

SOCIAL FORCES IN THE GROWTH OF LATIN AMERICA¹

I

THE NATURAL BACKGROUND²

THE indifference of the average American regarding the republics to the south of us, their land, their people, and their way of life, has been until recent years thorough and persistent. South America was so remote in the literal terms of transportation that it did not seem to belong to our hemisphere. Those countries were thought to be peopled with treacherous, poorly civilized half-breeds who cultivated nothing but leisure and produced little except revolution.

But this sense of remoteness has given way to one of proximity. Contacts have been established in divers ways, and, since the beginning of our brief and hesitating existence as a world power, it has been increasingly felt that North and South America were somehow moving in the same orbit. Vague interest has given place to detailed knowledge. Travelers more and more bend their course to the southward. Our merchants and capitalists are searching for and seizing opportunities that seemed a little while

¹ A course of six university extension lectures delivered under the auspices of the Rice Institute in the autumn of 1919 by John Willis Slaughter, Ph.D. (Michigan), Resident Lecturer in Civics and Philanthropy on the Sharp Foundation of the Rice Institute.

² Inasmuch as these lectures do not include more material than is necessary for social interpretation, the reader to whom the subject is novel is advised to consult some treatise on Latin American history.

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ago not worth the candle. The solid bond of economic interest is being forged, and acquaintanceship follows fast upon the exchange of goods.

In the last few years, too, the political relationships of north and south have emerged in a clearer definition. European economic expansion had supervened upon the tendency to territorial aggression which brought the Monroe Doctrine into being. These later associations, with their tangles of public and private interests, called for a clearer conception of policy from our statesmen. The construction of the Canal made the strategic control of the Caribbean a necessity; it therefore threw us into new and complicated relationships with the neighboring small republics. From this circumstance as a center there has radiated a new set of influences affecting the whole mass of Latin American peoples.

Above this groundwork of economic and political fact and difficulty there has floated a multi-colored atmosphere of romance. The American, tied, as a rule, to the exacting machinery of an industrial nation, has a strange hunger for the heroic and the picturesque. He is attracted by the vivid colors of nature and human life in the tropics. He has still his school-boy interest in adventures of conquistadores, in the adventurous search for gold, in the sumptuous living of feudal grandees. In spite of his desire to live and work under a government of his own making, he has still a lurking admiration for personal and irresponsible power. One of the roads, therefore, to Latin America is the unsubstantial, wavering, but ever beckoning one provided by imagination.

Meanwhile, and in the face of our imperfect knowledge and uncertain attitude, these republics are making their way to full membership in the family of nations. Our next stage

of study, preliminary to closer association, is an attempt to understand who these people are and what they are doing, to discover what they conceive to be their destiny and what forces are conspiring with them in its achievement.

Here is a world no less striking than that of business or romance. The social forces that are making Latin American life are as contrasting as mountain and plain, productive in their fusions and reactions of petty comedy and stupendous tragedy. To unload a heritage, the most evil one ever bequeathed to colonies by a mother-country, and to melt and mold into unity refractory elements of race and custom,—this has been the task in nation-making, still going on before our eyes in pain and in all-pervading hopefulness.

The life and history of these countries become more comprehensible when seen in connection with the geographical features that have in some measure determined their course. Man's artificial environment comes and goes in response to his changing need or aspiration, but his natural surroundings provide a fixed stage, with only slightly alterable setting, on which the episodes of history must be played, and no event can be indifferent to its setting. Slow, unconscious, and uncompromising influences of climate and topography give a direction to all human activities. These influences interweave themselves intimately with the texture of life and its attendant philosophy. Man works as his natural surroundings permit or compel, and his work shapes his habits and his thoughts. Just as any individual takes on the special marks of his profession or his trade, just as his attitudes and social connections are rooted in what he does as his daily work, so does the larger group develop modes of thought and action that accommodate the dominant occupations, and a social order is established to conform with and carry out the common working purpose. Jungle, plain,

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mountain-slope, river, and sea-coast are the indissoluble elements in the human life to which they give sustenance. The regional features of South America are few in number, but striking in scale, in contrast, and in significance. The Cordillera is no ordinary mountain-chain which merely, as with us, challenges a greater ingenuity. The haul over the Rockies is not prohibitive for ordinary goods even when combined with the traverse of a continent. But there are no means within the present contemplation of engineering science by which articles of general consumption can be carried across the Andes. The costs are prohibitive in the existing economic order. It is therefore a fact of importance that the continent of South America is divided into two sections between which direct effective communication is so far out of the question that we might almost consider the ocean as lying between them. This is, of course in the human sense, the literal truth. The range is single in its most southern reaches, but doubles as it stretches up the continent. From its middle a great shoulder juts eastward to make room for a lofty plateau. With the widening of the continent and the increasing width of the mountain-range, the moisture-laden winds from the east are cleared of their last drop before the western slope is reached. This narrow coastal band is therefore, through its middle course, a desert except for streams from the melting Andean snows.

