

# The American Political Science Review

---

---

Vol. XVI

FEBRUARY, 1922

No. 1

---

---

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY ON THE AMERICAN CONTINENT<sup>1</sup>

L. S. ROWE

The year that is about to close marks the hundredth anniversary of the independence of many of the republics of the American continent. The long struggle which began in 1808, and which did not reach full fruition until the beginning of the third decade of the nineteenth century, possesses all the characteristics of a great epic; marked by a degree of devotion to the ideals of liberty and independence which will ever constitute the great heritage of the people of this continent.

Within these last twelve months we have also seen the republican system of government fully organized in some of the older monarchies of Europe and in the new and independent states established by the Treaty of Versailles. The period that has elapsed is much too short to permit of any adequate estimate of the permanence of the political systems that have been established, or of the manner of their operation. On the other hand, the development of democracy in the republics of America has extended over a period sufficiently long to make possible an inventory of its strength and weakness and some formulation of the requisites for further progress.

<sup>1</sup> Presidential address delivered before the American Political Science Association at Pittsburgh, Pa., December 27, 1921.

The common purposes and ideals which the political leaders in the several republics so consistently pursued during the long struggle for independence, laid the lasting foundations of the Pan American movement, which in later years was destined to play so important a part in the destinies of this continent. In fact, one of the most inspiring characteristics of the early struggles of the American republics was the spirit of coöperation and mutual helpfulness which led large groups of patriots from remote sections of the continent to endure almost unbelievable hardships in order to support their struggling brethren. Patriots from Venezuela and Colombia undertook long and arduous journeys in order to support the people of Ecuador, and groups of republican enthusiasts from Argentina and Chile braved the hardships of the Andes in order to assist Peru in her hour of need.

A century has now elapsed since these heroic struggles, and it is both fitting and helpful that we undertake an estimate of the results accomplished. This means a retrospect of the development of democracy with special reference to the conditions which have determined its growth on the American continent; the circumstances that have favored its progress and the obstacles that must be overcome in order to move forward toward the fulfilment of its higher possibilities.

Although the history of republican institutions in Central and South America has been in many respects a checkered one, it is a notable fact that, with two exceptions—and those extending over a comparatively brief period—all these nations have adhered to the republican form of organization even when the actual operation of the system was far removed from that contemplated by the founders. The record of the American republics during the century that has elapsed since their declaration of independence has made possible a more accurate study of the relation between democracy as a form of social organization on the one hand, and republican institutions as the political expression of such organization on the other.

Now that democracy has become the goal toward which the nations of the world are striving, it is difficult for us to pic-

ture the dismay, amounting almost to horror, which the term "democracy" inspired a century ago. Even to the founders of our constitutional system it was synonymous with "mob rule." Their devotion to republican institutions was accompanied by an equally pronounced antagonism to democracy. It was not until well toward the second half of the nineteenth century that it began to be apparent that the effective operation of republican institutions requires a democratic social organization and that the infirmities from which republican institutions often suffer are due to the absence of such a democratic foundation.

In fact, the problem of overwhelming importance today confronting the republics of the American continent is to bring their social organization into closer harmony with their political institutions. The wide discrepancy existing between these two elements of national life is the cause of many evils and the source of much political unrest. While the ends in view are clear and unmistakable, the measures to be adopted for their attainment are at times difficult to formulate and often even more difficult of adoption.

The first and most important lesson to be learned is that we cannot hope for the smooth operation of republican institutions as long as any considerable portion of the population remains in a condition of abject economic dependence. In so many sections of the continent, the condition of the laboring classes, especially that of the agricultural laborer, so closely approaches serfdom as to be hardly distinguishable from it. As long as such a condition of economic subjection exists, the political destinies of the country will be managed by small groups of men removed from the control of any effective public opinion, and will slowly, but surely, degenerate into oligarchy. Election laws no matter how perfect are of no avail, and it is equally futile to increase the number of elective offices in the hope that thereby the participation of the masses of the voters in public life will be strengthened. While it is comparatively easy for the student of political institutions to point out existing shortcomings, the formulation of a workable solution presents difficulties which at times seem to be unsurmountable.

