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LIBERALISM RESURGENT

IT must be a matter of astonishment to any one with an intimate acquaintance with Latin American history, not that the conditions described have persisted, but that any progress through and away from them has been made. There is no necessity for any human group to move. This implies a dislocation of the highly complicated arrangements that constitute social life. Inertia in customs and habits has to be overcome. There are strong static elements in feudalism when it organizes society without too much oppression. Again, there is such a thing as the habit of servitude. Populations have been known that bore their yoke patiently, century after century, and it might well have been expected that the docile Indians of America would have developed little tendency to insurrection. Spanish colonial administration was fixed and mechanical. Why, then, should change have come about? Why, despite the disappointing subversions of their political institutions and all other discouragements, should these populations have made their way toward stable popular government? The matter is not easily accounted for. The Iberian element, in its home country, has displayed no remarkable genius for advancement. The Indians had been well taught to obey. There must have come into operation, from the beginning of these republics, certain forces which, obscured and submerged it may be, have overcome the static influences of the Church, a feudal social order, and the despotism of the Caudillos.

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It may assist to understand the nature of progress if we remember that it is primarily a state of mind. It involves a permanent discontent, a determination to alter circumstances, and the possibility of organizing this attitude into a settled purpose. It is necessary to think freely and to work out the basis of agreement before social purpose can operate on the road of progress. It has already been seen that, given this operation, popular government follows in time as a matter of course. Granted that this tendency was present, as was undoubtedly the case, whence did it come?

The revolutionary struggle was not merely against Spanish rule; it was against Spanish domination of every type. Circumstances that produced hostility existed in all the crevices of the social order. The creole knew that he was precisely as well born as a peninsular Spaniard; yet he was debarred from the privileges of the latter. The Indian had lived under the rule of custom, which, however it might hamper his mind and body, was yet his own; there can be no feeling of oppression when one oppresses oneself. But Spanish rule was to him alien, mechanical, and unfaillingly disagreeable. It is where volition is completely defeated that reaction begins. Colonial rule is successful when it interferes as little as possible with the arrangements that are dictated by custom, and when its restrictions make for the greater comfort and prosperity of the natives. A colony of this kind is hard to throw into a state of insurrection. The Spaniard was so completely exploitative that he exasperated the natives into a desire for liberty. Mere enforcement of labor is not sufficient to accomplish this,—slaves seldom revolt. There must be a total disregard of life and a defeat of normal human impulses. These conditions the Spaniards abundantly provided. The mestizo

felt his detachment from both his parent races. He was indigenous, but not of the Indians; he was of the whites, but separated by a chasm from their social order. There was therefore for him no settled place. He had, as a group, to make room for himself in a world which by its social arrangements denied his right of existence. He was, moreover, a rapidly growing element.

The war for independence was itself a factor. Long continued military action always liberates those elements of the population that are previously imbedded in custom and the communism of tribal life. At the same time the necessity for defense holds this awakening individualism to a common purpose. Had independence been secured without an effort, it is probable that social changes would have come more slowly, impeded by the friction of class divisions. As it was, mestizo, creole, and Indian were for half a generation held by the necessity of unified action. At the end, the disruptive tendencies were so far modified that pure class warfare has never taken place. Revolutionary cleavage had, for the most part, struck through all the classes.

Moreover, the general loosening of bonds was coincident with the final definition in Europe and North America of individual rights and liberties. The American and French revolutions had been fought, the former to the successful inauguration of a new form of government, the latter to a series of clear convictions that were to alter the constitution of European society. The leaders of the Latin American revolt were steeped in this revolutionary doctrine. They carried it to a soil so well prepared that in a few years conceptions of individual rights and democratic government had grown into the ordinary thinking of all classes. It was, in the circumstances, inevitable that the experiment of popular government should be tried.

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The case of Brazil shows the results of independence secured without an effort, in fact, after it had been necessary for the colony to provide an asylum for the government of the mother-country. There was no disruption of social organization; monarchist conceptions maintained themselves; slavery persisted; and it was not until late in the century that the change of government was effected. To-day the infringement of personal prerogatives is tolerated to a much greater extent in Brazil than in the Spanish-speaking republics. In the latter there has during the past century been no lack of oppression, but it was always known for what it was; and, always, the tireless, restless spirit of revolt was abroad.

These doctrines of liberty were embodied in the constitutions of the various republics, drafted on the pattern of that of the United States. It is commonly thought that the taking of our constitutional forms was merely an act of imitation. This is far from true. Even with us the instrument, while it embodies such experience as we had acquired in self-government, and while it stated our native racial tendencies, was, nevertheless, a treatise on political philosophy,—a statement of how an ideal government should work. And we adopted it with the same faith that it would magically relieve us from any future worries about government. It is easy to say that when these forms, carefully considered and adapted to our conditions, were taken over by Latin Americans, there was lacking any basis of experience or working body of law, on which that kind of constitution could securely stand. It, none the less, stated for Latin Americans, and once for all, their political intention. That this intention could for so many decades be nothing more than aspiration is not strange. Men act according to circumstances, and our own exalted conceptions

of liberty and the rights of man have not prevented many of our citizens from following courses of action favorable to themselves but subversive of their political principles. Moreover, popular government, with us, has had to make its way through the unanticipated wilderness of industrial development, and some of its problems are not solved even yet. The Latin American constitutions have had to make their way through a wilderness of racial, social, and religious relationships imbedded in a mass of ignorance that would seem to make defeat almost a certainty. It must, then, be kept in mind that, throughout the turbulent century of succeeding dictatorships, no one of these republics has ever forgotten its political mission and destiny.

