

***Caudillismo:***  
**Identity Landmark of Hispanic American**  
**Authoritarian Political Culture**

Alina ȚÎȚEI  
“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași

**Keywords:** caudillo, caudillismo, colonial period, independence wars, authority, legitimacy

**Abstract:** The construction of identity, in the case of the turbulent history of Hispanic American states, was a process which involved the proliferation of authoritarian figures and an unremitting adaptation to local conditions. A distinctive landmark of this identity crystallization, *caudillismo* was intimately bound to the disintegration of the colonial system and to the mass-scale social turmoil that escalated during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its entire phenomenology was highly influenced by the social, economic and political superstructures formerly created by the Spanish authority whose collapse represented a turning point for Hispanic America’s faltering political culture.

**E-mail:** alina83titei@yahoo.com

\*

## ***1. Preliminaries***

The year 1492 marks two significant moments in history: firstly, the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, and, secondly, the beginning of the territorial conquests and colonization process on behalf of the Spanish Crown. This resulted in the creation of the most extensive colonial empire, where the sun never set, as Charles V<sup>1</sup> would say later (*En mis dominios nunca se pone el sol*). At that time, Spain’s leadership was represented by two sovereigns, Isabella I and Ferdinand V; through marriage (1469), they succeeded in unifying the most large and important kingdoms over which they were ruling, Castile and Aragon (1479), thus establishing a very efficient coregency in terms of equally shared power.

Their accomplishments are noteworthy: the unification of the Hispanic monarchy and the foundation of the future Spanish state, as we know it today; the implementation of a centralized government system, after successfully finishing the Reconquista; the development of a military mechanism that was to dominate the next century; the completion of a legislative framework; the reformation of the Church and, last but not least, the political and financial support (especially by Isabella, on behalf of the Christian ideals and values which she represented as sovereign) of the expeditions to the West, which culminated with the discovery of America that enabled Spain to become the first world power in modern times.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (1519–1556) and king of Spain (1516–1556)

The encounter of these two worlds (*el encuentro de dos mundos*) entailed a substantial change in the morphology of geographical, political, social, economic, cultural, and identity evolution of both the “old continent” but especially the newly discovered land. Since the first Spanish contacts with the local population, the American territory proved to be a very different and extremely heterogeneous reality, the existence of these huge discrepancies being preserved not only in relation to the continent as a whole, but to each one of the future Hispanic American countries. In this context, there are still societies which, although living within the same geographical and administrative boundaries, belong to different historical times, or even to different worlds. Hence, Hispanic America is undoubtedly a world of contrasts and dissimilarities, a region where, historically speaking, there was an enormous lack of equality and uniformity maintained until today, despite the efforts to eradicate poverty, as well as economic and social development.

## **2. Caudillismo: General Framework. Definition**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spain loses its vast possessions in the New World and enters a period of decline that marks the end of its global hegemony, while the rise of another powerful European state takes place: the United Kingdom. For the Spanish colonies a fundamental stage begins: the emancipation from Spain and the foundation of the future Hispanic American free and independent states. These events, that occurred between 1808–1824<sup>1</sup> approximately, experienced a rapid and homogeneous development due to major transformations within power relations in Hispanic America: the introduction of the quartermaster<sup>2</sup> system; the practice of selling certain local offices to the benefit of wealthy Creole who thus increase their influence; an army composed mostly of native people; a diminished authority of the Church<sup>3</sup>; trade development; and particularly the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), especially the Spanish campaign, called the “Iberian war”.

To the Hispanic American countries, independence meant only a first step towards modernity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Without having a political tradition of their own and without knowing other way of leadership and organization than that imposed by the absolutist Spanish Crown, they adopted a foreign governance model – liberal constitutionalism – trying to articulate a political system based on the experiences of French and American revolutions. Therefore, they embraced Republicanism and,

---

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the Caribbean that will not gain independence until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These nation-states have preserved their independence up to the present, noting that Panama becomes an independent state as late as 1903, as a consequence of its detachment from Columbia after the War of 1000 days (1899–1902) and because of economic interests related to the construction of the Panama Canal.

<sup>2</sup> Administrative officer of French origin, introduced in Spain and the Spanish colonies by the Bourbon dynasty, the quartermaster ran over a specific territory, generally of medium size, and was appointed by the king among the peninsular inhabitants, so that he was no longer subordinated to the Viceroy, but directly to the Crown.

<sup>3</sup> Jesuits, whose power and influence had been increasingly growing, both in the spiritual aspect (promoters of university education) as well as in the economic one (which allowed them to make political claims), are expelled through the Pragmatic Sanction of King Charles III of Spain, in 1767, and their properties are taken by the monarchical institution.

regarding the separation of powers, they chose the presidentialist model of North American descent. Acquisition of sovereignty was by no means a peaceful process, in most cases violent clashes taking place and even civil wars, which inevitably led to social breakdown, a fracturing of society. The ensuing period was marked by an acute political instability, with numerous and ongoing conflicts between the various camps and interest groups, as well as a severe economic crisis largely triggered by the loss and destruction following the independence wars.