There are, however, a few cardinal principles of outstanding importance which must be made an integral part of national policy in those republics in which the laboring population or any considerable portion thereof is illiterate, unorganized, and with a standard of life dangerously close to the margin of subsistence.

In the first place we must learn to distinguish between national wealth and national welfare. There is a deeply rooted belief in America and elsewhere that these two terms are synonymous, and that with the progressive exploitation of the natural resources of a country through the investment of foreign or native capital the condition of the masses is certain to improve. No one will deny that there is a measure of truth in this assumption in a country in which the laboring classes are well organized and therefore in a position to secure for themselves a fair share of the national product. But in the circumstances in which some of the republics of the American continent find themselves, with a laboring population unorganized and with a relatively low standard of life, the exploitation of natural resources is inevitably accompanied by an increasing exploitation of the laboring classes. It is true, and it is to the everlasting credit of North American enterprise in Latin American countries, that, recognizing the importance of a stable labor supply, as well as the possibility of increased industrial efficiency through better living conditions, earnest and notable efforts have been made to improve of the condition of the laboring classes. It is also true that the governments in Central and South America are today making earnest efforts toward the same end. But the road still to be traveled is distressingly long.

It is by no means a fortuitous circumstance that where labor is adequately organized, as in certain sections of Argentina and in the nitrate provinces of northern Chile, the wage scale is not only high, but out of all proportion to the remuneration received by labor in adjacent countries. Moreover, it is generally assumed that these conditions will be remedied as soon as the process of popular education has proceeded far enough to

produce an economic awakening on the part of the laboring classes. Efforts to improve popular education are not lacking; in fact real, national sacrifices are being made for this purpose, but owing to limited financial resources the advance is necessarily slow and in the meantime the present generation is suffering from all the degenerating influences of inadequate nutrition, bad housing, and unfavorable sanitary surroundings.

It would seem, therefore, that the only possible solution to this social problem, of overwhelming importance to the political future of the Latin American republics, is the determination by the governments of a minimum wage scale, both in agriculture and industry, and the elimination of the many abuses which now exist, due to the dependence of the agricultural laborer on the stores established on their estates by the great landed proprietors. If there is one lesson to be learned from the experience of a century of economic development, it is that this drastic measure is necessary as a first step toward economic emancipation, without which the great mass of agricultural laborers and even certain sections of industrial labor cannot be made a real and vital factor in the development of a virile democracy.

The importance of such a step as part of a comprehensive plan of social legislation has been greatly increased by reason of the situation which has arisen as the result of the World War. The social upheaval in Europe and, especially, in Russia, has had a far-reaching influence on the laboring classes throughout Latin America. The demand for the betterment of living conditions is becoming more and more insistent and its influence on political life increasingly apparent. Unless measures are taken to satisfy this demand, the growing discontent is certain to manifest itself in political unrest and a possible undermining of established order. Legislation of the kind referred to has therefore become, not merely a step toward social justice, but a requisite for future stability. It is, of course, true that any system of minimum wage laws must be supplemented by a comprehensive plan of social legislation designed to give the increased income of the laboring classes its greatest effectiveness in raising the standard of living. This involves the construc-

tion of laborers' dwellings by the public authorities, national or local, the improvement of recreation facilities, and, above all, the restriction and ultimate elimination of the use of intoxicating liquors, which have done so much to undermine the physical and moral welfare of the laboring classes throughout the continent.

This step once taken, a further problem confronts those countries such as Mexico and most of the other republics of Central and South America whose social system is based on great landed estates; namely, the development of a class of small landed proprietors. The problem of developing through any governmental action a class of small land owners presents enormous difficulties. It is futile either through expropriation or confiscation to break up the large agricultural holdings into small farms. Unless the agricultural population is equipped with the technical preparation for farm management, combined with a strong and abiding desire for individual ownership, all governmental effort is doomed to failure, and usually expensive failure.

The disastrous experience of Mexico under the Madero régime in the attempt to develop a class of small farmers is most instructive. We are so apt to forget that where the traditions of a people have led them to the common ownership of land, rather than individual proprietorship, as was the case with the Indians of the greater part of Mexico, the desire for individual ownership is absent and must be gradually developed. The experience thus far acquired would seem to indicate that however necessary the development of a class of small farmers may be to the further progress of democracy in the republics of Latin America, this end will only be attained through the gradual transformation of tenants into proprietors, much in the same way and by the same slow and difficult process through which increasing numbers of negro tenants in our southern states are being transformed into land proprietors.

