deal else, little of it complimentary—whatever else we may say about the Hispanic empires, we must grant that they persisted in America for these 300 years. Their persistence is a foil that may be set against the briefer accomplishments of rival empires as well as against internal Hispanic deficiencies, and it appears as a measurable indicator of strength.

But the admiration or awe or grudging respect that we may express with regard to the duration of Hispanic rule is likely to become something quite different when we contemplate colonial survivals thereafter. Independence enforces fresh perspectives. Our new vantage point is liberal, and what were indications of strength now become obstacles to progress. It is as if the colonial period somehow had its historic role to fulfill, while we accompany it in retrospect and give it our support, and as if with independence a new role is called for, with which we also sympathize. If the observer is off his guard, this transition in perspective may pass only as a form of objectivity, a proper historian's accommodation to the spirit of different ages, or an absence of bias. It means however that we confront with quite opposite attitudes two related historical topics: the colonial period itself on the one hand and the persisting colonial features of its aftermath on the other.

Like any historical period the colonial portion of Latin American history is most obviously defined by its chronological limits. But the

* The author is Professor of History at the State University of Iowa.

chronological definition has the practical disadvantage that it affords us no scope for our discussion. In the chronological sense the colonial period came to an end in the early nineteenth century, and in this sense there can be no colonial institutions in modern Latin America, for a modern institution, precisely by being modern, escapes the definition of colonial. The difficulty is one that has been appreciated principally in the terminology of Latin American folk art, where the term colonial is recognized as inappropriate for styles that extend into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In a wider and looser sense the colonial classification is not limited to the period prior to 1810. I judge that the "colonial economies" of modern Latin America are so called partly because they are more or less unchanged from the real colonial period, partly because they are subordinate to foreign controls after the manner of true colonial economies. There appears, in other words, a characteristic type that we recognize as colonial, and a colonial institution of this type may occupy by extension any of several historical periods. An institution may begin and end wholly within the colonial dates, without any direct perpetuation thereafter. Examples would be the classic conquests, or the society of the viceregal courts. An institution may begin in the colonial period, persist into the middle nineteenth century, and then disappear, never becoming part of modern Latin America. An example is native Peruvian tribute liability, which has a full colonial history, a nineteenth-century history to 1854, and no history, or no official history, thereafter. An institution may originate before the colonial period and persist into, through, or beyond it. Examples would be the Araucanian family or the Christian church, and though in particular contexts we may refer to such institutions as colonial they are clearly not colonial in their origin or, necessarily, with respect to their major influence. Finally an institution may be post-colonial and yet so similar to a truly colonial institution that allowance is easily made. Thus exports of meats and bananas are understood to be aspects of the "colonial economy" of modern Latin America, despite the fact that these products themselves were not colonial exports. To surround our topic with further problems of this introductory nature we may add that all these examples depend on simplifications of reality. Institutions do not simply originate, exist, and die. They continually change, and as they change the question for us becomes: Are they the same institutions or different ones?

This last point may be appreciated through an examination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes toward the Spanish con-

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

quests. Conquest is a theme of importance for the entire subsequent history of the conquered areas, and it has been earnestly debated in the post-colonial period. In some degree, at least, approval or disapproval of conquest depends upon approval or disapproval of the long-term effects of conquest. Thus conquest is an issue in the modern intellectual history of Latin America. But it has no nineteenth- or twentieth-century existence except as a subject of discussion or as a remote cause for post-colonial conditions. Important as they are such long connections may be held to be irrelevant to our topic for the reason that the relationship is one of cause and consequence rather than continuous existence. One can avoid the difficulty, possibly, by identifying certain intermediate consequences of conquest which persist from late colonial times to the present. I do not mean to involve us in a discussion of the effects of conquests, but only through this example to indicate that a colonial institution may be consequential without being continuous and that modern legacies of colonial institutions may appear in disguised forms. Thus the classic conquests are associated with their own time and place; but one might argue that something of the spirit of conquest remains in Latin America in modern dress.

Because the particularities of institutions change through time, it may be felt that our most convincing instances of continuity are better selected at less concrete levels of institutionalism than any of those so far mentioned. If we now eliminate political and economic, and concentrate (in accordance with our assignment) on social and cultural, themes, we may consider such standard Latin American traits as family cohesiveness, aristocratic concepts of privilege, intellectual conservatism, cultural exclusiveness, and others, all of which can still be identified, in one or another particular form, in modern Latin America. These appear not as institutions but as attitudes or principles that are expressed in institutions. They appear more viable, less changeable, than the institutions that express them because they occur at higher or more durable levels of abstraction. The truth is that it is impossible to think of anything social or cultural that has not been modified in some degree in Latin America since the colonial period. But it is also possible to see some of these changes as superficial adjustments that do not affect underlying uniformities, or as variations on constant themes.