But the separation of the American territories from the Spanish Crown did not automatically imply a profound and definitive alienation, in all respects, from the old absolutist regime; it was, indeed, a transfer of authority, but rather a formal one, whereas many of the social, economic and political practices that had been ensuring the dynamics of the colonial system's functioning until that moment survived and kept imposing themselves in the newly created circumstances, though, naturally, with different values and meanings<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, from a socio-political point of view, the next years, 1830–1850, would continue on the same ascending line of turmoil, military conflicts and civil wars. Moreover, given the former colonies' almost umbilical attachment to the autocratic model inherited from the Spanish monarchy and the weak state authority, there would be innumerable attempts to centralize and concentrate power. Those who will stand out in this period and will seize the forefront of the political scene are the so-called *caudillos*, military strongmen whose proliferation and influence during the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century made Charles E. Chapman to define it as "the age of the caudillos".<sup>2</sup> Through the complex political, social and economic phenomenon they generated – *caudillismo* – and the authoritarian government system they implemented – *caudillaje* – these skillful magnetic leaders marked a historic moment of overwhelming importance in the development of Hispanic American states and also determined the expansion of authoritarian regimes in these countries. Largely considered either the product of a disarticulated society or the effect of an extreme institutional disruption, a peculiar process related to a crude colonial power in decline or the sheer expression of a political disarray associated with the presence of regionalisms, caudillismo may be described, in its broadest political sense, as a "highly personalistic and quasimilitary regime whose party mechanisms, administrative procedures, and legislative functions are subject to the intimate and immediate control of a charismatic leader and his cadre of mediating officials."<sup>3</sup> Although this pervasive, escalating phenomenon flourished within a specific political, cultural, and identity environment, one should not overlook, however, that the transition of Hispanic America to caudillismo virtually took and reflected the European evolutions and the gradual substitution of the medieval religiously engaged model with the anthropocentric or individualistic model, by means of a desacralization process controlled everywhere as the Hispanic societies evolved towards modernity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lariza Pizano, "Caudillismo y clientelismo: expresiones de una misma lógica," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, junio, 009 (2001): 75, <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=81500909> (accessed August 16, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Charles Edward Chapman, "The Age of the Caudillos: A Chapter in Hispanic American History," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 12 (1932): 281–300.

<sup>3</sup> Kalman Hirsch Silvert, "Caudillismo," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045000176.html> (accessed August 16, 2012).

### **3. Caudillos and Caudillismo: Origins and Growth**

Before the historical moment of 1810 – when most colonies initiate emancipation movements from the Spanish Crown – the Hispanic American context was not propitious to the emergence and development of caudillismo. Yet, the events that took place in the next period gave rise to a new character: local hero, military chieftain or leader of armed bands, the caudillo was seen as a result of the specific, concrete circumstances in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (independence wars, formation of nation-states and anarchic tendencies of the postwar period). However, the key factor paving the way for the fulminant ascent of such leaders were the changes produced in connection with the ownership and use of land areas in different parts of Hispanic America. The end of colonial rule and the collapse of colonial institutions have resulted in creating a power vacuum waiting to be filled. That was the best moment for local heroes to assert themselves and begin their political journey without necessarily embracing a rigorously delineated ideological or doctrinal platform: “Los caudillos no han sido necesariamente gente con arreos ideológicos o grandes proyectos de cambio social; su temeridad guerrera, sus habilidades organizativas, sus limitados escrúpulos, su capacidad para tomar decisiones drásticas, los convierten en los hombres del momento. Lograron organizar y ponerse a la cabeza de cuerpos militares triunfantes, y en su momento gozaron de una apreciable legitimidad, antes de que su sino político se eclipsara. Un instinto de autodefensa social les hizo aceptables por cientos o miles de seguidores. Y finalmente, el acceso al poder los convirtió en dictadores, marcando la parte final del ciclo.”<sup>1</sup> So, in the early years of conflict, the caudillo gradually turned into a guerrilla leader or a military chieftain, counting among his followers family members, peones, or unemployed individuals fleeing from justice or slavery and whose adhesion around him relied on either loyalty, interest or fear. The caudillo needed to obtain absolute power and he achieved it by drawing upon the three elements of the natural superiority which any leader acquires in wartime: success, popularity and cruelty. Caudillismo therefore arises in a tense climate, in which the state authority is unable to impose itself over the nation – either because of the struggle for supremacy between monarchists and republicans, or because of the competition among interest groups for controlling the executive power. In this way, local power bases are created that caudillos rush to occupy, establishing thus a new social order. But what are the roots of caudillismo, how it evolved and which aspects best feature it as an identity landmark of Hispanic American political culture?

