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PROGRESS

In 1850, Latin American conservatism stood at high tide. Then, over the next quarter century, the liberals made a stunning comeback and oversaw a long period of export-driven economic expansion. At last, Latin American countries were fully integrated into the free flow of international trade. The social and economic transformations liberals had so desired in 1825 now finally gathered momentum.

The liberal comeback was, in part, a simple return swing of the pendulum. Any official ideology, any ruling cadre, tends to discredit itself after decades in power. Conservative rejection of liberal pipe dreams had promised "a return to sanity" in the 1830s, a soothing reestablishment of order, a rosy appeal to traditional values. But the virtues of security faded as the years passed and the benefits of peace seemed ever more narrowly distributed. Gradually, all those outside the charmed circle of official patronage began to pine for a change.

Maybe, thought more and more Latin Americans, the liberal dreams of a transformed society were not so crazy after all. Landowners wanted a chance to sell coffee or hides or tobacco on the international market. The urban middle classes wanted paved streets and libraries, sewers and parks. Many pinned their hopes on new energies surging through the international economy after 1850.

The Industrial Revolution was accelerating in Europe and the United States during the period 1850–75. Industrialists regarded Latin America as a potential market for their manufactured goods. European and US industrial workers constituted a market for sugar and coffee grown in Latin America. Especially in England, which, unlike the United States, had no civil war to divert it in these years, industrial profits produced more capital than could be reinvested at home. Latin America's previous investment drought now ended in a rain of international capital. Governments borrowed and so did private businessmen who wanted to build railroads or port facilities. The Industrial Revolution, the mechanization of manufacturing, had not yet begun in Latin America. Factories were rare. But nineteenth-century steam technology did revolutionize Latin America's connection to the outside world.

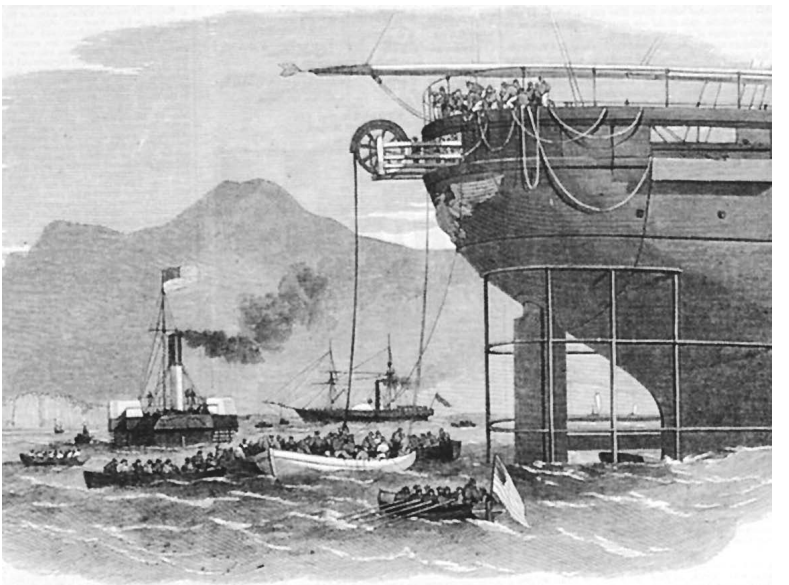
The transportation revolution in Latin America meant, above all, steamships and railroads. Wooden sailing ships were at the mercy of fickle winds, and they carried less cargo than the iron-hulled steamships that gradually replaced them. Steamers plowed the waves faster and more reliably than did sailing ships. Steam-powered trains would eventually transform overland transportation, which had relied principally on pack mules or oxcarts. In general, mules and carts limited profitable export agriculture to the coastal plains. Railroads cost a lot to build, but once built, opened access to enormous areas, creating agricultural boomlets in practically every locality along the length of their tracks. As if steam were not enough, telegraph lines, able to transmit written messages instantaneously, introduced another nineteenth-century technological wonder—electricity. Stringing wires was easier than laying rails, blasting tunnels, and erecting bridges, so telegraph lines often outran train tracks. By 1874 a transatlantic telegraph cable had already been laid across the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean connecting Brazil to Europe.

