SUMMARY - CHAPTER 2

Caudillos versus the Nation State

The chapter begins with the theft of Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna’s wooden leg during the war between the US and Mexico. Santa Anna’s wooden leg serves as a historical witness to the independence of Mexico and the internal political strife that followed (the leg was first given a State funeral, and then, a few years later, was dragged through the streets of Mexico City). The career of Santa Anna was marked by the unflagging loyalty of his people, his major failures in foreign expeditions, and his almost twenty-year exile, which was followed by an uneventful death.

Santa Anna was a typical caudillo. Caudillos such as him were representatives of non-colonially administered justice. They were icons who the local oppressed population could invest with their dreams and aspirations. The King and Church, symbols, and often executors, of paternal benevolence were—in the wake of independence—replaced by the figure of the caudillo. Caudillos stood in the same relationship to their followers as the King had. The difference was that their power was administered locally and held intact by the closeness among their armies. Post-independence, the functioning of the state depended on a balance between the now‐diminished powers of the central governing authority and the military power of the caudillo.

The figure of the caudillo could also bring about a dangerous destabilizing force to a country, as in the case of Bolivia and Peru. It is arguable that the defeat these nations suffered at the hand of Chile was contributed to by the caudillo. In Bolivia, the nation was held together by a system of patronage in which essentially independent states headed by caudillos paid tribute to the government. In Peru, the resources of the nation were ill managed by the caudillos. Both nations also lost major national assets due the caudillos' destabilizing force.

Nonetheless, caudillos brought along with them some good. Under the caudillo age—an age hampered less by the evils of centralized authority—more marginalized elements of Latin American society were able to assert an important measure of autonomy. The dissolution of central political authority post‐independence brought into the foreground local institutions as agents of communal consensus and power. This communal power was not only an effort at cultural preservation but also at cultural definition in the face of the outsider.

The caudillo maintained his power more by respecting and honoring the cultural lifestyle of his follower than by pushing an ideological agenda. Juan Manuel de Rosas was an archetypical example of such a caudillo. He used resources won during the independence wars to reward his followers. Rosas provided order through authoritarian rule, and in return for his absolutist method of governance he provided a degree of economic and personal security. Rosas’ popularity endured, despite mounting liberal opposition, because of his populist tactics and defense of the traditionally religious order.

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1. A short story by Esteban Echeverría: *The Slaughterhouse* by Echeverría sets up a dialogue between the traditional and modern in the foreground of the Argentine independence narrative.