Almost as effective as the Cordillera, as an instrument of separation, is the Amazon River. The regions north and south are again connected only by the ocean, and this condition must continue for an indefinite period. The river is really an inland sea with a narrow longitudinal channel of communication. The intermittent floods make the human conquest of the selvas so difficult that its accomplishment is not within our present view. But if the river is an instru-

ment of division, it is also a superlatively fine one for communication across the continent. Ocean-borne vessels can go to the very foot-hills of the Andes and the hinterland of Peru and Bolivia has what is in effect an eastern seaboard.

The same is true of the great southern river. The stream which pours out its yellow waters in the sea-like estuary of the Rio de la Plata is, to the northward, the Paraná, fed by the dual drainage systems of the Paraguay and the Alto Paraná. On the former, sea-going vessels can reach Corumba in Brazil, nearly two thousand miles from the mouth of the river. The eastern branch, drawing some of its water from the very edge of the Brazilian plateau, within the sight of the Atlantic, follows a turbulent course difficult of navigation, but which may within a few years provide for this part of the world an immense industrial area. Inside the continent lies a great stretch of plain, terminating in the highlands of Matto Grosso, the divide of the river systems. With only a single short carriage, it is said that a canoe can proceed from the mouth of the La Plata to that of the Orinoco.

The physical elements are, then, the impassable Cordillera, two plateaus, that of Brazil being cut by watercourses into mountains and valleys, and two great river systems, to which should be added the minor one of the Orinoco. With these go the plains and the habitable valleys of the broken plateau, and a coastal border ranging from the inhospitable tip of the continent to the tropical lowlands of Guiana and Venezuela.

To the above must be added the portion of the North American continent south of the United States and the islands of the Caribbean. In the case of Mexico, the dominant feature is a great central plateau sufficient to justify the name of New Spain. Its broken edges are familiar

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as the eastern and western Sierra Madre Mountains. It rises from the northern border in a gradual ascent to an immense promontory in the state of Oaxaca. In the north and west this area merges into the great desert. To the east is a coastal border of tropical characteristics in its southern stretch. To the south there is a drop to comparative lowlands that connect with the less contrasting regions of Central America. The plateau itself, by reason of its altitude, has the effect of the temperate zone. Indeed, in Mexico one can within a few hours traverse regions characteristic of every latitude from that of tropical exuberance to the arctic desolation of the ice-cap of Orizaba, or Popocatepetl.

Despite its hundreds of branches and languages, there is a large element of identity throughout the indigenous American race. Any theory of its origin is no more than a matter of calculating the probabilities. If it came from Asia, its life on this continent had been sufficiently long for the development of many special characteristics. It is likely that it spread to full occupation of the continent with no more than the primitive skill of hunting and fishing. There is little evidence that the savages found by our forefathers were cases of reversion; it is rather that they had been maintained in the savage state by natural conditions. The formation of fixed settlements with a sedentary mode of life is a special achievement in the history of the race. It seems to take place only when a group that may possibly find itself at a disadvantage under conditions of forest life moves into a region less favored for gaining a livelihood. Where nature provides an abundance man is little inclined to exert mind or body, and there is no test which insures the survival of the superior. The mobile and often very active life of savages preserves efficiency within the type, but the

type provides for no advance beyond itself. The savage in the jungle exists within a closed circle which can only be broken by a departure from those conditions. This change of conditions to a less favorable area entails the necessity of working for a living instead of having merely to catch and kill. The beginning of work was, to be sure, a fall from the Eden of savagery, but it was the start on the long rise to civilization. Those who remained and those who left became two great types, each with its own distinctive characteristics. The American Indian of the northern forests or the western plains was literally incapable of labor. When coerced he died, and this has proved true of typical savages everywhere. To learn to work involves the exercise of a special discipline which probably acts as a selective agent upon successive generations. The apparent exception is the negro, but it must be remembered that the African was for many thousands of years a worker in his home continent as well as the practitioner of the savage arts. This long apprenticeship at labor enabled him to meet the conditions of slavery without noticeable harm. It was only where nature refused her gifts except at the price of man's exertion that he developed a higher life. Not in the moist, tropical jungle or even the savanna, but on the edge of the desert, was it possible to become a master of nature. Instead of having to hold one's own in a tiny spot against the ever-encroaching jungle, man finds in this new environment a nature tame enough to use. But this use must be secured by permanent settlement, continuous effort, and close co-operation. These are the conditions of social development. A sedentary Indian of our southwest may have seemed low in intelligence compared with his brother of the plain, but he possessed what was lacking to the other, a social heritage of habits and a capacity to coöperate with his fellows in

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work. Group life becomes organized and permanent, and it becomes fixed in a definite region. Apparently there was a tendency to the sedentary manner of living in the Ohio valley, but this could not hold its own against the eastward movement of the buffalo which swept it back into pure savagery. But in the southwest there was nothing to overwhelm the settlements, and there the Indian became domesticated,—the *Indio manso* as distinguished from the *Indio bravo*.