New technology transformed Latin America's hazardous, unpredictable, and expensive communications with the rest of the world. That world would soon come to call, and elite Latin Americans, for whom Europe remained a cultural beacon, began to feel nervous at the prospect. After all, the "decent people" claimed social priority because of their European race and culture. But how would they measure up in the presence of the real thing? Would Europeans smirk at the "decent people's" attempts to imitate them? Would they find Latin American countries devoid of *Progress*?

Progress (with a capital *P*) was the great theme of the West in the nineteenth century. The industrial and transportation revolutions had massively reordered societies and touched everyone's lives in one

RAILROADS AND TRESTLES created crucial transportation infrastructure for Latin American export economies, in Mexico and elsewhere, in the mid- to late 1800s. *AS400 DB/Bettman/Corbis.*

way or another. Even when people suffered as a result, they stood in awe of the change. Somehow, the idea of inevitable, all-conquering technological advancement—a notion still with us today—had already taken hold of people's imaginations. At a celebration to inaugurate the railway from Mexico City to nearby Texcoco, people spread flowers on the tracks in front of the arriving locomotive. Here was a new hegemonic idea to replace the old colonial version. In a world where Progress seemed unstoppable, well-informed elite Latin Americans wanted to be part of it. Like other ruling classes in the West, they worried about modern materialism eroding traditional values, but they embraced materialism anyway. Exporting something for pounds sterling or dollars or francs was the obvious way to satisfy their desire



THE TRANSATLANTIC TELEGRAPH CABLE. Along with the advent of steamships, the laying of telegraph cables across the ocean floor constituted another communications innovation linking Latin America to Europe and the United States in the mid- to late 1800s. *Terra Media*.

to be up-to-date in European terms. Export earnings, after all, could buy fence wire and sewing machines and steam engines. In other words, export earnings could literally import Progress, or so the elite believed.

In the mid-1800s, Progress was becoming a sort of secular religion, and liberals were its prophets. Back in 1810, their vision of progress had a political emphasis: republics, constitutions, elections. As it turned out, that kind of progress bogged down in a morass of conflicting interests. Technological progress, on the other hand, still had an invincible reputation, and Latin American liberals reaped the benefits of the idea's awesome persuasiveness. The years 1850–75 saw a political sea change all across Latin America as the inevitability of Progress became simple common sense for the educated elite. People continued to follow caudillos and patrons. Economic interests still collided. But everywhere in Latin America, the liberals gained advantage by riding the wave of the future.

Upwardly mobile families tended to join the Liberal Party, whereas long-established status made other families Conservatives. Opposition to the Catholic Church—its wealth, its power, and its abuses—remained the litmus test for liberals. In essence, liberals always represented change, and the church symbolized the colonial past. To conservatives, who remembered colonial days as a peaceful age when uppity mestizos knew their place, the past was attractive. But the past was the opposite of Progress. And after mid-century, Progress seemed unbeatable. The ever-dramatic history of Mexico provides an excellent example.

MEXICO'S LIBERAL REFORM

Nowhere had the colonial church been more sumptuous, more omnipresent in people's lives than in Mexico. The Mexican Church owned vast properties, real estate bequeathed in wills or taken in mortgage for loans over the centuries when the Church was Mexico's chief moneylending institution. This property had accumulated steadily, because the Church was a landowner who never died and whose


LIBERALS VS. CONSERVATIVES AT MIDCENTURY
Wars of Reform and Intervention 1850s, 1860s
CONFLICTS THROUGHOUT REGION
Brazilian Regional Rebellions 1830s, 1840s
Wars against Rosas 1840s, 1850s

property was therefore never subdivided among heirs. By the mid-1800s, the church owned about half the best farmland in Mexico, as well as monasteries, convents, and other urban real estate, not to mention the church buildings themselves. Especially in central and southern Mexico, rural society was organized around agricultural villages, and each of these around a church. Generally, the priest was a local leader and, sometimes, a petty tyrant. According to traditional Spanish law, still in force, the clergy enjoyed a broad legal exemption called a *fuero*, and parish priests often supported themselves by charging fees for their religious services. In addition, Mexicans were legally obligated to pay a tenth of their income to the Church as a tithe.

The independence era had been a time of progressive priests like Hidalgo and Morelos, but these seemed to vanish by mid-century, when the pope himself led a spiritual counterattack against the gospel of Progress. Europeans called this ecclesiastical conservatism *ultramontane* because it emanated from beyond the Alps, that is, from Rome. Ultramontane conservatism now became official Catholic policy, and assertive churchmen, especially a wave of militant priests who arrived from Spain in these years, refused to accept government control over ecclesiastical affairs. All of Spanish America and Brazil too felt the impact of ultramontane conservatism, but again, nowhere felt it as much as Mexico.