We may take as our next example the institutions of Latin American education. Our argument here would be that the institutions themselves have undergone transformation in numerous ways, while some of the larger attitudes or principles that these institutions ex-

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/743/8043/380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

press have remained constant. Between the colonial universities and the national universities of the middle twentieth century there appear immense differences, in size, in number, in composition, in function, and in technique of operation. The modern university's political role and the power of its student groups have developed far beyond any comparable conditions of the colonial period. The state has replaced the church, or is in process of replacing the church, as the controlling force in education. But the university's concentration on special subjects (we think of law and medicine), the pedagogical emphasis on memory learning and dialectics rather than on empiricism, the limited libraries, the dilettantism, the "manipulation of concepts," the elite principle that denies primary and secondary schooling to large masses of the population—these appear in unbroken continuity from the colonial period.

Again what could be more modern, more post-colonial, in Latin America than its urban industrial society, its rapid-tempo business culture, its labor unions, and its twentieth-century political pressure groups? One might expect little by way of colonial connection here, for the institutions are modern and their ultimate historical origins lie outside Latin America entirely. Further one might be inclined to classify them in wholly political and economic categories and hence as more appropriate to Professor Borah's paper than to mine. But they have all had to adjust to the continuing social-cultural conditions of Latin America, and among others to the intimacy of family ties and the nepotistic tangle that is characteristic of Latin America at all periods. The family, which is the social institution *par excellence,* fixed fundamental forms of association in the colonial period and continues to do so in the twentieth century. "In Latin America culture," as Frank Tannenbaum has said, "business is part of the total scheme of things; it is part of the family, of the *compadre* system, of the friendships, of the Church. It is done among friends in a leisurely and understanding way." Traditional cultural concepts in other words—concepts of interpersonal relations, of honor, of ethics, of work—continue to impinge on political and economic events in Latin America, and to the extent that they do so they represent persistent social-cultural forces to which other areas of life must make adjustment.

There is an opposite and contrasting type of colonial survival in which a particular thing continues with relatively little change, while the surrounding circumstances are so modified as completely to alter its meaning and its import. The type is most clearly exemplified in the physical survivals of colonial buildings and of colonial documents

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

and artifacts. Public buildings, originally erected in a genuinely colonial spirit, are put to uses not originally intended. I have frequently been struck, in studying the history of Latin American towns, by how commonly the *casas reales* of the colonial period survive to become the *juzgado* or the house of correction or the local jail in subsequent periods. Documents that once served a legal purpose are relegated to archives and serve only a historiographical purpose. Works of art that reflected living aspirations fail to find a response in new environments and become testimonies to a dead past. Objects that were used in homes become objects that are looked at in museums. Such fragmentary remnants of colonialism sometimes require support in the twentieth century in order to withstand the destructive forces of modernization, and committees for their defense are sometimes created to safeguard their preservations. As in Peru after the earthquake of 1950, the colonial remains must also compete with the pre-colonial remains, for as one was built upon the other both cannot be simultaneously exposed or maintained. The effort to reconstruct the fortifications in Havana harbor, the effort to prevent the paving of the cobblestones in Pátzcuaro, and the effort to save Taxco from neon lighting are examples of this protectionism, which is partly romantic and nostalgic in spirit and which incidentally allows our tourist brochures to speak of locations of quaint colonial charm.

My impression is however that relics deliberately retained—I am speaking here of secular relics, not of ecclesiastical—are less a part of the Latin American than of the Anglo American or western European scene. Latin America has nothing to compare with the impressive institutionalized antiquarianism of the British Museum or Williamsburg, Virginia. The Latin American cultural heritage has not, in general, been perpetuated in this way—perhaps for the reason that it is already being perpetuated in other, more immediate ways. Preservation in museums is not consonant with the aristocratic, antidemocratic tradition. It is not consonant with the program either of liberalism or of conservatism, for it stands apart from both. To Latin American liberals the society and culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem insufficiently changed from the colonial period, and the need for preservation of any kind is denied. Conservatives seek to retain colonial forms, but as realities in their own social lives, not as objects in museums, and not because they are colonial but because they serve a living purpose.

