

The rise and rule of the *caudillos* in Latin America

In a seminal work on an accurate definition of the figure of the *caudillo* in the history of Latin America, during the first half of the 19th century, Argentine historian Tulio Halperín Donghi points out that it is both simplistic and inaccurate to reduce to a caricature these regional strongmen that were so important in nation-building. Most went far beyond the stereotypical role of military or paramilitary leader merely seeking to obtain power by force rather than democratic means. Regionalism, federalism, foreign intervention, the territorial fragmentation of the former viceroalties and a general context of insecurity caused strong personalities to emerge and take charge, often representing and counting on the mutual support of different interest groups that varied vastly between Mexico, Central America and South America. The complex social, political and economic panorama that ensued following the independence wars created contexts for these strong leaders to become forceful social actors in building and governing new nations.

Italian political scientist Federica Morelli has pointed to a new analysis of 19th century Latin American *caudillos*, no longer viewed as power-hungry traitors to the cause of democracy in their nascent nations, which has been the prevalent view of historians since the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, as well as the view of many North American and European historians. She proposes the revisionist view, borne out by new evidence, that the personal rural charisma, the military and violent aura has obscured a budding liberalism and republican institution founding in the new political spaces which opened within the new governments. Contrary to what has been written in the past, new evidence has found that many new Latin American nations adopted institutions tending toward democracy, such as wider coverage of suffrage. In fact, with the exception of Ecuador and Chile, most countries extended the vote to Indians and illiterate males. Instead of viewing *caudillos* as tyrants in the midst of political anarchy in which elections played no part, the new Latin American historiography has now found that the *caudillos*, in fact, put forward practices of political modernity alongside traditional conservative roles. The new perspective focuses on petitions, local revolts, other forms of community-based grass-roots political practices that contributed toward nationbuilding in newly independent Latin American countries. In addition, lawyers and jurists in urban areas were responsible for constructing the legal backbone of the state, including provisions for constitutions, codes of law, business and market regulation, and penal codes. Legal professionals often formed the core of the political élites and greatly influenced public opinion. The social actors also contributed to nationbuilding from the salons, literary circles, political clubs, assemblies and congresses, Masonic lodges and the military. The *caudillos* had to negotiate among all of these political and social actors, in addition to local élites, municipal leaders and popular groups, such as peasants, Native Americans and former African slaves.

Discussion point

The *caudillo* phenomenon

In what ways and to what extent was the rule of Spain and, to a lesser degree, Portugal responsible for the political, economic and social upheaval in Latin America during the 19th century that led to the emergence of the *caudillos*?



In what ways were local and regional issues, as well as geography, foreign intervention and centralism contributing factors?

This section will provide students with the opportunity to understand why, in some recently independent Latin American countries, *caudillos* of different types emerged. Within the new nations of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, a great struggle ensued. Nations were divided by regionalism which challenged the ability of many countries to create stable, effective systems of government and healthy economies. The division also had as an ideological backdrop: conservatism vs. liberalism. Bitter, and less often, bloody and protracted contests for power between these groups dominated Latin American politics, as it did politics in North America and most of Europe, until the end of the 19th century.

Caudillos emerged from both liberal and conservative camps, representing the grievances of different interest groups: ranchers, farmers, merchants, landowners, mine owners and many other groups. Sometimes they represented, or had the support of the lower classes and the Indians. Some were of humble origin, like Rafael Carrera of Guatemala; others were of mixed racial and social origins, like José Antonio Páez of Venezuela. Others, like Martín Miguel de Güemes in northern Argentina, fiercely defended the territory and rights of his native Salta against the centralism of Buenos Aires. José G. Artigas also staunchly defended his region north of the Río de la Plata (River Plate) from Buenos Aires as well as Portuguese encroachment, culminating in the foundation of Uruguay. Juan Manuel de Rosas of Argentina was much absorbed by the diplomatic and military complications with France, Britain, Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Brazil.

Local **peons** or former soldiers of the independence armies became the military support for some of the early *caudillos*. The *caudillos* mentioned above were successful and popular officers of the wars of independence. Charismatic, they sometimes employed military justice with impunity to maintain authority and, at times, to eliminate opponents. In other cases, the *caudillos* came to power in the midst of liberal-conservative hostility, such as Rafael Carrera in Guatemala. While Guatemala was still part of the newly independent United Provinces of Central America and early into breaking away from it, Guatemala's government was liberal. The church was especially targeted, as the liberal governments passed reforms to curtail the power of the Roman Catholic Church: this resulted in the expulsion of Dominicans and Jesuits (due mostly to their economic power), the abolition of tithes and recognition of civil marriage and divorce, and the toleration of all religions. Municipalities were especially powerful as sources of local and state power in Guatemala, following not only the colonial tradition of the *cabildo*, or council, but also traditional Indian custom, according to Guatemalan historian Arturo Taracena. Their disagreement with these liberal anti-church moves certainly did much to support the popular *caudillo* Rafael Carrera in his rise to power in 1838. He then, promptly, repealed all the laws against the established church, yet kept toleration of other religions. Carrera also urged the Guatemalan Assembly to allow the Jesuits to return to Guatemala as a boon to education. Carrera eventually signed a concordat with the Vatican in 1852 which strengthened the role of the Catholic Church in

The words **peon** and **peonage** are derived from the Spanish *peón*. It has a range of meanings, but is generally used to describe someone of low social origins, who is in a position of servitude or debt bondage.

