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## Chile: The Making of a Republic, 1830–1865

Chile enjoyed unique prestige among the Spanish American republics of the nineteenth century for its stable and increasingly liberal political tradition. How did this unusual story unfold? The tradition was forged in serious and occasionally violent conflicts between the dominant Conservative Party, which governed in a sometimes authoritarian manner from 1830 to 1858, and the growing forces of political Liberalism. A major political realignment in 1857–8 paved the way for comprehensive liberalization. This book examines the formative period of the republic's history and combines an analysis of the ideas and assumptions of the Chilean political class with a narrative of the political process from the consolidation of the Conservative regime in the 1830s to the beginnings of liberalization in the early 1860s. The book is based on a comprehensive survey of the writings and speeches of politicians and the often rumbustious Chilean press of the period.

The late Simon Collier was Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. From 1965 to 1991 he was on the faculty at the University of Essex, England. His previous books include *Ideas and Politics of Chilean Independence, 1808–1833* (Cambridge, 1967); *A History of Chile, 1808–1994* (Cambridge, 1996), coauthored with William F. Sater; and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Cambridge, 1992), coedited and coauthored with Thomas E. Skidmore and Harold Blakemore.

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*Politics and Ideas*

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Politics and Ideas

SIMON COLLIER



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*In memoriam*  
**Richard Southern**  
(1933–1990)  
*and*  
**Laureano Ladrón de Guevara**  
(1940–1992)

*Together we “conversed” many a bottle.*

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Publisher's Note

Simon Collier died in February 2003,  
shortly after he reviewed the proofs of this book.

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S.C.  
Nashville, Tennessee  
April 2002



## Abbreviations Used in the Notes

ACT	<i>La Actualidad.</i>
AI(A)	Intendancy Archives, Atacama Province (Archivo Nacional, Chile).
AI(V)	Intendancy Archives, Valparaiso Province (Archivo Nacional, Chile).
AMI	Ministry of the Interior archives (Archivo Nacional, Chile).
AR	<i>El Araucano.</i>
AUCH	<i>Anales de la Universidad de Chile.</i>
BACH	<i>Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia.</i>
CHAM	[Diego Barros Arana, Marcial González, José Victorino Lastarria, Domingo Santa María]. <i>Cuadro histórico de la administración Montt</i> (Valparaiso, 1861).
CN/D	Congressional record, Chamber of Deputies.
CN/S	Congressional record, Senate.
DIS	<i>La Discusión.</i>
DP	<i>Documentos parlamentarios.</i> 9 vols. (1858–61).
EDP	Ernesto de la Cruz and Guillermo Feliú Cruz, eds., <i>Epistolario de don Diego Portales</i> , 3 vols. (1937).
FE	<i>El Ferrocarril.</i>
MV	<i>El Mercurio</i> , Valparaiso.
M(S)	<i>El Mercurio</i> , Valparaiso (edition for Santiago).
M(V)	<i>El Mercurio del Vapor</i> , Valparaiso (steamship edition of MV).
PR	<i>El Progreso.</i>
RCAT	<i>La Revista Católica.</i>
RCHG	<i>Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía.</i>
SCL	Valentín Letelier, ed., <i>Sesiones de los cuerpos legislativos de la República de Chile</i> , 1811–1845. 37 vols. (1887–1908).
TRI	<i>La Tribuna.</i>

A limited number of works consulted are identified in full in the notes, but most books and articles are cited by the name(s) of the author(s), sometimes with an identifying initial, and, with the author(s) of several works, by a shortened title of the publication. (In newspaper and magazine titles, the definite article is omitted.) Full details can be found in Sources.

## Introduction

It is a textbook commonplace that the Republic of Chile was a byword for political stability in nineteenth-century Latin America. Commonplaces are usually at least half true, and often more than half. Chile *was* the only Spanish American republic to win this reputation in the eyes of the outside world. The only other Latin American country to enjoy similar esteem was the Empire of Brazil, which almost until the end was a slaveholding society. (Slavery in Chile was abolished five years after independence.) Chile's transition to stability, however, was more eventful than the textbook commonplace assumes, with political life in what we may call "the early republic" marked by serious conflict as well as a promising degree of institutional continuity. The Chilean political tradition was forged in sharp and occasionally bloody struggles between government and its Liberal (and later Liberal-Conservative) adversaries. Not until the early 1860s were order (the key ideal of the Conservative governments) and greater political liberty (the principal demand of successive oppositions) reconciled to the satisfaction of most politicians. The ideas and politics of this formative period are the subject of this book.

The most perceptive review of my earlier book on the ideas and politics of Chile's independence period,<sup>1</sup> by French historian Jean Meyer, hinted that my approach to the history of ideas rested on "*une conception 'bégélienne de droite.'*"<sup>2</sup> The label is not congenial, but he had a point. Ideas should not seem to float in the air ("*dans un vide sidéral,*" as Meyer put it), as perhaps they sometimes did in that book. I remain convinced, however, of their intrinsic importance. At the very least, it is vital to draw an accurate picture of what they *were*, and this is the main task undertaken in this long-intended and late-flowering sequel to that earlier work. But although it is important to present political ideas against the background of the society and culture in which they were expressed, it also is very necessary to relate them to the political *events* of their time. Politics is, of all human

1 *Ideas and Politics of Chilean Independence, 1808-1833* (Cambridge, 1967).