Historical change in Latin America often strikes observers as change of a peculiarly uneven sort. If I may cite our brochure again

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/710800/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

the "unique contrasts between the old and the new" are features of contemporary Latin America frequently remarked upon by visitors. The colonial and the modern worlds are juxtaposed. The references here are to oxcarts, single-handed plows, draft animals, digging sticks, backstrap looms, handmade pottery, adobe walls, thatched roofs, jugs carried on the head, and the leisurely peace of community existence, especially as these may be observed in conjunction with television, airports, modern architecture, and twentieth-century symbols in general. I do not mean to suggest that such contrasts do not exist. But I think that they need further analysis. The contrasts are "unique" partly because the foreign visitor is unfamiliar with them in his own society, and he should not forget that the contrasting solutions of his own society may appear equally unique from other points of view. In our own country the persisting influence of Puritanism and the continuing depressed position of the Negro provide what might also be called "unique" contrasts to modernism, and they relate the United States more closely to its own colonial past than we are likely to realize or wish. What we mean by "unique contrasts," in short, may imply some imagined or false standard of uniformity, as if there were a proper way for a society to change.

We call Latin America an undeveloped, or underdeveloped, or less euphemistically a backward area, but we could not do so unless we regarded our own, or some other, area as developed and advanced. The concept of underdevelopment, stated in other terms, implies an insufficient change from the colonial period, and the programs for development, or for progress, in Latin America, seek to widen the historical gap. But the notions of development and underdevelopment ordinarily relate to the political and economic spheres that are not the subject of this paper. In modern commentaries on Latin America of all kinds, it seems to me, economic and political topics are receiving more attention, and cultural and social topics less. The programs for progress ordinarily look to the economic scene in the belief that if economic reorientation is accomplished, appropriate social and cultural change will follow. Social, and especially cultural, underdevelopment are less easy to measure than is economic underdevelopment, and from the point of view of those who speak in these terms social and cultural underdevelopment are less important. An economic deficiency can be "corrected" simply by a grant of funds, whereas for a social or cultural deficiency much more subtle methods are required. Though we may speak of an outmoded social structure in Latin America, lacking a middle class, we do not normally allow ourselves to speak of a Latin America that is underdeveloped in its

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

cultural life. Even if made with the best intentions such an observation is likely to be construed as unfriendly. Besides, in remarks that all of us have heard, the charge of cultural underdevelopment is one that Latin Americans make against us, not we against them. It may be that Latin America is closer to its colonial past socially and culturally than it is politically and economically, but I think either proposition would be difficult to prove, and, as we have said, these categories are not so easily separated in Latin American life as in our own.

I agree with Pedro Carrasco, who says that change or continuity will receive different emphases according to whether we consider the structure, the form, or the function of a social institution. We may exemplify the observation with reference to any of the institutions that span the period from the colony to the present. Thus the small Latin American community displays a structure and a form quite similar to those of its colonial prototype. Its function has been modified by modern communication systems and access to the outside world. In the city, on the other hand, both structure and form have been subjected to new influences; function, by contrast, appears to have changed least. The modern class structure, to take another example, is essentially the colonial class structure, despite the evident facts that slavery has been abolished, mobility facilitated, and social differentiations, especially that between peninsulars and creoles, modulated. In form the class system is being inflated and modified by population increase. In function, which is a kind of guide to future structure and form, class plays a still vital, but perhaps a progressively less vital, role.

Change and continuity may be classified in other ways. Between rural and urban societies the degrees of survival from the colonial period to the present consistently differ. Rural society displays the lesser inclination to change. There exist parts of rural Latin America where time appears to stand still, where the material cultures and the society and psychology accompanying them appear almost unchanged in 150 years. By contrast the great Latin American cities resemble, at least externally, not their urban antecedents of the colonial period but the metropolitan types of the twentieth-century world at large. Oscar Lewis has pointed out, with regard to the "culture of poverty," that even the proletariat society, the slums, of a Latin American city, though specifically deriving from their Latin American past, are closely related to the phenomena of twentieth-century world urbanism. In any case even the most unobservant visitor responds to the contrasts between city and countryside. He is familiar

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/770808043038/0430380.pdf by guest on 20 April 2024

with them at home too, but in Latin America the degrees of difference are exceptionally striking and the rural resistance to change exceptionally strong.