After they have long been seeking to establish the origins of caudillismo, scholars have managed to distinguish three major arguments as to the genesis of this particular phenomenon: the Spanish monarchy, the colonial period, and the independence wars.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Castro, “El caudillismo en América Latina, ayer y hoy,” *Política y cultura* 27 (2007): 12, [http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0188-77422007000100002&script=sci\\_arttext](http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0188-77422007000100002&script=sci_arttext) (accessed August 19, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Reiko Tateiwa, “Caudillismo y sus interpretaciones: un análisis sobre un fenómeno común de la historia de América Latina en el siglo XIX,” *Cuadernos Canela* VII (1995): 43, <http://www.canela.org.es/cuadernoscanela/canelapdf/cc7tateiwa.pdf> (accessed August 22, 2012).

Regarding the Spanish monarchic heritage, Charles E. Chapman believes that the seeds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century caudillismo are to be found in the attitude displayed by the conquistadors, who transplanted the absolutist model from their native country to the new discovered territories. In his opinion, the indigenous populations incorporated the absolutist system relatively smoothly due to the fact that the tribal organization and leadership they had were largely similar to the Spanish autocratic regime.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Richard M. Morse understands caudillismo as a natural consequence of the two distinct political stances adopted by the Catholic Monarchs. He thinks that the Spanish domination in the New World was rooted in the interplay between the two different manners of approaching statecraft and conquest endeavours: through her expansionist actions to the south and overseas, Isabella “symbolizes the spiritualist, medieval component of the emergent Spanish Empire,”<sup>2</sup> whereas Ferdinand, politically and military engaged in Eastern and Northern Europe, “represents a secular, Renaissance counterpart.”<sup>3</sup> This twofold ideological perspective was also gradually implemented in the American colonies with the aid of the Spanish conquistadors, colonizers, and catechizers, a significant undertaking which rightfully invested the Catholic Monarchs as the representatives of a dual heritage: “medieval and Renaissance, Thomistic and Machiavellian.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, after Isabella’s death in 1504 and until the coronation of Philip II in 1556, the New World hovered between these two orientations. However, despite the Thomistic position assumed by the colonial Empire for almost three hundred years, the emancipation efforts and the outbreak of the independence wars at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century undoubtedly favoured a dominant Machiavellian position.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Morse is drawing a parallel between the rise of the condottieri in a chaotic and fragmented 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy and the emergence of the caudillos amid the anarchic upheavals throughout Hispanic America four centuries later.

Closely related to the first, the second argument explains the birth of caudillismo by virtue of the colonial period and its cultural legacy; more precisely, it refers to the political duality manifested on all levels by the cunning viceregal administration. According to William H. Beezley, this dualism is to be acknowledged in the stark disparity between “the empire in theory, and the empire in practice,”<sup>6</sup> between “law and implementation”.<sup>7</sup> In concrete terms, the institutional hiatus growing larger every day as the colonial era was coming to an end rendered the government more compliant, a favourable circumstance that “provided the underpaid, the ambitious, and the opportunistic with the possibility of graft, corruption, and often the excessive

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chapman, “The Age of the Caudillos: A Chapter in Hispanic American History,” 286-287. Apud Tateiwa, “Caudillismo y sus interpretaciones: un análisis sobre un fenómeno común de la historia de América Latina en el siglo XIX,” 44.

<sup>2</sup> Richard M. Morse, “Political Theory and the Caudillo,” in *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, ed. Hugh M. Hamill (Oklahoma: Oklahoma University Press, Norman, 1992), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Morse, “Political Theory and the Caudillo,” 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Beezley, “Caudillismo: An Interpretive Note,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 11/3 (1969): 345, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/165417?origin=JSTOR-pdf> (accessed August 25, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Beezley, “Caudillismo: An Interpretive Note,” 346.

arrogation of power.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, difficulties in implementing the reforms all across the empire, fundamentally because of its physical characteristics and nucleated settlement pattern, altogether with a poorly developed infrastructure, generated a significant degree of regionalism and local autonomy. Hence, with economy and demography in decline, an intensifying localism and the extended familial unit as the strongest social anchor, the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an accelerated disintegration of the colonial construction. Such a vulnerable context, visibly lacking order and stability, required the presence of “a strong man who could stand above the quarrels, attract the loyalty of the people, and crush his opposition.”<sup>2</sup> For this purpose, he needed absolute control over all aspects of government and society. Obviously, the colonial heritage of the undivided political authority seems to have benefited him most. The stage was thus prepared to welcome the caudillo, “a man who could remain aloof from the controversy among ideologies and institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the previous interpretations, the third one circumscribes the caudillismo to the revolutionary process of the independence wars. For John Lynch, the advocate of this theory, caudillismo stands among those very specific elements which shape the idiosyncrasy of the Hispanic Americans and, consequently, it is not by all means a natural descendant of the Spanish legacy.<sup>4</sup>