Religion and politics had always gone together in Mexico. The language of Mexican independence struggles, years before, had been infused with religion, and even most liberals of the 1830s and 1840s had viewed the Church as a necessary part of the country's social order. Then, as the mid-century Church became explicitly antiliberal, liberals became more antichurch. This did not make them necessarily irreligious—although some were. Leading Mexican liberal Melchor Ocampo, for example, caused great scandal by announcing the nonexistence of God. For the most part, Mexican liberals directed their anger against the Catholic Church as an institution; they were more anticlerical than antireligious. The Church's unproductive wealth and the fuero exemptions enjoyed by the clergy were affronts to Progress, reasoned the liberals. The anger of liberal anticlericalism comes out in a story (true or not) that Ocampo liked to tell about a priest who

refused church burial to a dead boy until the boy's family paid his fee. Asked by the boy's father what he should do, the priest in the story replies: "Why don't you salt him and eat him?" For Mexican conservatives, on the other hand, religion, church, and clergy were one and the same. "Religion and Fueros!" became their battle cry.

When Mexican liberals began their great mid-century uprising—the beginning of an entire period called the Reform—the president was once again the old caudillo Antonio López de Santa Anna, who had worked overall to keep things from changing for a generation. Santa Anna finally left for exile in 1855. If Santa Anna represents Mexican politics as usual in the early postindependence era, the liberals who gathered against him represent an alternative Mexico. At their head was Juan Alvarez, a tough mestizo caudillo from the tangled mountains of the indigenous south. Alvarez had been a patriot since the 1810s, when Santa Anna was still a royalist. Now an old man, and not much of a politician, Alvarez became the figurehead president after the departure of Santa Anna. But the real liberal crusaders of mid-century were younger men, educated men of words and laws. One was Melchor Ocampo, already mentioned. Like Alvarez, Ocampo was a mestizo, a man of humble background but extraordinary talent—an amateur scientist, economist, linguist, dramatist, and professional lawyer. Ocampo exemplifies a particular kind of liberal leadership—young, urban, mestizo, upwardly mobile men for whom progress offered personal advancement. Benito Juárez, the first person of fully indigenous ancestry to become governor of a Mexican state, likewise provides an atypical, but highly symbolic, example.

Juárez, like Ocampo, was an orphan with nowhere to go in life but up. At the age of twelve, he tired of watching over his uncle's sheep in the mountains, left his Zapotec village, and traveled to the provincial city of Oaxaca, where his sister worked as a cook. There he put on European clothes (becoming famous, in fact, for the relentless formality of his black frock coat), perfected his Spanish, and eventually studied law at Oaxaca's new public Institute of Arts and Sciences, which existed thanks to Mexico's postindependence liberal government. Juárez then practiced law in Oaxaca, at one point representing poor villagers against a supposedly abusive priest, a case that landed

Juárez in jail for a few days. Eventually, he was elected to the state legislature and national congress and served five years as governor of Oaxaca. But Juárez left his Zapotec identity behind when he donned his black frock coat. He did not represent the interests of the Zapotecs in particular, or of indigenous people as a group. To call him an *indio* was to insult him, and he sometimes used rice powder to lighten his dark complexion. Yet everyone in Oaxaca—and, one day, all Mexicans—knew where Benito Juárez came from. His enemies might call him "a monkey dressed up as Napoleon," but to many Mexicans, the personal rise of Benito Juárez confirmed the promise of liberalism.

Among the first decrees of the liberal Reform was the Juárez Law (1855), which attacked military and ecclesiastical fueros and thrust its author into the national limelight. A couple of months later, the liberals decreed the Lerdo Law (1856), abolishing collective landholding. The Lerdo Law struck primarily at the Church, which would now have to sell off its vast properties, but its secondary effect was to jeopardize the communal lands of indigenous villages. The Reform credo enshrined individual effort, property, and responsibility. According to the liberals, distributing village lands to individual families as private property would motivate each family to work harder because of the selfishness inherent in human nature. But indigenous villagers had their own vision, and they believed that communal lands benefited them. For that reason some indigenous villagers joined the "decent people" and other conservatives under the banner of "Religion and Fueros" and opposed the liberal Reform of the 1850s.

