

Political Issues Facing Latin America in the 1800s

Excerpt from Simon Bolivar, Message to the Congress of Angostura (1819)

What is the problem Bolivar sees, with Latin America and its political history as a Spanish colony?

They are entrusted with civil, political, military and religious functions; but in the last analysis, the Satraps of Persia are Persians, the Pashas of the Great Master are Turks, the Sultans of Tartary are Tartars. China does not send for her Mandarins to the land of Genghis-khan, her conqueror. [Latin] America, on the contrary, received all from Spain, which had really deprived her of true enjoyment and exercise of active tyranny, by not permitting us to share in our own domestic affairs and interior administration. This deprivation had made it impossible for us to become acquainted with the course of public affairs; neither did we enjoy that personal consideration which the glamour of power inspires in the eyes of the multitude, so important in the great revolutions. I will say, in short, we were kept in estrangement, absent from the universe and all that relates to the science of government.

The people of [Latin] America having been held under the triple yoke of ignorance, tyranny and vice, have not been in a position to acquire either knowledge, power or virtue. Disciples of such pernicious masters, the lessons we have received and the examples we have studied, are most destructive. We have been governed more by deception than by force, and we have been degraded more by vice than by superstition. Slavery is the offspring of Darkness; an ignorant people is a blind tool, turned to its own destruction; ambition and intrigue exploit the credulity and inexperience of men foreign to all political, economical or civil knowledge; mere illusions are accepted as reality, license is taken for liberty, treachery for patriotism, revenge for justice. Even as a sturdy blind man who, relying on the feeling of his own strength, walks along with the assurance of the most wide awake man and, striking against all kinds of obstacles, can not steady his steps.

What is the connection Bolivar makes between virtue and liberty?

A perverted people, should it attain its liberty, is bound to lose this very soon, because it would be useless to try to impress upon such people that happiness lies in the practice of righteousness; that the reign of law is more powerful than the reign of tyrants, who are more inflexible, and all ought to submit to the wholesome severity of the law; that good morals, and not force, are the pillars of the law and that the exercise of justice is the exercise of liberty. Thus, Legislators, your task is the more laborious because you are

to deal with men misled by the illusions of error, and by civil incentives. Liberty, says Rousseau, is a juicy food, but difficult to digest. Our feeble fellow-citizens will have to strengthen their mind much before they will be ready to assimilate such wholesome nourishment. Their limbs made numb by their fetters, their eyesight weakened in the darkness of their dungeons and their forces wasted away through their foul servitude, will they be capable of marching with a firm step towards the august temple of Liberty? Will they be capable of coming close to it, and admiring the light it sheds, and of breathing freely its pure air?

Many ancient and modern nations have cast off oppression; but those which have been able to enjoy a few precious moments of liberty are most rare, as they soon relapsed into their old political vices; because it is the people more often than the government, that bring on tyranny. The habit of suffering domination makes them insensible to the charms of honor and national prosperity, and leads them to look with indolence upon the bliss of living in the midst of liberty, under the protection of laws framed by their own free will. The history of the world proclaims this awful truth!

Bolivar states that what works in the United States very well might not work in Latin America:

And, in my opinion, it is a wonder that its model in North America may endure so successfully, and is not upset in the presence of the first trouble or danger. Notwithstanding the fact that that people is a unique model of political virtues and moral education; notwithstanding that it has been cradled in liberty, that it has been reared in freedom and lives on pure liberty, I will say more, although in many respects that people is unique in the history of humanity, it is a prodigy, I repeat, that a system so weak and complicated as the federal system should have served to govern that people in circumstances as difficult and delicate as those which have existed. But, whatever the case may be, as regards the American Nation, I must say that nothing is further from my mind than to try to assimilate the conditions and character of two nations as different as the Anglo-American and the Spanish-American. Would it not be extremely difficult to apply to Spain the Code of political, civil and religious liberty of England? It would be even more difficult to adapt to Venezuela the laws of North America.

Excerpt from: How to Conduct a Latin-American Revolution, by F. Hassaurek (1865)

The moment a revolutionary party has secured a foothold somewhere, they resort to the customary mode of Latin-American warfare. Its principal features are forcible impressments, and forced loans and contributions, in addition to which they seize all the horses, mules, cattle, provisions, Indians, and other property they can lay hands on. The Government does the same....

Ecuadorian soldiers are but poorly clad and poorly paid. Many of them have to go barefoot. When their services are no longer required, they are discharged without the means to return to their homes. Under these circumstances, it cannot appear strange that such soldiers should revenge themselves on society whenever an opportunity offers. When marching from one place to another, they will take from the poor people living along the public highways whatever they can find. Hence, when it becomes known that a regiment or company of soldiers will march through a certain district, the people living along the road, even in times of profound peace, will hide their valuables, drive away their horses, mules, cattle, or sheep, take their provisions, chickens, etc., to some out-of-the-way place in the mountains or forests, and make preparations as if they expected the arrival of a savage enemy. The houses along the road will be deserted; the men will carefully keep out of the way of the marching columns; and only now and then an old woman will be found to tell the soldiers how poor she is. Many a time when, during my travels in the Cordillera, I stopped at a hut to buy eggs or other provisions, the people told me with a sigh: "We have nothing to sell, sir; the soldiers were here and took all we had."

The first means of a party which succeeds in a revolution or civil war are generally acts of retaliation or revenge on the vanquished, who may congratulate themselves if only forced contributions are resorted to. The wealthy members of the losing party are notified by the new "Government" that within a certain number of days or hours they must pay a certain sum of money. If they refuse, the amount is sometimes raised, and even doubled, and the victims are imprisoned, either in their own houses or in the military barracks, until they "pay up." If they are storekeepers, their goods are seized as security. If they are hacienda owners, their cattle or horses are taken in lieu of money. If they are women, they are placed under a military guard, and not allowed to leave their rooms, or to consult with friends, until they comply with the arbitrary edict of the despot of the day.