Independence wars legitimized the caudillo, who thus obtained his first appointments as military leader. Sometimes he was the representative of a powerful family, who controlled and distributed resources; other times, he was the head of the local elite with whom he had ties of blood. However, the caudillo represented most often regional interests above family ones. In many cases, by means of various favourable circumstances, he could gain access to the control of state resources, which automatically placed him into a new distinctive position: that of benefactor, of patron.

This laid the foundation for the patron-client relationship, grounded in mutual needs, help and fidelity, which will become an important support for caudillismo within the new emerging republics. The most highly valued reward was land and a caudillo's ambition was to acquire as much land as he could for him and his henchmen. The development of this kind of patronage and its application in the political, social and military spheres accelerated in the immediate aftermath of the independence wars, when the appointments were no longer favours of the imperial power; hence, in default of a system to replace this practice which had become traditional, they have turned into an additional weapon at the caudillo's disposal. The patron-client relationship benefited especially those belonging to the elite, but was also a bridge between caudillos and common people. The influence that a caudillo exerted on those working for him mostly based on owning larger areas of land, which provided him two key strengths: respect and resources. At the same time, this gave him the possibility to control a growing number of peones who formed the so-called *peonada* – a primitive political structure, born of personal loyalty and built on the patron's authority and the peon's dependence, a structure which finally came to be part of the state and a specific trademark of caudillismo.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Lynch, *Caudillos en Hispanoamérica, 1800-1850* (Madrid: Editorial Mapfre, 1993).

One of the independence wars' consequences was the weakness of traditional forms of social control, which allowed peones, mulattos and slaves to claim their right to liberty and equality, and gave many caudillos the opportunity to rise to power relying on these popular forces. Yet, in many Hispanic American countries, ethnic groups' activism and mass insubordination caused serious problems related to public order, which claimed the presence of an authoritative power that state institutions were unable to ensure. Thus, the privileged groups in countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico or Guatemala saw in the caudillo the most appropriate person to act as a "necessary gendarme" (*gendarme necesario*),<sup>1</sup> a strong man to embody both state authority and popular representation. The elite needed military leaders such as Juan Manuel de Rosas, José Antonio Páez, Antonio López de Santa Anna or Rafael Carrera<sup>2</sup>, because they exerted a certain influence among *gauchos*, *llaneros* and Indians, and they were virtually the only local leaders of their countries to have control over the masses. In this context, the caudillos' fundamental mission was not to contribute, as it was erroneously assumed, to a state of anarchy, but rather to restore order and stability. As protectors and defenders of order, caudillos not only made use of their power of persuasion and moral influence, but also of methods of repression, to varying degrees. For caudillismo cruelty was not an inherent trait, and in many cases the system was less oppressive than the following presidential regimes. We can therefore say that, largely, the political situation played a decisive role in the emergence, rise and maintenance in leadership of these local, regional and, ultimately, national leaders who, after independence, found themselves

---

<sup>1</sup> Concept introduced by Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1870–1936), a Venezuelan writer, journalist, sociologist and historian, one of the leading exponents of positivist thinking in his country and one of the most controversial apologists of the dictatorial regime imposed by Juan Vicente Gómez (1857–1935). In his book *Cesarismo democrático y otros textos* (1919) Vallenilla Lanz proposes two syntagms: *cesarismo democrático* (democratic caesarism) – rule based on permanent reelection of a charismatic leader endowed with absolute power, or an autocracy that seeks to legitimize itself through voting – and *gendarme necesario* ("necessary gendarme"): a rather ambiguous and controversial concept – an authoritative but desired figure, the personification of the nation's will and spirit, that combines, on the one hand, personal charisma with a missionary, saving attitude, legitimized by the divine, religious dimension of his role and, on the other hand, strength and intelligence of a man determined to impose his own criteria to establish a social order desired by all, irrespective of state law. Vallenilla Lanz's trajectory and political ideas indicate a firm conviction: that dictatorship was something natural and even necessary in Venezuela, the expression rather than the negation of true democracy. Through his research focused on colonial era, independence war and postwar period in Venezuela, he concluded that violence, murder and robbery could easily become a normal fact in Venezuelan society unless a superior force controlled them. Experience has shown that this control should not be represented by the law, but the most prestigious and feared caudillos. Therefore, in Venezuela, as in all Latin American nations, condemned out of complex reasons to a turbulent existence, "[...] el Caudillo ha representado la única fuerza de conservación, realizándose aún el fenómeno que los hombres de ciencia señalan en las primeras etapas de integración de las sociedades: los jefes no se eligen sino se imponen". (Vallenilla Laureano Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático y otros textos*, Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1991, 94). The Peruvian writer Francisco García Calderón also claimed the necessity of caudillos in times of crisis, when the instability of the heterogeneous Hispanic American states required the strong hand of a powerful leader.