Guatemala, making it the exclusive religion and only doctrine taught in schools: a state of affairs which lasted until the liberal revolution in 1871.

A different sort of strong leader emerged in Chile in the 1830s. Businessman Diego Portales was never president, but he formed powerful conservative influence groups as Minister (of the Interior, then of War and the Navy), that changed the political landscape of the country for a century. He was a frequent contributor and commentator for the press and used his powerful influence to control the political anarchy of the previous liberal governments. This austere figure of a public servant of frugal honesty has been enriched by historiography analyzing his defence of the rule of law and stressing social obedience to authority, while maintaining the privileges of the élite and the Catholic Church. He believed in a strong, centralized legal system and judiciary, and wrote that the judicial system must be improved to curb abuses. Democracy was a future ideal to Portales, who believed that first a strong system of law and order was necessary for social control and for the stability required for business to progress. This occurred, and landholders, businessmen and mine owners prospered while the majority of Chileans did not.

Caudillos were important nation-builders in Latin American politics from 1820 into the 1870s, but they were by no means the only social actors demanding or suppressing change. In the newly independent Kingdom of Brazil, according to Brazilian historian Jurandir Malerba, strong conservative élite influence groups exerted their power to maintain their privilege, their monopoly of commerce and the institution of slavery until the end of the 19th century, sometimes supporting local strongmen or *caudillos* in the powerful states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas. The monarchy, like its republican counterparts in most of the rest of Latin America, had a strong social and political influence group in the *salons*, and one of the best known hostesses was the Countess de Barral from the 1850s on. Brazilian writer Wanderley Pinho comments that “No other woman of that era had as much social and political power.” Living alternately in Bahia and in Paris, she subtly, but decisively influenced the abolitionist movement, protested imprisonment of Catholic bishops, declared the freedom of her female slaves’ children in the 1860’s and freed all her slaves in 1880. She often traveled to Rio de Janeiro and the Court in Petrópolis, where she had direct contact with Pedro II and the Brazilian monarchy and often carried missives for him to and from Europe. Her *salon* in Rio was frequented by liberals and conservatives, providing a space for discussion, compromise and decision-making kept civil by the countess’s legendary finesse.

Juan Manuel de Rosas of Argentina is a good example of how difficult it is to simply dismiss *caudillos* as stereotypical, crude despots. Rosas ruled for 23 years and was certainly a tyrant, refusing to build republican institutions or a constitution, yet as Argentine historian José Ramos Mejía has written, “In the matter of public funds, Rosas never touched one peso for his own benefit, he lived soberly and modestly and died in poverty.” He had been one of the richest

Activity

Film activity

- Watch the film *Camila* (1984, Dir. Maria Luisa Bemberg), which deals with life during the Rosas dictatorship in Argentina until 1852.
- Examine and discuss the role of the élite in supporting Rosas and the power of the Roman Catholic Church and Rosas in upholding traditional values and customs, as well as curtailing liberal political thought.

conservative landowners in Argentina and he ruled with an iron hand, grievously curtailing free speech and ideas, supported by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1835, he announced a new customs law that was meant to protect agriculture and ranchers, as well as the manufacturing industry, to give the middle-classes a chance to prosper. On the other hand, he did not behave with such largesse toward Argentina's Native American population, and was wary enough of them to say, when offered their support in 1852 against the army that would unseat him: "If we triumph, who will contain the Indians? And if we are defeated, who will contain the Indians?" In addition, revisionist Argentine historian Tulio Halperín Donghi has proposed that Rosas empowered the rural peonage and argues that this makes him "the leader of a bourgeois revolution that has a ranching and rural base, and not, like the metropolitan countries, an industrial and urban base."

Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793–1877)

Juan Manuel de Rosas earned his spurs fighting in a number of wars against foreign and domestic enemies before he came to power as the Governor of Buenos Aires Province (1829–32).

He was Caudillo of Argentina from 1835 until his defeat at the Battle of Caseros in 1852. In power, Rosas believed that whatever helped the cattle industry helped the nation. Not surprisingly, he was popular with ranchers, *gauchos*, meat-plant owners and workers. He owned vast tracts of land and was related to Argentina's wealthiest landowning family. He supported the traditional role of the Catholic Church and was no friend of liberal reforms. He was popular with the people who believed he was their benefactor and protector, but also ruthless in putting down his opponents in wars waged against Argentina's domestic and foreign enemies.



