FRUSTRATED POLITICAL ‘MODERNITY’
IN LATIN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

In order to respond to the theme of this colloquium, I adapt a flexible and operational definition of ‘modernity’, not much embedded in doctrinal discussions. I refer to ‘modernity’ as a social state including, among other characteristics, high levels of variables such as per capita income, development of industry and services, urbanization, individual liberties, democratic election of rulers, widespread of education, and external opening. These and other elements can be combined in different countries with different intensities and by different ways. There is not, indeed, a single model of modernity’, and even less of ‘modernization’. On the contrary, the just mentioned elements can be considered to be broadly desirable precisely because they can develop in different geographic, ethnic and cultural contexts with specific forms in each place.

Some elements of ‘modernity’ can be measured or estimated in a comparative perspective by using certain indicators. A notable example is the United Nations Index of Human Development, which is a composite of economic, cultural and demographic variables, such as life expectancy, literacy, per capita school years and income. Other indices are, for instance, the World Values Survey, Freedom House, and others for economic freedom, press freedom, ‘perception of corruption’, as well as the ‘Latinobarometer’ and its parallels in other regions of the world (all easily accessible in the web).

If this operationalization is accepted, most countries in Latin America are at mid-low or relatively low levels of ‘modernity’. Specifically, in the ‘human development index’, Latin America is located below the OECD and central and east
European countries, and above Asia and Africa. Mexico lies at the 52th place over 177 countries, although it is below the median in ‘human poverty’ and ‘women development’.

I will focus here on a few basic elements of political ‘modernity’ which imply the building of a sovereign nation state with representative government. There may be several factors to explain the relatively low levels of political ‘modernity’ in most countries in Latin America, including Mexico. They can be identified as for:

1) Legacies of the Spanish colony, which was strongly ‘ancient regime’, in contrast to dominations by other colonial metropolis.

2) Independence outcomes, especially territorial fragmentation in dispersion and the subsequent ethnic heterogeneities.

3) Institutional choices, strongly oriented towards the concentration of presidential power.

**ANCIENT REGIME COLONIES**

From the beginning of conquest in the Center and the South, the medieval combination of military and religious initiatives typical of Iberian explorers, conquerors, and missionaries had contrasted with the habits of the more entrepreneurial Anglo merchants and farmers in the colonization of the North. For three hundred years, Spanish colonial rule had been arranging or creating ancient regime, medievalizing social and economic structures in which no effective administration or clear or enforceable civil or private property rights were established. Social life was structured in a number of cities, but also in many small agrarian communities –including the so-
called 'Indian republics'— under the influence of local churches. (Carmagnani 1975, Weckmann 1983, 1993).

Further processes were very different in the metropolis and in the colonies. On one side, the building of the empire in America helped to increasing the links among the several old kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula. During the 18th century, the Crown of Spain, which at the beginning, with the Habsburgs, had been only a personal union, was replaced with an increasingly centralized monarchy with the Bourbons. By the time European-born colons and American-born creoles in the colonies reclaimed the formation of autonomous local assemblies to appropriately represent their interests before the crown --as had been the case with Castile-Leon, Aragon-Catalonia, and Navarre-Basconia in the previous two centuries under the Habsburgs-- it was too late. The new absolutist, centralizing dynasty was already suppressing such intermediate bodies even in Spain. In addition, although inspired by the French model, the new Spanish monarchy was not able to effectively reform traditional social and economic structures by liberating serfs or opening new markets for local production, and even less so in the remote Americas, in contrast to the type of changes developed in 18th century France. (Elliot 1963, Kamen 1983, Lynch 1991).