<sup>2</sup> Representative figures of caudillismo from Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico and Guatemala.

engaged in the competition between liberalism and conservatism. While the new form of government aspired to rebuild, reform and modernize the Hispanic American states through a Constitution and an electoral system such as to enable them access to power and its maintenance, as well as the imposition of an economic policy favourable to owners and exporters, the conservative wing will count on the support of the caudillos in an attempt to regain its privileged position by appealing to the social sectors where conservatives and their traditional retrograde ideology still had supporters: those institutions deeply rooted in the Hispanic society – the Church and the Army – and, in some countries, indigenous communities and craftsmen.

In those societies where written agreements do not exist or play a limited role, and the typical relations of modern societies and even of certain traditional communities are found only in embryonic state, blood ties and personal bonds are the only ones which have a real importance. Such is the example of clientage relations: based on the *gens-clientes* model, appeared in Roman times and revived during the Germanic invasions (having a more primitive social organization, the newcomers determined the perpetuation of this type of agreement), clientage relations will be found in Spain, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, where there still persisted groups of *criados* (retainers) around powerful, influential men or under the protection of high royal functionaries, hidalgos and nobles. The obligations were clear for each party: protection, help, favours and gifts for one side; loyalty and unconditional support from the other. Along with the conquerors, these clientage relations moved from Spain to America where, given the immensity of the continent, the king could hardly make his authority felt in every corner of the colonies. Nevertheless, these relations found a way to proliferation and consolidation through the new emerging forces: the caudillos – a dynamic social component, with a mainly military role. Most of these caudillos secured their access to power and maintenance in leadership through a military career, either as leaders of a revolution or war, or as professional soldiers. In fact, almost all dictators were military, because they “[...] must not have other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline. The art of war is all that is expected of a ruler; and it is so useful that [...] it frequently enables ordinary citizens to become rulers [because] the first way to win a state is to be skilled in the art of war.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, those who did not enjoy this prestige adopted the title of general.

Returning to the clientage relations mentioned above, we can identify a type of relation specific to Hispanic America, “a religious relationship between the *compadres*, or godfathers ... and the relatives of the baptized as well as the child himself.”<sup>2</sup> This kind of ties often remains powerful enough so that to oblige the ones involved help each other in all circumstances. A notorious example in this regard is the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo who, most often, resorted to coercive methods to become the godfather of thousands of children, obviously in order to create a network of loyal supporters regardless of social class. This practice undoubtedly gained Trujillo the support of a significant part of the Dominican Republic population, who became thus linked to him as if by a blood relationship. Local and national leaders relied so much on the so-called *compadrazgo* that the word itself took on a political connotation, that of “favouritism”. But its application also extended to rural communities, as well as to

---

<sup>1</sup> Niccoló Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Group, 2003), 47.

<sup>2</sup> François Chevalier, “The Roots of Caudillismo,” in *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, 36.



mestizo and indigenous ones where “the extraordinary proliferation of these religious relationships even appear, in a spontaneous fashion, to replace and to recreate personal bonds ... where solidarity among the clan has softened or lost its control.”<sup>1</sup> So, without understating at all the harmful influence and role, especially at the political level, that this type of relationship exercised, *compadrazgo* had and still has an essential function at the community level, a function similar perhaps to that of the religious brotherhoods in Spain, responsible for creating reciprocal obligations of assistance which sometimes proved to be necessary, especially in isolated regions where law has minimal authority and individuals lack personal guarantees of any kind.