The Reform lasted for only a few years before a conservative general seized the presidency and dissolved Congress in 1858. A full-scale civil war then erupted. Fleeing toward the liberal strongholds in the mestizo mining towns of the Mexican north, the reformers chose Benito Juárez to command their forces. They chose well, because even those who disliked Juárez respected his determination. The conservatives controlled most of the army, but the liberals now enjoyed widespread popular support. The Juárez government soon retook Mexico City, but the liberals' troubles were not over. The civil war had bankrupted the Mexican state, and Juárez suspended payment on foreign debt. France, Spain, and Britain retaliated by

collectively occupying Veracruz. At first, this occupation seemed simply another episode of gunboat diplomacy. The French, however, had an ulterior motive.

In desperation, defeated Mexican conservatives had reached for their secret weapon: a monarch. Napoleon III of France wanted to expand French influence in Latin America. In fact, the French invented the name "Latin America" during these years as a way of making their influence seem natural. Before the mid-1800s, people had talked of Mexico or Brazil or Argentina, and also of "America," but never of "Latin America." Because French, like Spanish and Portuguese, is directly descended from Latin, the term "Latin America" implied a cultural kinship with France. Napoleon III obligingly supplied Mexican conservatives with a potential monarch obedient to French interests. The would-be emperor of Mexico, Maximilian, was a truly well-intentioned man from one of Europe's greatest royal dynasties, the Hapsburgs. Before accepting the plan, Maximilian asked earnestly whether the Mexican people really wanted an emperor. Mexican conservatives falsely assured him that they did.

So French troops invaded Mexico in 1862 and installed Maximilian as emperor two years later. Benito Juárez retreated northward to lead the resistance. The French invasion had fueled a nationalist reaction that aided Juárez. In an attempt to satisfy the patriotic feelings of Mexicans, on his first independence day in Mexico Maximilian made a public pilgrimage to the church where Father Miguel Hidalgo had begun the fight for independence in 1810. The emperor engaged in a bit of political theater by ringing the bell of Hidalgo's church and on other occasions wearing a serape and exhibiting his taste for Mexican food. But nationalism was a losing issue for the conservatives in this case. Juárez, Zapotec in spite of the rice powder, was simply a more convincing nationalist symbol than Maximilian dressed as a mariachi.

In addition, Juárez found a powerful ally in the United States. The French invasion had presented an obvious challenge to the Monroe Doctrine. Napoleon III had attacked during the US Civil War, when there was little danger of interference from the United States. In 1865, however, that war ended, US aid to Júarez increased,

and Napoleon III decided to withdraw French forces from what had become an expensive mess. Maximilian stayed in Mexico, where he was captured and executed. When he faced the firing squad, among his last words were "Viva Mexico!" His wife, the glamorous Empress Carlota, escaped. She managed to return to Europe but was insane for the rest of her life.

Benito Juárez returned to Mexico City as president. Mexican conservatives had utterly disgraced themselves by inviting the French invasion. They would never again rule Mexico. Nor would Catholicism ever regain its former prominence in Mexican society.

OTHER COUNTRIES JOIN THE LIBERAL TREND

Colombia, Chile, and Central America further illustrate the rising fortunes of liberalism throughout the hemisphere. The church issue was especially crucial in Colombia and Chile.

Colombian liberals had attacked the church ever since Bolívar's day. Then came the conservative reaction of the post-independence generation. The 1840s governments restored the ecclesiastical fuero, which liberals had eliminated, and even invited the Jesuit order to return to Colombia. The Jesuits, known for their loyalty to the Vatican, had been too Catholic even for the Spanish Empire. They were expelled from Spanish America in 1767. When Colombian liberals began their comeback in the 1850s, they threw the Jesuits out again and went through the usual anticlerical drill, removing the fuero, making tithes voluntary, insisting on government control over Catholic clergy, even legalizing divorce.

In 1861, Colombian caudillo Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera rode into Bogotá at the head of an army and inaugurated two solid decades of liberal rule. Mosquera was a classic Spanish American caudillo: an independence hero, a general by the age of thirty, no political idealist. Like Mexico's Santa Anna, Mosquera had the distinction of being president, eventually, for both liberals and conservatives.