Naturally, the more exploited sections of the population would provide a final refuge for ideals of liberty, and it has been from these lower orders that the libertarian revolt has risen again and again, always to be defeated by its own inexperience and its misplaced trust. One of the epics of the world is found in the first revolt in Mexico against Spanish rule. The undisciplined, unarmed following of Hidalgo, at first successful through sheer momentum, but to be cut in pieces and dispersed by a handful of trained soldiers, displays the typical Latin American struggle for liberty. This has been repeated again and again down to our own day. Each revolutionary movement in Mexico has been a rising of the masses. Naturally here was the opportunity of an ambitious leader. Each in turn has secured his following by the promise of justice or freedom. Once in control, he has secured himself through the two old arms of government,—the military and the ecclesiastical,—and the story of oppression and personal despotism has gone on until another could raise the aspiration of the masses to the point of eruption. On the few

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occasions when real liberals were in control, they found themselves in continuous conflict with the old deep-grounded governing forces, and, as a rule, went to pieces on these rocks through political inexperience. Liberalism in power plans extensively and promises everything, but it has little skill in performance. Ability to organize public affairs does not grow in a day, and is seldom found among those who champion the real interests of the common people. Before the necessary experience is gained, the old reactionary forces are again uppermost and the struggle has to be renewed. Other countries, trying the experiment of popular rule, had already disposed, before the beginning, of all impossibly recalcitrant elements. In England, kings and peers had learned that they could float only with the current. The claim of the people to be consulted, through their representatives, on all legislative proposals of the crown, had been granted as a fundamental principle before any doctrine of rights had permeated the masses. Despite its enormous economic power and social influence, the upper class has, during the past century, unflinchingly retreated from any position that became defined as hostile to popular control. The result, as in the United States, has been a normal and usually healthy conservatism, never so rigid as to subvert constitutional principles. The case is different in any country where the traditions of government are principally military and ecclesiastical. Generals and bishops know how to rule,—through a technique established by many centuries of experience. Relationships of rulers and ruled are fixed and final. No half articulate and wholly impracticable notions of social progress or general welfare confuse their thinking and throw indecision into their administration. Army and Church are permanent institutions. Thus readiness is added to certainty. Against this reef of

skilful authority the restless, amorphous tides of liberalism have broken themselves. The hope of freedom, blazing in humble souls, has been the plaything of crooked leaders who used it to lift them into power. Not all, however, were betrayers. Now and then a Juarez has guided the surging rise of liberalism and set himself to the final issue,—that of supplanting the authority of army and Church with a body of law based upon the constitution. Defeat follows upon intrigue, bribery, treachery, foreign intervention, and, principally, the instability of the ignorant masses. When the effort to expel the oppressors has successfully terminated, those who suffered expect to see the new order come instantly into operation. Moreover, they demand quick redress of their grievances. Impatiently waiting, they become suspicious, listen to the counsel of unscrupulous new leaders, divide, fall away, and leave the field to reaction, which always knows what it wants. Here is the eternal tragedy of liberalism. The leader who stands upon the support of the masses stands upon quicksand. How often has this been proved in Westminster. Who, then, is to blame for seeking a more certain foothold? Indeed, the hope of many a liberal movement lies in the alliances it is able to make. In older countries there are fixations affording stability, which pertain to neither heaven nor hell exclusively, but to an intermediate purgatorial ground which seems to be the true home of progress. But the stable, skilful, forward-looking moderates have not thriven in the tempestuous surge and resurge of Latin American politics. They are carried away or left without recognition.

The final outcome can never be in doubt. Illiterate masses of half-breeds though they are, these people have in their blood the fire of 1789, now smoldering sullenly,

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now flaming into violence, into folly or nobility. And always they are trying to lift the curtain of ignorance with which benevolent dictatorship and Church alike have kept them enfolded. A desire for education the observer finds pathetically characteristic of all the humble ranks. And, since the war for independence, in whatever brief moment liberalism found itself in the seat of authority, it has promulgated a plan of secular education, universal in scope, which would with a blow destroy the dragon of ignorance. Liberals always expect, on the morrow's awakening, to find the structure of their dreams become magically a reality. But a system of education cannot be planned, or legislated, or confiscated into existence; it has to grow through decades of effort. But the intent has never lost vitality. Defeated again and again in Mexico since the days of Iturbide, the liberal plan on universal education flowered out with undiminished brilliance in 1915, when it seemed that the long tropical night of the Diaz despotism was to be ended by the true dawn of constitutional liberty. Who can doubt that these countries will, in the course of a few more generations, be in possession of all the blessings and curses of popular education? This case is typical of the whole range of social forces that carry the hopes and ambitions of the common people. The rigid elements of reactions that hinder are increasingly out of harmony with the modern world, and, even if they can for a while withstand the national forces to which they are more immediately opposed, must before long be swept away by the general current of a unified and progressive civilization.