#### 4. Legitimacy or Deviation? Caudillismo: In-Between Phenomenon

Regarded either as a typical manifestation of Hispanic America in the wake of the wars of independence, or as a degenerate or abnormal form of liberal democracy specific to Western cultures, caudillismo cannot be ultimately considered an aberration in the exercise of political power, but rather the expression of a complex network of ideological and cultural traditions which legitimizes this type of personalistic leadership. Put differently, this political phenomenon that Francisco José Moreno so appropriately distinguishes from dictatorship came out of the very culture of Hispanic American peoples: “Within the Spanish political tradition, caudillismo was an effort to fill the vacuum left by the removal of the symbol of institutional authority [i.e., the king]. Caudillismo is an attempt, based upon charisma, to keep political forces under control by promoting allegiance to the person of the leader. Caudillismo, thus, is not to be confused with military control. The former could create legitimacy whereas the latter could not. Allegiance would render the use of violence unnecessary. The employment of force is thus indicative of failure to secure allegiance. Caudillismo is a noninstitutional way of satisfying the authoritarian orientation latent in a country’s political culture. Due to its reliance on individual leadership, the caudillistic solution tends to be temporary. The caudillos could be challenged by another charismatic leader, or could be deposed by a militant minority free of his spell. And even if he were successful in retaining control, his existence was limited. Once he was dead, the legitimacy built upon allegiance to his person would disappear. But despite its temporary nature, caudillismo is more conducive to stability than dictatorial (illegitimate) rule. The caudillistic solution is basically legitimate and thus acceptable. Dictatorial rule rests upon coercion and its mere reliance on force is indicative of its inability to secure allegiance.”<sup>2</sup> Caudillismo resulted in a specific political system – *caudillaje* – defined by four basic features: 1. the repeated emergence of patron-client relations, reinforced by personal ties of dominance and submission, and by a common desire to obtain wealth by force of arms; 2. the lack of institutionalized means for succession in public offices; 3. the use of violence in political competition; 4. the repeated failures of leaders in power to ensure their tenures as chieftains.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Chevalier, “The Roots of Caudillismo,” 37.

<sup>2</sup> Francisco José Moreno, “Caudillismo: An Interpretation of its Origins in Chile,” in *Conflict and Violence in Latin American Politics*, eds. F. J. Moreno and B. Mitriani (New York: Crowell, 1971), 38–39. Apud *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, 6–7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eric Wolf and Edward C. Hansen, “Caudillo Politics: A Structural Analysis,” in *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, 63–64.

As we mentioned before, caudillismo is a form of personalistic government understood as “ejercicio personal del poder, bien como expresión de la pura voluntad de dominio únicamente sujeta a su propio arbitrio, correlativo a la debilidad institucional y/o al escaso arraigo de la norma, bien inscrito dentro de la normativa vigente, amparado tras el «estado de excepción» previsto en los textos constitucionales para situaciones extraordinarias.”<sup>1</sup> Political personalism referred to by Soriano – described as “sustitución de las ideologías por el prestigio personal del jefe”<sup>2</sup> and translated into practice by the popular tendency to show more loyalty and obedience to the person who holds office rather than to the office itself<sup>3</sup> – is not a phenomenon specific only to Hispanic America or to the “third world”, but a recurring reality in history that manifested itself in multiple ways. The author reviews the various forms that political personalism took throughout world history (Caesarism, praetorship, medieval royalty, *signoria*, absolutism, Bonapartism, proletarian dictatorship, fascism, militarism) as well as their characteristic elements.

As for the 19<sup>th</sup> century caudillismo, she admits that, like other terms in the same category – *dictatorship*, *tyranny*, *despotism* – this term was most often defined irrespectively of its specificity, being applied to “realidades que tal vez no respondan a idénticas características y que engloban [...] desde los guerreros de la Independencia hasta los militares del siglo XX.”<sup>4</sup> In the author’s view, caudillismo was “[una] respuesta americana a la desarticulación del Imperio español, implicada en la ruptura y en las desiguales guerras de Independencia. Se fundamenta en el «prestigio» de los «jefes» (como expresión de la relación del individuo con la masa) y en la fuerza de las armas (como condición o factor para la obtención y para la conservación del poder), y puede emerger espontáneamente como tendencia en situaciones de debilidad institucional – incluida la del ejército –, y de atraso técnico –tanto desde la perspectiva del desarrollo técnico general como desde la de las técnicas políticas, incluidas las militares.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, authoritarian regimes do not represent a deviation but a phenomenon fully explainable within the historical, political, cultural, and identity context of Latin America. Such polities have dominated the continent’s history for a long time and they have been considered to some degree “legitimate”, since certain relevant segments of Hispanic American society have deemed these authoritarian structures to be adequate and, consequently, worthy of acceptance or support. In order to see in what way and on what grounds these Hispanic American systems of government were legitimized, we should start from the idea of political legitimacy, namely “the set of beliefs that lead people to regard the distribution of political power as just and appropriate for their own society.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Graciela Soriano de García-Pelayo, “Aproximaciones al personalismo político hispanoamericano del siglo XIX,” *Revista del Centro de Estudios Constitucionales*, 7 (1990), [http://revistas.cepc.gob.es/revistas\\_sf42.aspx?IDR=15&IDN=1234&IDA=35382&strApplicationPath=](http://revistas.cepc.gob.es/revistas_sf42.aspx?IDR=15&IDN=1234&IDA=35382&strApplicationPath=) (accessed September 11, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Apud Lynch, *Caudillos en Hispanoamérica, 1800-1850*, 530.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>4</sup> Soriano de García-Pelayo, “Aproximaciones al personalismo político hispanoamericano del siglo XIX,” 212.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>6</sup> Peter H. Smith, “The Search for Legitimacy,” in *Caudillo: Dictators in Spanish America*, 88.