As is well known, American colons and creoles entangled themselves in fiscal and commercial fights with the metropolis. In the absence of appropriate institutional mechanisms to deal with these differences, they generated unintended disobedience and rebellion which eventually involved dramatic clashes with the colonial armies. The Spanish empire had had notable difficulties in monitoring and extracting revenue from very distant colonies. Viceroy's and captain generals had become little accountable for their activities. When the Spanish absolutist monarchy collapsed on the peninsula at a French invasion, a new liberal regime was then going to be established for Spaniards "of
both hemispheres”, as was proclaimed in the new 1812 constitution in Cadiz. But then a mixture of agrarian catholic reactionaries, new liberal enlightened reformers, and heterogeneous indigenous groups took the occasion to surge up in the colonies, eventually declaring their independence. (Lynch 1973, Dominguez 1980, Halperin 1985, Annino, Castro-Leiva and Guerra 1994).

**EARLY INDEPENDENCE**

Most Spanish colonies in North, Central, and South America arrived at their independence probably too early –by the early 19th century. At that time, the independence leaders could not rely upon prior governmental resources nor their own organizational or institutional capacity to structure political alternatives, voters, and electoral competition. The new independent republics were very weak states, in the sense that they attained very small levels of tax collection and public expenditure, tiny administrative structures, little law enforcement, and ineffective armies. (Tilly 1975, 1990, Collier and Collier 1991, Lopez-Alvez 2001, Centeno 2002).

At the time of independence, not only was the economy in Spanish America backward, fragmented, and uneven, but about two-thirds of the population did not speak Spanish (Lodares 2002). The breakdown of the existing institutions and authorities fostered broad social unrest. Rebellions in the country increased the ruralization of social life and territorial fragmentation. Elite competition for power developed through coups and protective counter-coups, spreading a number of civil wars across the continent. Fighting wars exacerbated confiscations and fiscal collections; the previously existing monetary union was destroyed and raised tariffs were adopted, in this way still

Social disarray, political chaos, and economic disaster were among the immediate consequences of the liberation from colonial rule. As was soon acknowledged precisely by Simón Bolívar, in a dramatic confession that his initial grandiose project had failed, "Independence is the only good, which we have acquired at the expense of everything else" (Bolivar 1830).

**TERITORIAL DISUNION**

Remarkably, at about the same time, former British North America had managed to give itself a stable institutional framework and eventually succeeded in developing its own political communities and markets. In contrast to the situation in the Spanish world, the first thirteen British colonies in North America that declared their independence from colonial rule in the late 18th century could rely on previously established local representative assemblies and governments along with well-defined property rights. They soon formed a single federal Union, linked by a new liberal constitution, which became the core for further Southern and Western expansion—also supported by the diffusion of the unifying English language. For more than two centuries, the United States of America --a very broad, mighty, prosperous union-- has been able to attract and somewhat include huge fluxes of immigrants from all over the world, especially from Mexico and Latin America. (Langley 1976, Riker 1984, Grofman and Wittman 1989).
A major institutional difference between these two processes on the American continent was territorial union in the North and territorial fragmentation in the Center and South. In contrast to the unifying federal process in the former British territory, the initial four Spanish viceroyalties organized in North-Central America, the continental Caribbean, the Andean region, and the Southern Cone very quickly split into a high number of states of disparate size and composition. In situations of low population density and weak administrative and technical capacities, the new independent rulers were unable to project their control over large territories and incorporate dispersed and ethnically varied groups into a single institutional framework. Some of the larger units managed to remain more or less united –thus creating the large republics of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. But many provinces and towns were in the hands of generals, colonels, and lieutenants who, fearful of the large group's corresponding domination and invested in their own local relations, struck out on their own and separated from their previous allegiances. In this way Paraguay and Uruguay separated from Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela (and later Panama) from Colombia, Bolivia from Peru, Guatemala from Mexico and, immediately afterwards, the rest of Central America separated in a dispersed manner from Guatemala thus creating Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. (Rodriguez 1978, Riker 1996, Parodi 2002, Alesina and Spolaore 2003, Colomer 2007).

