

COLONIAL INSTITUTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA:

A Commentary on Two Papers

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THE TASK of commenting on two such thoughtful and penetrating papers is a challenging one, for the areas of agreement among us are so broad as to limit the opportunity for meaningful observation. There are, however, a number of points, some minor, others of greater importance, which call for comment.

Let me begin by noting that both authors were particularly sensitive to the various connotations of the term "colonial." Professor Borah pointed out that today's program "with equal logic and identical wording of topic could deal with the institutions that work to keep Latin America impoverished and subservient to other regions." Professor Gibson, on the other hand, offered a plea that "colonial" should not be allowed to suffer the fate that has overtaken the word "medieval" in the hands of careless users or writers of editorials. This plea, I fear, will have little effect where it is most needed. The term "colonial" has been so closely related to the word "imperial" as to be rendered guilty by association and thus doomed to suffer the penalty of pejorative usage.

Turning now to Professor Borah's paper, we find our attention directed to various survivals of colonial administrative experience. Any of us who have had to deal with governmental agencies in Latin America, whether to extend a temporary visitor's permit so as to complete an archival search, or simply to withdraw an international package from the customs, immediately recognize the features of external administration to which he refers. Were they ever to disappear, I fear that our capacity as historians to appreciate something of the human realities of colonial life would be materially lessened.

Professor Borah proceeds to analyze for us the centralizing features that characterize much of contemporary Latin American government. Here I find myself a bit puzzled since there is no clear effort to differentiate the colonial survivals from the accretions of

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one hundred and fifty years of new experiences. The current subordination of provincial and local authority to the will of the center cannot be regarded simply as a survival of eighteenth-century Bourbon administrative reforms. To do so would be to underestimate the twentieth-century pressures that have augmented the powers of national governments everywhere in the world as well as in Latin America, and also to deprive of all meaning nineteenth-century experimentation in administrative organization. At the least we should bear in mind the discontinuity between the centralizing tendencies of the eighteenth century and those that prevail today. After all, in Mexico it was not until the Díaz regime that the central government effectively controlled local and provincial elections, and determined the appointment of the lowliest officials. In Argentina the national government, when it existed, had only imperfect control over the provinces until after the 1880's; and in Brazil, between 1890 and 1930 the states, or more accurately certain states, seemed to have had greater power and revenues than the national government. The centralized political systems that do in fact exist today in such countries as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, despite their federal constitutions, are not lineal descendants of eighteenth-century centralizing tendencies. Rather they are the product of conflict between those tendencies and regionalist forces—another and unmentioned colonial legacy—and of the new economic, social, and ideological demands that have reshaped political relationships within these states since about 1930.

As regards the preponderance of the executive power within contemporary political systems, I find myself in greater agreement with Professor Borah. The presidency does seem to embody and perpetuate the vast powers and broad personal authority exercised by colonial viceroys and captains-general. Here too, however, one must be wary of generalizing from the example of the Mexican president to his counterparts elsewhere. The prestige this official enjoys within the Mexican political system—especially his freedom from public criticism while in office—is a case in point. If this is a legacy from colonial times then the heirs to the viceregal tradition in the Río de la Plata have reason to complain about their inheritance.

In his examination of the basic features of political life Professor Borah quite properly directs our attention to the eighteenth-century origins of Latin American militarism. The creation of standing armies, the extension of the *fuero militar* to officers of the colonial militia, and the employment of military men in civil posts undoubtedly helped to pave the way for the militarization of political life after

Independence. But whether one can link the political influence of Latin American armies today in any causal way to eighteenth-century developments is something else. Perhaps a case for this could be made in negative terms. The failure of the colonial political experience to prepare civilians for effective self-government permitted the assumption by military men of political power after Independence. Subsequently, whenever and wherever civilian groups have been able to achieve a broad consensus and have learned to fashion effective political parties, military influence on politics has receded. The resurgence of Argentine militarism on the one hand and the decline of Mexican militarism on the other in the years since 1930 give little support to any hypothesis based on colonial precedents.