Therefore, it is legitimacy that provides a rational justification for voluntary submission to political authority.

To begin with, we must point out that all modern analyses of political legitimacy should come to terms with the three “pure” types of legitimacy posited by the German sociologist Max Weber in his essay *Politics as a Vocation* (1926), respectively: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal or bureaucratic.

Traditional legitimacy represents “the authority of ‘eternal yesterday’, the authority of *custom*, which is sanctified by validity from time immemorial and by habitual observation.”<sup>1</sup> It is the rule “such as that exercised by the old-style patriarch and patrimonial prince,”<sup>2</sup> based on the belief of those governed in the sacredness and intangibility of customary rules and ancient traditions, on the idea of the sacred character of power, of the divine origin of its representative, usually an absolute hereditary monarch. Traditional legitimacy has occupied a prominent place in Hispanic American history, particularly during the colonial period, when obedience had always been due to the Spanish Crown, which demanded – and for centuries received – recognition on precisely these grounds. Later, separation from Spain nullified the possibility of explicitly relying political legitimacy on traditional authority. Nonetheless, what followed, namely the caudillismo of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inherited the personalistic forms of exercising power, promoted by the Hispanic tradition which has been determined, in principle, by reformist Catholicism and manifestation of power through violence. Along with the abolition of colonial institutions a power vacuum was created that local leaders of the independence wars were forced to “fill” by calling on the same type of authoritarian patterns they had known until then. Hence, personalistic and ideological interests have bet on the continuity of traditional forms of domination personified by the new leaders, and thus they managed to maintain and renew the figure represented by the caudillo that was to play a vital role in the troubled history of the Hispanic American states.

A second type of legitimacy is the charismatic one based on “the authority of the special personal *gift of grace* (charisma), absolutely personal devotion, and personal trust in revelation, in heroism or in other leadership qualities of an individual. This is “charismatic” authority, such as that exercised by the prophet – or in the political sphere – by the elected warlord or the plebiscitary ruler, the great demagogue and the party leader.”<sup>3</sup>

Characteristic of dictatorships, such domination is essentially a mass manipulation practiced from the leader to the governed; the leader’s exceptional personal qualities – looks, stage presence, mimics, gestures, speech style, the attraction he emerges, self-assurance, honesty, modesty, etc. – or a well-directed self-representation by means of effective communication strategies contribute to gain the confidence of people who support him, to whom he imposes himself and whom he dominates. Charismatic leaders have played prominent parts in Hispanic American history meeting in the popular imagination the secular aspect of political power with the religious aspect

---

<sup>1</sup> John Dreijmanis, ed., and Gordon C. Wells. trans., *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (New York: Algora, 2008), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Dreijmanis and Wells, *Max Weber’s Complete Writings*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

of a redemption mission bestowed upon them because of the unique gift offered to them through the divine grace: charisma. Reformist Catholic heritage specific to Hispanic American nations played the leading part in this case too: political missionaries, caudillos or dictators, represent a movement, a cause, or some higher truth, and embody under various guises collective redemption, national salvation, social justice, and, frequently enough, even a historical revenge or the political accomplishment of an unfinished project. Submission to this kind of leaders, such as Juan Perón (Argentina), Fidel Castro (Cuba) or Hugo Chávez himself (Venezuela), to give only a few examples of classic charismatic leaders – obeys either a profound sense of moral duty as a result of the identification with the great project undertaken by the leader, or a strong and lasting emotional state, or a combination of both reasons.

The third and last type of legitimacy defined by Weber is the rational-legal one which is the “rule by virtue of ‘legality’, by virtue of the belief in the validity of a legal *statute* and the validity of ‘competence’ that is based on rationally created rules. This means an attitude of obedience in the fulfillment of statutory duties [...]”<sup>1</sup> It is characteristic of modern political systems and it derives from the unanimous acceptance of rational rules for distributing power which are consistent, unambiguous and universally applied. Unlike traditional legitimacy, in this case obedience is owed to the legally established order itself and not to the persons, any individual figure or leader, who occupy the special offices. As to Hispanic America, this kind of legitimacy appeared when the recently independent states wanted to legalize their political personality through constitutionalism. In this sense, there have been attempts to adopt constitutions inspired by French and North American models, with the intention to make the transition from traditional to legal legitimacy through the implementation of the liberal creed and the spirit of the law on a continent yet unfamiliar with these forms of authority; this led to a profound destabilization of the political order that favoured, ultimately, the development and establishment of personalistic authoritarianism. Rejecting the idea that constitutional ideals were imported from France and the United States, Glen Dealy,<sup>2</sup> for example, argues that most Hispanic American constitutions have contained a large number of authoritarian features and that they placed power in the state not in the people, the central authority having virtually no restrictions. However, in explicitly elitist fashion these constitutions defined the major requirement for holding political office as moral superiority to the detriment of popular support. Therefore, they may be interpreted as efforts to legalize dictatorship rather than to implant democracy.