Many of the new smaller states and closed societies proved to be rather unviable, not having achieved minimal degrees of institutionalization and social and political stability in the ensuing two hundred years. In conditions of ancient regime social structures, precarious state resources, lack of common language, small size, and isolation, any minor social conflict, unrest or riot within a state tends to become a general political crisis, fostering reactions and counter-reactions questioning the basis of
the community itself. Massive and steady emigration—mostly to the United States—has been a distinctive feature of most countries in the region.

Only the two former Portuguese colonies of Maranhao and Brazil, which united only in the late 18th century, developed a somewhat smoother political process. In fact, Brazil remained organized by the Portuguese monarchy separated from Spain until the late 19th century, which allowed it, among other advantages, to subsist as a very large, relatively stable political community.

**ETHNIC CONFLICT**

One of the colonial institutions that plagued some new states’ further development, especially around the Caribbean basin, was the organization of agricultural and domestic work largely on the basis of African-originated slaves’ labor. In former British North America, the politicization of the issue of slavery generated, in the second half of the 19th century, one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. This was particularly paradoxical because, by the time of the North American civil war, more than fifty years had elapsed since the British empire had eliminated slavery, in general by peaceful means, in the rest of its dominions. Only Canada in the North and Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean arrived sufficiently late at independence from Britain and Spain, respectively, to avoid dealing with such an issue under newly improvised or not yet well-proven institutions. (Thomas 1997).

In other territories, especially in Central America and the Andean region, racial and economic strain also developed in the form of miscommunication and confrontation with substantial portions of the native Indian population. During the conflicts leading to
independence, loyal Spanish and colonial rebels had competed in trying to mobilize Indians to their respective support, as further rival caudillos in the newly created republics also did afterwards. This only produced more misunderstanding and more unpredicted, disordered developments. In fact, wide sectors of the indigenous population in Latin America were never incorporated into the new political communities. If the indigenous groups generated social movements or even political parties, they tended to play outside the established rules of the game. Continuing into the 21st century, majority or large portions of the population in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, and several states in Mexico cannot communicate beyond their small local communities because they only speak unwritten local tongues. In general, racial segregation, discrimination, exclusion, rebellion, and conflict have remained very long-term features across the continent. (Florescano 1997, Marx 1998).

CONTENTIOUS PRESIDENTIALISM

It was over those weak administrative apparatuses, backward economies, territorial fragmentation, and ethnic dispersion that new destabilizing political institutions were unable to channel conflicts and even contributed to the promotion of political unpredictability and social clashes.

The new independence political leaders in 19th century Latin America tried to substitute weak states with strong governments. Unfortunately, they tried to strengthen the government by concentrating powers in the hands of a single individual –the regime formula usually known as 'presidentialism'. Although a number of constitution makers claimed to be imitating the institutional formulas adopted in the late 18th century at the
formation of the United States, some of them looked farther back to the absolutist monarchies and aimed at having “elected kings with the name of presidents” (again in Simón Bolívar’s words). In the U.S. process, a combination of intellectual creativity, political maneuvering, and serendipity led to the establishment of a regime of division of powers by which inter-institutional cooperation implying broad political and social supporting majorities is required to make enforceable policy decisions. In the United States, power is shared by the Presidency and the Cabinet, the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Supreme Court, the state governments (also organized around the Governorship and the one- or, more often, two-chamber Assemblies)-, and the local governments. In contrast, in the typical Latin American country, the bulk of power resides in the single-person Presidency, to which the other institutions are either subservient or in underlying or open conflict.

Diffusion of power, like in the United States, makes drastic, expeditious decisions sometimes difficult to make, but, precisely for this, it does not polarize opposition. It rather fosters consensus, acquiescence, or indifference, all of them favorable attitudes to social, economic, and cultural development. In contrast, the typical Latin American presidentialist concentration of power creates very small, weak, and contentious governments, which also further weakens the state. Especially in societies with low levels of income, high economic inequalities and ethnical heterogeneity, presidentialist governments tend to be alienated from society, politically both trouble-making and vulnerable, and highly unstable. (Colomer 2001, 2004, 2005, Colomer and Negretto 2003, 2005).
REFERENCES


