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REVOLUTIONS, LATIN AMERICAN

Revolutions are a relatively rare but commonly studied and vaguely understood historical phenomenon. The word *revolution* comes from the physical world and generally refers to a political rotation that replaces those in power with a previously dispossessed class of people. The term is sometimes used so loosely to refer to any palace coup or change of power that it loses all meaning. Alternatively, some historians will restrict usage to highly exceptional events, such as the 1640 English Revolution, the 1789 French Revolution, and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Others contend that even those changes were not profound or permanent enough to warrant use of the term. Some assert that social changes, such as those that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, were more significant than those in the political realm where the term is commonly applied.

Likewise, Latin America scholars have not reached consensus on which events to characterize as revolutionary. Previously the term was commonly applied to early nineteenth-century anticolonial movements. Many scholars now view these as elite movements that, while resulting in political independence from European powers, also entrenched preexisting social, political, and economic structures. The one exception is the 1791 Haitian slave revolt. After ten years of sustained warfare, plantation slaves in this French colony overthrew the planter class, destroyed the sugar-based export economic system, and created a new government led largely by ex-slaves. Although rarely considered as one of the classic examples of a revolutionary movement, it was one of the deepest and most profound revolutionary changes in the history of the modern world. Some have taken its levels of brutal violence and the resulting impoverished state as a caution against attempting revolutionary changes.

Interpretations of what causes revolutionary changes, how to understand them, and how they have uniquely developed in Latin America tend to revolve around numerous themes, including the question of who is most likely to revolt. Writing in a European context, Karl Marx (1818–1883) contended that an urban proletariat would lead revolutionary changes. He considered Latin America, with its lack of an advanced industrial economy, to be not ready for a revolution. In the twentieth century, however, Latin America has perhaps experienced more revolutionary movements than any other area of the world, and these have mostly been led by the peasant classes. Revolutionaries also debated how quickly changes could be implemented, and whether violence was necessary to achieve change.

Revolutions are commonly assumed to emerge out of oppression, but Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) famously observed that if exploitation alone caused an insurrection, the masses would constantly be in revolt. Rather, as historian Crane Brinton (1898–1968) argued in *The Anatomy of Revolution* (1965), revolutions emerge out of rising expectations. Latin American events seem to underscore the need for a charismatic leader (such as Fidel Castro in Cuba) who can appeal to a coherent (and often nationalist) ideology that gains broad appeal. Anti-imperialist rhetoric and actions usually trigger strong responses from the United States. A successful revolution required the mobilization of significant organizational and material resources, both to overcome U.S. support for the previous government and to overcome opposition to the new regime. It would also appear that revolutions only succeed with the collapse of a weakened and discredited *ancien régime*. While revolution is often seen as synonymous with violence, notable examples (Chile in 1970, Venezuela in 1989) point to the potential for deep structural changes through peaceful and institutional means.

MEXICAN REVOLUTION

The 1910 Mexican Revolution is often seen as a standard bearer through which other subsequent Latin American revolutions are interpreted. Historians debate whether it was truly a social revolution, a rebellion, a civil war, or a mindless blood-letting. It began in 1910 with Francisco Madero's (1873–1913) liberal Plan of San Luis Potosí that called for free elections in the face of Porfirio Díaz's (1830–1915) seemingly entrenched thirty-five-year dictatorship. A popular uprising led Díaz to resign and leave for exile in Europe the following year, but this led to ten years of often chaotic warfare that left one million people dead. On Madero's left, Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919) and Francisco (Pancho) Villa (1878–1923) demanded deeper social and political changes. Zapata's Plan of Ayala called for agrarian reform and introduced one of the revolution's most noted slogans, "Land and Liberty." These peasant demands, together with a wide-reaching labor code and liberal anticlerical reforms that curtailed the power of the Catholic Church, were institutionalized into

a progressive 1917 constitution. Many of these promised reforms were not realized until the 1930s under the Lázaro Cárdenas (1895–1970) government, which is best known for nationalizing the country's petroleum reserves.

GUATEMALA

Similar to Díaz in Mexico, Guatemala's strongly pro–United States dictator, Jorge Ubico (1878–1946), appeared to be deeply entrenched in power (1931–1944) but quickly fell when the population withdrew support. An urban middle class called for liberal reforms similar to those that Madero had championed. Educator Juan José Arévalo (1904–1990) won elections and served for five years (1945–1950), during which time he implemented moderate labor, social security, and agrarian reforms. Jacobo Arbenz (1913–1971) won the 1950 presidential elections and dramatically increased the speed of reforms. Most notably, a 1952 land reform program known as Decree 900 expropriated unused United Fruit Company (UFCO) land. In response, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1888–1959) and CIA director Allen Dulles (1893–1969), who both sat on the UFCO board of directors, authorized a 1954 coup that overthrew Arbenz and implemented a long and bloody military dictatorship.

MOVIMIENTO NACIONALISTA REVOLUCIONARIO (MNR)

A short insurrection on April 9 to 11, 1952, brought the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) to power in Bolivia after leader Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1907–2001) had won the 1951 elections but the military prevented him from taking power. As in Guatemala, the MNR's base of support was in the urban middle classes. Workers and peasants quickly exploited this political opening, and demanded more radical structural changes, including nationalization of tin mines, agrarian reform that broke up large landed estates (haciendas), and universal suffrage that eliminated literacy restrictions. This led to some of the most militant labor and peasant unions in Latin America. Notably, the MNR's radical reforms did not trigger U.S. intervention as did Arbenz's in Guatemala. Historians have debated these contrasting responses, with explanatory factors including Bolivia's greater distance from the U.S. sphere of influence, domestic rather than foreign ownership of the nationalized commodities, and the MNR's willingness to accommodate U.S. demands.