In the social structure of Latin America there occur similar differences. As in other parts of the world, but here with a particular Latin American intensity, the upper classes choose to retain what they already possess and to resist changes that would equalize peoples. In some instances the present possessors of large properties are the actual descendants of colonial possessors of large properties, and the continuity of inheritance is unbroken. Both the ancestor and his modern heir exemplify social conservatism. In terms of power and wealth and social attitudes it would perhaps be true to say that the upper classes have changed least since the colonial period and the lower and middle classes most, while the very lowest classes—the rural agriculturists, Indian groups, and "marginal" peoples outside the main society—have changed least of all. But the greatest force for change appears in the unprecedented demands voiced in the twentieth century by a whole middle portion of the society whose colonial counterpart was nonexistent, or, if existent, inarticulate. My point here is that the rate of historical change is modified, not simply as we move from city to country but as we move up or down the social scale.

Again it seems to me that our analysis of colonial survivals will vary according to whether we consider the question primarily from a modern, or primarily from a colonial, point of view. To historians of colonial Latin America it is likely that the present-day world will appear quite different from the colonial world and that the elements of change, rather than the elements of continuity, will dominate a first impression. To the observer more familiar with the modern world, on the other hand, the peculiarities of present-day Latin America, by way of contrast with non-Latin areas, will present themselves in a more forceful way and will receive explanation as ideosyncratic, historically derived, characteristics. The matter is not confined to first impressions but is an integral part of the large, complex question of the relation of the historian, or of any observer, to the subject being considered. The historian of the colonial period typically takes a particularistic view, examines the details of colonial life, recognizes the changes that occur within the colonial period itself, and is less likely to consider the broad attributes that distinguish the colonial from other periods or to accept the characterizations that are postulated by persons who know the subject in less detail. Viewed from a greater distance, on the other hand, the colonial period has a kind of massive unity, and traits can be ascribed to it with less

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

concern for qualification. From this latter standpoint, the object of attention, or the puzzle, is the chaos of modern Latin America and not the chaos of colonial Latin America. It is modern Latin America that demands explanation, and colonial Latin America acquires a certain clarity simply by being removed and subordinated in the formulation of the problem. But if the colonial scene itself constitutes the problem, these roles are reversed.

I think that we should not allow the term "colonial" to suffer the fate that has overtaken the word "medieval" at the hands of careless users and writers of editorials. We should not allow "colonial" to be applied to everything that appears illiberal in Latin America or that is vaguely out of date. Colonial status was what the revolutions for independence were against, and it is perhaps natural that when independence failed to achieve its liberal goals the colonial legacy was blamed. It may be pointed out, on the other hand, that Latin American liberalism has its own colonial antecedents, limited as these may be, and that some of what is condemned as colonial survival in modern times is colonial only in one of the extended meanings indicated above. Again if we consider internal peace and absence of revolution as desiderata then the colonial period appears to this extent preferable to the national period and a favorable aspect of the heritage was rejected. Moreover not all colonial legacies conform to the modern liberal's pejorative typology. Mestization for example is an evident social phenomenon of the colonial period. It was colonial in its origin and had no pre-colonial history. It continued and expanded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it appears with vigor in the contemporary social scene. In the colonial period "mestizo" might be synonymous with bastard or vagrant or outcast. In the nineteenth century mestization was still ordinarily viewed as a defect in the Latin American character. But in various interpretations in more recent Latin American thinking, mestization provides a nationalistic ethos wholly compatible with the most advanced social aspirations. Mestization exemplifies a kind of colonial legacy in reverse, neglected or denounced in its early stages, exalted and proclaimed in its later.

We come then to the major point. I think that most persons are not primarily interested in colonial survivals by way of an historical exercise or an academic question. The fact is that again and again what are called colonial residues in modern Latin America are the objects of condemnation because they appear to be obstacles to change. If Latin America could truly escape from its colonial heritage, so the argument runs, the way would be cleared for Latin America to

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024

take its rightful place in the twentieth-century world. In a sense the proposition is undeniable. The principal inhibiting social legacy is the rigid class system, which neither the revolutions for independence nor any of the subsequent revolutions successfully destroyed, and which is only now being partially modified. The inhibiting cultural legacies relate primarily to education, for though the 50% literacy, more or less, of 1962, represents a marked change upon the colonial figure, still the other 50%, of illiteracy, is seen as a colonial heritage in need of correction. To historians it appears obvious that both the rigid class system and the aristocratic educational system may be traced to pre-colonial origins in the Old World, and that there is a sense in which it is gratuitous to speak of them as colonial rather than as pre-colonial or nineteenth-century. But in comparison with the urgency of the practical demand for improvement, such questions appear immaterial. Who but an historian would consider them at all?

Downloaded from http://dup.silverchair.com/hahr/article-pdf/43/3/380/771080/0430380.pdf by guest on 19 April 2024