In his social organization there is advancement without change of type from the life of the woods. The *Zuñi* pueblo is an extension of the Long House. In other words, the organization is one of kinship with the family enlarged into the tribe. Further southward the same order seems to hold. The so-called civilization of Mexico was of a piece with that of our own southwest,—merely more expanded. There was a series of tribes living in pueblos within each of which organization was based on kinship. To be sure, the point had been reached before the coming of the whites, at which intertribal relationships had been established in the form of confederations. The confederation usually had its dominant member, strong enough to enforce the payment of tribute and compel the service of fighters. But our thought, for example, about the Aztec régime, may easily fall into error. There was no such occupation of territory and administration of government as the thought of empire usually brings to mind. Each tribe was free in the practice of its own customs and the carrying out of its own work. There was not even a military occupation. When any pueblo failed in the payment of a tribute it was considered in revolt, an army was marched out by the dominant tribe, aided by others in the confederation, and the pueblo was merely destroyed. There was not much resembling civilized govern-

ment in all this. In so far as the religion of the dominant tribe obtained acceptance, observances and customs tended to become common, but the rule was far from being one of established law.

What there was of military life, however, was in Mexico accomplishing the same result as elsewhere in the growth of peoples. The soldier is always a person detached from the communism of the kinship group, and set on the road to the attainment of individuality. Some results of this process were appearing among the Aztecs. There were the beginnings of private property and slavery, and wives had become the possession of husbands. In other words, civilization was making a start.

In any mode of rule by force, aided by extension of custom, religion naturally plays a prominent part in the processes of government. An Aztec prince such as Montezuma was combined war chief and high priest. The god on whose help he would especially rely would be the god of war, and as the subjection of tribes depended upon intimidation, revolt would be an offense against the war god, to be appeased by the sacrifice of those who had sinned. Hence the ferocious ritual discovered by the Spaniards.

There is room for speculative doubt as to whether the ruling tribe in any of the prehistoric civilizations of America either produced or was the special repository of culture. It is possible here to apply false standards. The culture of a people is really to be found in the organization of their life and in the practice of the arts in the small ways of daily work. This is reflected rather than embodied in the more obvious monuments that have survived. The Aztecs may have designed and produced the great stone calendar which now excites wonder, but back of it lies the unrecorded study and accumulation of knowledge, as the procession of

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seasons proved its importance in the annual labor of the people. It is probable that the picture-writing and the delicate craftsmanship were indigenous products which Toltec and Aztec merely took over and exploited. These curious twists in the growth of civilization are often found. Probably civilization itself is a consequence of weakness as measured by prevailing standards. A group is apparently crowded out of what is considered the best environment. It is inconceivable that there should be a voluntary migration to a less favored region. The new region, however, through the exigency of work and the premium placed upon ingenuity and coöperation, stimulates group productivity, although the individual membership of the group may be inferior to the neighbors left behind. After the hard lesson is learned, there may be expansion into a hitherto unoccupied and more favorable environment. One would surmise that the beginnings of indigenous culture in Mexico were in a semi-arid environment; that this hard-earned social power extended to the southward and there flourished. Other tribal groups, learning their lesson also in the desert, may have been tempted to move upon the peoples who had advanced further but had become weakened by sedentary agriculture. The story is familiar of migrations into Europe, in which bands of herdsmen who had learned the lesson of coöperation over-ran with their superior discipline the peasant populations of the far more civilized regions. The barbarian may always dominate civilization without creating any part of it. He is likely, however, to give a special direction to its further expression. He will make use of it to aid him in maintaining his domination. Great monuments are nearly always a reflection of servitude. Symbols of power in the form of palaces and temples are made as imposing as possible. At the bottom it is a matter of forced

labor. At the top it is a matter of the psychology of empire. The more despotic a government may be, the more majestic will be the visible symbols of that government. The procedure seems simple in all known cases: conquest of a culturally superior people through a better military discipline; the use of that people and its civilization to create monumental symbols of domination. The rule seems to hold in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Asia Minor, India, and China, and it seems fully exemplified on the plateaus of Mexico and Peru. There is no good reason to believe that the Mayas of Yucatan were an exception.

If the foregoing is true, or is even a good working assumption, great monuments are not so much expressions of a civilization as reversive and exploitative by-products. The Teocallis, or sacrificial mounds of Tenochtitlán, and the still more impressive temples of the Inca clan, merely display the applied religion in the peculiar distortion necessary to despotism. The real survival of Peruvian culture is marked on the slopes of the Cordillera in the almost obliterated Andenes, or terraces, on which cultivation took place. Here was coöperation on a vast scale to conserve and distribute through elaborate channels the precious supply of water, to hold and use to its fullest capacity the small amount of soil available, to organize labor in ways so effective as to make this Andean life a prosperous thing,—here was the reality of culture. Most probably the well established customs and practices were taken over and made by the Incas into laws so minute in their application that the power previously gained by a necessary coöperation became a function of the controlling group which took to itself the direction of all affairs in a universal paternalism. Cohesion was then no longer a matter of the people: it was joint action dictated by the Inca. So completely was this true

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that the final tragedy was almost comedy in disguise. The
whole great structure came down like a house of cards at
the touch of a handful of Spanish adventurers.