Having as a starting point the Weberian theory, Peter H. Smith identifies and analyzes two other types of political legitimacy that derive from the very specific context of Latin America. Taking Weber’s assertion that “the state is a relationship of *rule* by people over people based on the means of legitimate force (i.e., force that is regarded as legitimate). In order for the state to prevail, the people ruled over must therefore *submit* to the authority claimed by those ruling at the time.”<sup>3</sup> Smith speaks primarily about political legitimacy based on the principle of *dominance*, explained by a

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Apud* Smith, “The Search for Legitimacy,” in *Caudillo: Dictators in Spanish America*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Dreijmanis and Wells, *Max Weber’s Complete Writings*, 157.

somewhat tautological assertion, namely “those in power ought to rule because they are in power.”<sup>1</sup> The principle of dominance maintains that the leader’s authority becomes valid only if the majority or at least a major segment of the population obeys that authority. According to the author and returning to the idea of the German sociologist, the central means of asserting dominance is through physical constraint that involves two components: a sexual one – domination of women (*machismo*) –, and a political one which may be translated into demonstration of the capacity for wielding violence. Once recognized and obeyed, dominance will bring about political order. In short, according to Smith, power should lie with the powerful. However, the author makes an important distinction between dominance and charisma, bringing into focus three important differences: 1. power, force, order vs. ultimate truth, moral purpose, spiritual cause; 2. obedience by virtue of a rational calculation, a sort of political “bet” vs. submission out of a sense of duty; 3. maximum and constant attention to the size and strength of his following vs. maximum and constant attention to the project or mission undertaken. This differentiation between dominance and charisma represents at least one way of classifying and analyzing the complex phenomenon called *personalism*, which may be observed in the case of Hispanic America too. There has been a widespread tendency in literature on Hispanic American politics to identify the personalistic leader with the charismatic leader, which has created confusion and, unfortunately, it also contributed to a devaluation of the concept of charisma. Some personalistic leaders have undoubtedly been charismatic, but others have not, their claims to authority resting solely upon dominance.

If legitimation through dominance prevailed in the first part of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hispanic America, the following period favoured the assertion of another kind of political legitimacy – *achievement-expertise* – which claimed that authority should reside in the hands of people who possess the knowledge, expertise, or general ability to bring about specific achievements, especially economic achievements. In this case, authority derives essentially from the desirability of the achievement itself, the commitment being to the aim pursued and not to the means employed, which means that leaders are free to adopt any measure, however repressive, as long as they can demonstrate progress toward the sought-after goal.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these theoretical considerations, we return to the question in the subtitle: legitimacy or deviation? Upon closer examination, the emergence and subsequent consolidation of caudillistic regimes seem to have stemmed from an intense social quest for stability, a necessary and eagerly-desired stability that allowed caudillos to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their people and to perpetuate their tenures. However, as long as Hispanic, and by extension, Latin America has not proved itself a culturally and identitarily unidimensional clear-cut territory, we believe caudillismo should not be appraised but within the same heterogeneous multi-layered perspective that characterizes the continent. Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with its leading political actors embodying a particular mixture of old colonial practices related to prestige and personal power, and independence-arousing ideas could not have generated anything other than a specific in-between phenomenon.

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith, “The Search for Legitimacy,” 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 92-94.

## **5. Conclusions**

Within the miscellaneous context of Hispanic America, an outstanding character instrumental in forging the cultural identity of the region and its political assets has appeared: the *caudillo*; a character that will play an important part in the emergence of *caudillismo*, one of the continent's typical forms of leadership foretelling the various authoritarian regimes that the countries in the tropics would face over their long historical continuum. If, at the beginning, *caudillo* designated especially the military leader who had authority but not power, along with the wave of independence movements and civil wars, many caudillos assumed the country's leadership and some of them even became feared dictators. Nowadays, a man with such qualities is bestowed with the epithet of *caudillo* but in extremely rare circumstances, mainly in political discourse.

As a form of authoritarianism, *caudillismo*, joined by dictatorship beginning with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, represents the mostly rooted political tradition in the tumultuous history of the Hispanic American states. Three are the key factors that contributed to the emergence and proliferation of dictatorial figures within the region: the process of colonization of the continent, which began immediately after its discovery and conquest; adaptation to local conditions and perpetuation of social, economic and political superstructures left by the Spanish authorities after the withdrawal from the continent; and, last but not least, the exclusive contribution of the United States, namely the North-American capitalist interests, that took advantage of the natural wealth and economic resources of these lands.