Running parallel with these economic changes, and only secondary in importance to them, are certain political principles, the recognition of which is essential to the normal and progres-

sive development of republican institutions on the American continent.

In all the republics of the American continent—North, Central, and South America—there exists a lack of harmony between inherited political ideas and present political and economic needs. In some cases, as in Mexico and Argentina, sectional feeling, either inherited from the Spanish motherland, or developed by reason of lack of means of communication and transportation, have led to the adoption of a federal system of government, whereas manifest national needs dictate the importance and necessity of an unified, centralized, national system. It is true that in the actual operation of the federal system in both Mexico and Argentina, the national government has established a control over the respective states and provinces, which means a wide departure from the purpose and intent of the framers of the constitutional system, but this wide discrepancy between the written constitution and the actual system carries with it the severe penalty of undermining the respect for law and opening the door to serious abuses of power.

In fact, the history of federal government on the American continent during the last century raises the question whether the federal system, wherever it has been tried, is anything more than a transition stage, a compromise designed to satisfy political instincts, ideas, and prejudices inherited from an earlier period, and doomed to disappear as soon as political ideas, necessarily of slow adjustment, have adapted themselves to present economic and social needs.

In the study of the political development of the republics of the American continent, it is a matter of very great importance that students of political science analyze with much greater care than has hitherto been the case the causes of political unrest in certain sections of the American continent and that we distinguish clearly between violent changes that have a deep social significance and those revolutionary movements that represent nothing more than the selfish ambitions of a few unscrupulous leaders.

As our own history has shown, and as is shown by the history of every republic of the American continent, political impasses at times develop, for which revolution furnishes the only solution. No matter how much we may condemn violence, no matter how strongly we may preach against armed opposition to the existing order, the fact is that great social changes, such as took place in the United States during the Civil War, in Chile during the revolution of 1891, and in Mexico during the revolution of 1910, are brought about through upheavals which are usually accompanied by violence. We may look forward to a time when humanity may be able to effect such changes by the peaceful processes of constitutional evolution, but we must also recognize the fact that we cannot attain this great end until the machinery for adapting political organization to present economic and social needs functions much more smoothly and with much greater responsiveness to national needs than is the case at the present time.

A further political principle which the experience of the last one hundred years has demonstrated, and which possesses a deep and far-reaching significance in our present international situation, is that the qualities that prepare a people for self-government—respect for law, political self-control, acquiescence in the will of the majority, and willingness to use the slower processes of discussion rather than brute force in order to bring about political changes—cannot be imposed from without, but are only acquired as the result of much bitter experience and as the outcome of a slow and painful process of education.

The underlying missionary spirit of the American people often leads them to the belief that they can carry the spirit of order and self-government to less fortunate sections of the American continent, even if the agency used is the military arm of the government. While such government has always been characterized by great integrity and great ability in the execution of public works and other technical enterprises, it has always signally failed in preparing the people over which it has had control for the responsibilities incident to the management of their own affairs. This is due in part to the limitations of the military

mind, and in part to the conditions under which military governments are established.

There is a further principle which I desire to emphasize because of its great importance to the development of democracy on the American continent. Today there exists on this continent a series of irritating international disputes which are not only a menace to the peace of the New World but also a real obstacle to democratic progress. The majority of these questions are boundary disputes inherited from the colonial period. Their existence has been a constant obstacle to the normal development of republican institutions on the American continent. The presence of these international dangers has had a two fold effect on domestic institutions. They have in the first place diverted national attention from the pressing social problems upon the solution of which any real advance in democratic organization depends, and in the second place they have diverted an altogether undue share of the national income to military and naval purposes, thus injuring such fundamental services as public education, sanitation, public works, and other productive enterprises. There is no international question now confronting the American republics in their relation with one another that cannot readily be solved through the orderly processes of an international tribunal, and until they are thus settled they will present a serious obstacle to the solution of pressing domestic problems, to the development of a normal, enlightened and controlling public opinion and to the further advance of democracy.