19th century South America
Overview
(Selected excerpts from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1986: South America, History, Knowledge in Depth, Volume 27, pages 694 to 696)

México, Puebla, The arrival of the railroad during the Porfiriato (1876-1910)

The legacy of Iberian colonialism
(The forces shaping culture, political and social geography)

This basic socio-cultural framework, with all its inherent ambivalences and contradictions, emerged during the colonial era and exercised a deep and lasting impact on the political, economic and social structure of the new South American nations. Only after many decades was the impact blurred by the action of other external influences, change occurring from within, and a growing sense of national identity. (…) Although the political organization of the independent nations of South America was largely molded after the French and U.S. models, the political culture, values, attitudes, and behavior—particularly during the 19th century—were to a considerable extent the reflection of Iberian politics.

Economic and social factors

In the economy a similar continuity is discernible. Colonial South America was a producer of raw materials—precious metals and tropical crops—and a market for European (mostly Spanish) manufactures. Local manufacturing was discouraged, and the rest of the economy—based mostly on subsistence agriculture and on some artisanal production for local lower class consumption—contributed to the surplus that helped to
support the local colonial administration and the **higher stratum of colonial society**, as well as the Spanish (or in Brazil the Portuguese) royal treasury. After independence this economic framework continued to exist in the form of the **primary export economy** that was predominant in the region until the 1930s and that still remains an essential part of it today.

The same process that may be observed with regard to social organization and **stratification** was closely related, both during the colonial period and afterward, to the **system of land tenure** and to the **pattern of labor relations**. The great **landed estate** (“latifundio”), the hacienda (called fazenda in Brazil) was one of the cornerstones of colonial society. The hacienda became an autonomous, self sufficient productive unit, with the **great landowner**, or hacendado, generally exercising absolute authority – protective, oppressive, or both - over all the groups living at the hacienda; these included his own family, as well as the numerous servants, serfs, and slaves who provided labour for the agricultural, artisanal, and other activities. (…)

Labor relations established in colonial times also reflected the contradictory attitudes of Iberian rule. The **encomienda** (which meant to entrust a number of Indians to a Spaniard) was theoretically established as an institution for the protection of the indigenous population and for its conversion to the Christian faith. In fact, however, it became a means of reducing the Indians to slavery of serfdom. This was an important factor in the abolition of the **encomienda** and similar institutions, but the same semi-feudal relationships were reproduced in the hacienda and continued under various partially modernized or transformed forms through the 19th century. In certain areas these relationships did not disappear until the first half of the 20th century, when social change in rural areas began to gain momentum. (…)

**The colonial class hierarchies** had a profound influence on the future independent nations. This inherited social structure – slaves, free Africans, Indians, mestizos, creoles and European born Spaniards- resulted in the failure to create a viable modern political
system in the new nations. In addition, the central economic role played by raw material exports not only reinforced the latifundium (landed estate system), maintained economic dependence and vulnerability, and provided an obstacle to industrialization, but it also determined forms of social relationships that in turn tended to perpetuate the archaic social structure.

**Postindependence development**

With the independence of the Spanish colonies in the early 19th century, the last Spanish restrictions upon trade and local enterprise were swept away. Freedom to export to world markets aided the expansion or agriculture, even though factional strife hampered productivity. Road construction progressed. And after 1850 railways were build from many coastal points into the interior, usually with British and other external assistance. Wheat and hides from Argentina were sold in quantity to Europe. Coffee was introduced into Sao Paulo and within a few decades gained for Brazil the preeminence in that staple that it thereafter maintained. Cacao became important in Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela. Immigration was actively promoted and reached considerable volume in the Atlantic countries. Agriculture on the western coast showed less expansion, because of remoteness and the exiguity of arable land, while mineral industries for a time flagged. In no part of South America did independence bring the breaking up of the vast landed estates, and agriculture in consequence, did nor have the stimulus of diffused ownership. A compensatory gain in Peru was the exploitation of guano on the Chincha Islands and in Chile the export of natural nitate from the Atacama Desert. The arrival of manufactures from Europe at lower costs than in the colonial days was not favorable to South American industrial development, especially as motive power, industrial training and local capital were not available. Yet simple industries became widespread: textile mills multiplied greatly; cereals, sugar and leather were processed; and the output of clothing, furniture, footwear, soap, ceramics and beverages were everywhere augmented. The decades just before World War I brought new development: Natural Rubber in the Amazon Basin, Bananas in the Caribbean, Chilean Nitrate and Copper and the La Plata region build large packing plants and shipped chilled meat to Europe.
Social and political changes

The economic expansion created by a growing demand for primary exports, the new services required as a result of this expansion, and the growing centralizing and coordinating role of the state all helped to transform South American urban society, particularly in the larger cities, and led to the emergence of an urban middle class and to the beginnings of a modern urban working class. These transformations were carried into the political system, leading to an enlargement of participation. (…)

The emergence of new social sectors – first the urban middle classes and then the urban proletariat – deeply modified the cultural, social and political scene. Nationalism in different ways and degrees, characterized the outlook of the middle classes, and of the populistic regimes that replaced the oligarchic regimes, which had been characterized by “limited” democracy, or (more often) undisguised authoritarianism. Military intervention continued, but its meaning changed. Prior to the 1930s it had represented an expression of factional conflict within the ruling elites, but instead it became a component of the “participation crisis” generated by the entry of an increasingly larger proportion of the population into politics. Economic, political and cultural “dependence” of foreign hegemonic nations – mainly the United States - became a central issue. A growing sense of national identity generated a revaluation of the mestizo and Indian heritage. Even where this element was virtually lacking – as in Euro-America - efforts were nevertheless made to recreate a national-popular tradition. Economic development and the integration of national society became universally accepted, but deep conflicts were created by the contrasting ideologies, and interests of the various social sectors that were actively participating in the political arena. New regimes were established in the 20th century, varying from those oriented toward Marxism on the one hand to the modernizing authoritarianism of military rule on the other. The old colonial heritage was clearly disappearing.
Argentina, Buenos Aires, Plaza San Martín, Turn of the century.

Buenos Aires, Turn of the century, Immigrants at a “Conventillo”