Professor Gibson's paper offers the intriguing observation that "a colonial institution may be consequential without being continuous" and that "modern legacies of colonial institutions may appear in disguised forms." What he is suggesting, it would appear, is that changes in form and structure of institutions—indeed their very disappearance as far as law or practice is concerned—do not mean that the function performed by the institution has ceased or even that the ideas associated with it have lost their vitality.

One can make a case for the persistence of colonial institutions in disguised forms. The problem then becomes one of definition: does a contemporary social, economic, or political practice similar to one found in colonial times but performed in a different manner constitute a colonial legacy? Is it possible to disembody the spirit from the structure of a colonial institution, recognize it in its modern social garb and acclaim it as a survival? The difficulties involved are illustrated by practical examples.

It has been suggested—although by a political columnist rather than an historian, I hasten to add, that the *residencia* has been recreated in contemporary Argentina. The allusion is to the investigatory committees that are created each time that a government has been forcibly overthrown. These committees, appointed by the successor regime, have inquired into the use and abuse of public office by members of the prior administration; they have produced reports, often voluminous ones, and in some instances their recommendations have resulted in judicial proceedings. The fact that such committees were consistently created after the fall of Yrigoyen in 1930, Castillo in 1943, Perón in 1955, and Frondizi in 1962 suggests that we are indeed in the presence of an institution. But its function appears to be less the administrative one of elevating standards of official conduct or of maintaining royal control over remote officials that we associate with the *residencia* and more the political one of providing

the public with proof that the ousted officials were in fact corrupt, as their opponents had charged, and that they deserved to be put out of office. Perhaps the chief resemblance between the *residencia* of colonial times and the modern Argentine institution is the failure of either to raise standards of public morality.

Now let me cite one other example where I think the spirit of a colonial institution is still at work. This is the *blanqueo de capitales* or whitewashing of taxable assets that occurs in Argentina—and possibly other countries as well. In Argentina in 1956 and again in 1962 delinquent taxpayers—those who had failed to file statements of assets subject to certain taxes—were invited to register those assets and pay the current tax with the inducement that all previous tax obligations on those assets would be forgiven. Some 15,000 took advantage of this offer in 1956; some 100,000 taxpayers presented themselves this past September and October. Now what we have here, I believe, is the revival of the *composición*. Just as Philip II's government, pressed for funds, was willing to update land titles and overlook past irregularities in return for present payments, so the Argentine government in its desperate search for funds whitewashes past tax irregularities and regularizes the status of those who will come in and make payment of current taxes.

Returning to Professor Gibson's paper, I find myself attracted to his assertion that the most convincing instances of continuity are found at what he calls the "less concrete levels of institutionalism." As one reflects on the examples he cites—the persistence of the aristocratic principle in the sphere of education, the role of nepotism and family ties in the varied aspects of urban society—it seems evident that it is not institutions in the usual sense of the word that have slowed and complicated the transformation of Latin America but the survival of a system of values. Professor Borah confirms this in his definition of institutions and in his discussion of the obstacles to capital accumulation.

Even where, as the result of evolving class structure, sharp changes have taken place in the formal aspects of institutional life, certain basic attitudes have shown a tremendous vitality. In education for example it appears that the new middle class has taken over elitist viewpoints once associated with the colonial aristocracy. Víctor Alba has recently asserted that one characteristic of the new middle class in Latin America is that "although it advocates public education, it is in fact much more urgently interested in developing higher and professional education, though this preference is never

frankly stated.”¹ Thus the addition of engineering and economics faculties in the universities alongside the traditional ones of law and medicine expands the avenues through which one can join the elite but does not resolve the problem of the illiterate mass.

If it is true then, as these two fine papers seem to suggest, that the value system erected in the colonial era has been more impervious to change than the structure of institutions, and if those concerned with promoting the rapid modernization of Latin America become increasingly aware that the process involves much more than directing capital flows or altering the terms of trade, then perhaps next year’s program committee could perform a real service by organizing a session to take up where this one leaves off, a session that could perhaps be called “Colonial Values and Contemporary Latin America.”

¹“The Latin American Style and the New Social Forces,” in A. O. Hirschman, *Latin American Issues, Essays and Comments* (New York, 1961), p. 50.