CUBAN REVOLUTION

The 1959 Cuban Revolution was the most successful, long lasting, and far-reaching of the twentieth-century revolutions. On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro led a failed attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago in eastern Cuba that he hoped would spark a popular uprising against the corrupt Fulgencio Batista (1901–1973) dictatorship (1934–1959). Timed to correspond with the centennial of the birth of the independence hero José Martí (1853–1895), Castro appealed to his nationalist legacy. Castro went into exile in Mexico, where he met the Argentine Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928–1967), who had just witnessed the coup against Arbenz in Guatemala. Guevara, who subsequently became the Americas' most renowned guerrilla leader and theoretician, argued that revolutionaries should arm the masses and not hesitate to execute their opponents. His policies assured Cuba's survival even as the new revolutionary government's extensive land reform program and expropriation of foreign industries led to the failed U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.

As revolutionary leaders consolidated their control over the island, they radicalized and extended reforms, often with dramatic results. Gains in education and health care led to socioeconomic indicators that rivaled those of the industrial world, sometimes surpassing those in the United States. Critics complained, however, that this was done at the cost of individual liberties. Although strong by developing world standards, Cuba failed to reach the goal of an industrialized economy.

Meanwhile, Guevara left Cuba to continue revolutionary struggles elsewhere in Latin America and Africa. He was most noted for his *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare that challenged traditional Marxist doctrines of waiting for proper objective conditions for a revolutionary struggle. Rather, Guevara believed that the triumph of the Cuban Revolution demonstrated that a small insurrectionary guerrilla force (the *foco*) could create the conditions for a revolution. A subsequent attempt to implement this theory in Bolivia in 1967 failed spectacularly and led to Guevara's death. As a martyr, Guevara became renowned for his selfless dedication to a revolutionary struggle.

CHILEAN ROAD TO SOCIALISM

With Guevara's defeat in Bolivia and the 1970 election of Marxist Salvador Allende (1908–1973) to the presidency in Chile, leftist sentiments swung away from searching for revolutionary changes through guerrilla struggles and toward using constitutional and institutional means. Similar to Arbenz in Guatemala, Allende came to power through constitutional means, dramatically accelerated reforms begun under his predecessor, and quickly alienated the U.S. government. His goal to transform Chile from a capitalist and dependent society into a socialist and independent one within a democratic and constitutional framework realized significant gains for the lower classes at a cost to the wealthy elite. Nationalization of U.S.-owned copper mines led, as in Guatemala, to U.S. support for Augusto Pinochet's brutal September 11, 1973, military coup.

SANDINISTAS

With the collapse of Allende's government, leftist sentiments swung away from the possibilities for electoral means to social revolutionary changes. Led by the Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional (FSLN, Sandinista Front for National Liberation), on July 19, 1979, a guerrilla army defeated U.S.-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza (1925–1980) and took power in Nicaragua. The Somoza family dynasty had ruled the small Central American country since the 1930s. Similar to Castro's use of Martí in Cuba, revolutionary leader Carlos Fonseca (1936–1976) appealed to the nationalist image of Augusto César Sandino (1895–1934), who had fought the U.S. Marines to a standstill in the 1930s.

In power, the Sandinistas implemented goals of a mixed economy, plural political system, and a nonaligned foreign policy. As one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Nicaragua lacked the economic significance of Chile, Cuba, or Guatemala. Nevertheless, the United States feared its independent example and helped train and arm a counter-revolutionary force (called the *contras*) that drug the country down and halted agrarian and social reforms. Ironically, the one lasting legacy of the Sandinistas was implementation for the first time of a functioning electoral system that opponents used to remove the revolutionaries from power in 1990. The defeat of the Sandinistas brought to an end in the minds of many proponents the possibilities for an armed path toward a socialist revolution.

ZAPATISTAS

Four years after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, the launch of a guerrilla war in the impoverished southern Mexican state of Chiapas caught the world by surprise. Led by a charismatic masked Subcomandante Marcos, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista Army of National Liberation) occupied five towns on January 1, 1994. They announced their opposition to neoliberal economic policies that favored the elite at a cost to the impoverished indigenous masses. The EZLN conceptualized the struggle as a continuation of that which their namesake, Emiliano Zapata, had launched at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite sparking the imagination of leftists around the world, they made few concrete gains.

BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

Since elected president in 1998, Hugo Chávez has brought his uniquely styled Bolivarian Revolution to Venezuela. Chávez embodied many of the debates concerning revolutionary movements from throughout the twentieth century. After a failed 1992 coup, Chávez turned toward an electoral apparatus to gain power. Rather than contradictory or ironic, it indicates that these are simply different and not necessarily contradictory strategies in a common revolutionary struggle. As with previous revolutionaries, Chávez is a charismatic leader who provided the inspiration that drove his movement. Similar to how Castro appealed to Martí, and Fonseca to Sandino, Chávez held up Latin American independence leader Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) as his symbolic nationalist hero. Even though Venezuela is primarily an urban country, Chávez continued to emphasize and draw support from peasant and indigenous peoples. His fervent anti-imperialist rhetoric led to strong opposition from the United States, but unlike Allende he weathered an April 11, 2002, coup attempt and consolidated his hold on power. Meanwhile, Chávez's social programs brought education and health care to the lower classes, significantly raising their standard of living. Chávez seemed not only to have learned the lessons of a century of revolutionary movements, but also to embody a synthesis of their gains.

SEE ALSO *Colonialism; Cuban Revolution; Decolonization; Indigenous Rights; Nationalism and Nationality*

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REVOLUTIONS, SCIENTIFIC

Although the expression *scientific revolution* is perhaps most closely associated with Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996), who embedded the phrase in a general theory of scientific change, it also names a specific time and place—western