Rosas ruled from Buenos Aires yet his support was in the country where he spent many months away from the capital on his ranch. He was suspicious of the Europeans but was popular with the people when he stood up to the English and French on several occasions. The key to his power and longevity was his military prowess. Initially, he recruited an army of *gauchos*, mulattos and *mestizos* and led them to victory after victory. He gave his soldiers land grants and won their loyalty. He maintained the support of the landowning gentry by not initiating land-reforms. The creole elite eventually, however, defeated him in 1852 with the support of the armies of Brazil and Uruguay, after which he fled to England. Rosas's defeat opened the door for liberal values to gain the upper hand. A liberal constitution, capitalism, land speculation and an export-driven cattle industry to feed beef-hungry Europe followed his exile. In the end, his greatest achievement was keeping Argentina united.

Activity

The caudillo: Three historians' views

Read the views of three US and British historians and address the questions at the end of this section

Source A

A few caudillos, however, championed the lifestyles and needs of the dispossessed majority and can be considered "popular" or "folk" caudillos. A highly complex group, they shared some of the characteristics of the elite caudillos, but two major distinctions marked them as unique. They refused to accept unconditionally the elites' ideology of progress, exhibiting a preference for the American experience with its Indo-Afro-Iberian ingredients and, consequently, a greater suspicion of the post-Enlightenment European model. Further they claimed to serve the folk rather than the elite.

A nineteenth century contemporary found that "the people regarded a popular caudillo as 'guardian of their traditions,' the defender of their way of life." And such leaders constituted "the will of the popular masses ... the immediate organ and arm of the people ... the caudillos are democracy."



If the folk obeyed unreservedly those popular leaders, the caudillos in turn bore the obligation to protect and to provide for the welfare of the people. The ruled and the ruler were responsible to and for each other, a personal relationship challenged in the nineteenth century by the more impersonal capitalist concept that a growing gross national product would provide best for all. The popularity of those caudillos is undeniable.

Source: Burns, Bradford E. and Charlip, Julia A. 2007. *Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History*. New Jersey: Pearson-Prentice Hall. pp. 112–13.

Source B

In the conditions prevailing after the wars of independence there were plenty of opportunities for political buccaneering. Economic depression, the breakdown of law and order, the militarization of society, all contributed to the phenomenon of the caudillo—a charismatic leader who advanced his interests through a combination of military and political skills, and was able to build up a network of clients by dispensing favours and patronage. Caudillos were the major power-brokers and power-seekers in the political world; in fact, they treated politics as a form of economic enterprise, adopting liberalism or conservatism as best suited their strategy for winning control of public funds in order to enhance their capacity to offer patronage and so build up their networks of power.

Source: Williamson, Edwin. 2009. *The Penguin History of Latin America*. Penguin Books. p. 237.

Source C

The Caudillo had three basic qualifications; an economic base, a social constituency and a political project. He first emerged as a local hero, the strong man of his region, whose authority derived from ownership of land, access to men and resources and achievements that impressed for their value of their valor. A caudillo would ride out from his hacienda at the head of an armed band, his followers bound to him by personal ties of dominance and submission and by a common desire to obtain power and wealth by force of arms. His progress then depended on the strength of the state. In societies where succession to office was not yet formalized, caudillism filled the gap; political competition was expressed in armed conflict and the successful competitor ruled by violence, not by right of inheritance or election. Such rule would be subject to further competition and could rarely guarantee its own permanence.

Caudillos were thus likely to emerge when the state was in disarray, the political process disrupted, and society in turmoil; personalism and violence took the place of law and institutions, and the rule of the powerful was preferred to representative government.

Source: Lynch, John. 1992. *Caudillos in Spanish America*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Questions

Based on the views of these historians answer the following questions:

- 1 What pre-conditions allowed the *caudillos* to emerge?
- 2 What were the dominant characteristics of a *caudillo*?
- 3 Speculate on why *caudillos* did not become a permanent fixture in Latin America
- 4 Why were *caudillos* most popular with the “folk”?
- 5 Why did South Americans support the *caudillos* initially?
- 6 Using the opinions of all three historians, and the Latin American sources mentioned in the text, develop a profile of the *caudillo*.

Activity**The *caudillo* and the Artist**

Portrayed as a heroic figure, José Antonio Páez came to prominence because of his bravery and leadership during the wars of independence, serving with Simón Bolívar. In 1830, Páez declared Venezuela independent from Gran Colombia. Nicknamed *El Centauro de los Llanos* (The Centaur of the Plains), Páez served three terms as president.

Examine the two paintings of Páez and answer the questions that follow.



José Antonio Páez, painted in 1874 by Martín Tovar y Tovar.



The Battle of Las Quesearas del Medio, 2 April 1819, painted by Arturo Michelena in 1890. Here, Michelena depicts the moment when Páez ordered his 150 lancers to “Vuelvan Caras!” (Literally to about-face and attack 1,000 Spanish calvary). The Spanish were defeated leaving over 400 dead, while Páez lost six men.

Compare and contrast the messages conveyed in these two paintings.

- 1 What is the painter of the presidential portrait attempting to convey about José Antonio Páez?
- 2 Why do you think the lancers obey Páez and turn to face the hard-charging Spanish cavalry despite being outnumbered almost ten to one? How does the painting support your conclusions?
- 3 Why was it important in wars of independence to portray leaders as heroes?