2 *Revue Historique*, No. 499 (July-September 1971), pp. 231-34.

activities, perhaps the most rapidly shifting, and political ideas are often altered by circumstances. My emphasis in this book is still certainly on what people *thought* or *said* was happening, but I attempt, by the inclusion of four narrative chapters, to explore the connection between what people thought and said and the political *flow* of the period in which they were doing the thinking and saying. Only the reader can decide whether this is a risky strategy. These chapters are not a comprehensive narrative of the period, something that can be found in several classic works.<sup>3</sup> Their aim is to tease out the political implications of the most salient events, sometimes in ways the classic works did not attempt, while also adding fresh (and hopefully useful) detail. My prime interest in politics and ideas means that the narrative chapters pay particular attention to partisan maneuvering (at which Chilean politicians quickly became adept) and partisan propaganda. The propaganda, in particular, illustrates the terms of debate among Chilean politicians at certain critical junctures, the most serious being the dramatic confrontations of 1849–51 and 1857–9.

To describe the stage on which these dramas were enacted (and to set up a defense, though hardly a Maginot Line, against further suspicions of right-wing Hegelianism), Part I of the book (Chapters 1–2) offers a brief socioeconomic sketch of the new Chilean republic and examines the political system imposed by the ruling Conservative party, some knowledge of which is indispensable if the political tussles of the time and the making of the republican tradition are to be understood at all. My description of the political system is not conceived as a study of (although it would be foolish to deny that it has an unavoidable connection with) nineteenth-century Chilean state formation, a topic that would take me into a number of fields that are not germane to my main theme. It is a topic that has certainly attracted interesting scholarly work in recent times in the case of other Latin American countries.<sup>4</sup> Political ideas and attitudes in the

- 3 For the 1830s, Barros Arana, *Historia*, vol. 16, and Sotomayor Valdés, *Historia*; for the 1840s, Barros Arana, *Decenio*; for the 1850s, Alb. Edwards, *Gobierno*. For the 1860s there is no narrative as good as these, though Ag. Edwards, *Cuatro presidentes*, which covers the years 1841 to 1876, is passable, if patchy. For 1846–51, Vicuña Mackenna's *Jornada* and *Historia* are immensely readable, as is, for 1851–61, CHAM, pp. 30–242 (written by Barros Arana). For the years to 1850, I. Errázuriz, *Historia*, is a narrative still worth close attention. Encina, *Historia* (X, 443–XIV, 313) covers the whole period, although his “psychoethnic” judgments need to be taken with a large grain of salt, and, ideally, his text should be checked against Ricardo Donoso, *Francisco A. Encina, simulador*, 2 vols. (1969–70), II, 186–268.
- 4 Examples for other countries (mostly covering longer periods) include Charles F. Walker, *Smoldering Ashes. Cuzco and the Creation of Republican Peru, 1740–1840* (Durham, N.C., 1999) [pp. 84–230]; Mark Thurner, *From Two Republics to One Divided. Contradictions of Postcolonial Nationmaking in Andean Peru* (Durham, N.C., 1997); Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Foundations of Mexico's National State* (Stanford, Calif., 1996); Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation. The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995). It should be noted that all of these are based on studies of specific

early postcolonial decades, by contrast, have not aroused quite the same attention,<sup>5</sup> and there is still plenty of work to be done here, too.

Part II of the book (Chapters 3–4) starts the political narrative and takes the story from the mid-1830s, and the first, distinctly muted division among the ruling Conservatives to the bloodily opposed election in 1851 of the third Conservative president, Manuel Montt, the key political figure of the mid-century years. Part III (Chapters 5–8) is in some ways the core of the book. It is an attempt to portray (across the whole period) educated Chileans' political attitudes and their general view of Chile and the outside world, their *cosmovisión* or *imaginario*, as it is nowadays sometimes termed in Spanish. Here I make a fairly liberal use of representative short quotations, representative in that they reflect a point of view or a train of thought which could easily (to a point well beyond tedium) be illustrated by numerous similar examples. This is the best (indeed the only) way I know of conveying something of the argumentative and linguistic *flavor* of the time. The narrative resumes in Part IV (Chapters 9–10), and follows the story through Montt's presidency and into the first years of that of his successor, José Joaquín Pérez, years that brought the first stage of political liberalization and completed the foundations on which Chile's essential political tradition was built.

In the past thirty years or so, scholars have gone a long way toward rectifying our previous substantial ignorance of the economic, social, and cultural history of Chile's postindependence decades,<sup>6</sup> and a number of valuable studies have touched on aspects of political life.<sup>7</sup> There is no "traditional" overall political interpretation of the early republic in serious Chilean (still less, non-Chilean) historiography. Chile's classic nineteenth-century Liberal historians Diego Barros Arana, Miguel Luis Amunátegui,

regions rather than nations as a whole, an approach that may be less applicable to the Chilean case. Other promising approaches may be found in Paul Gootenberg, *Between Silver and Guano. Commercial Policy in Postindependence Peru* (Princeton, N.J., 1989) and Jeremy Adelman, *Republic of Capital. Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford, Calif., 1999).

5 For Chile, the classic work by Ricardo Donoso, *Las ideas políticas en Chile*, 3rd ed. (Buenos Aires, 1975), covers the entire nineteenth century on an issue-by-issue basis. For Mexico, see Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821–1853* (New Haven, Conn., 1968), and for Colombia (with wide coverage of ideas), Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, *El pensamiento colombiano en el siglo XIX* (Bogotá, 1964). José Carlos Chiaramonte, *Ciudades, provincias, Estados: Orígenes de la Nación Argentina, 1800–1846* (Buenos Aires, 1997) is a notable contribution for Argentina. Carmen McEvoy, *La utopía republicana. Ideales y realidades en la formación de la cultura política peruana, 1871–1919* (Lima, 1997), deals with a later period in Peru, but see also her valuable critical introduction to Juan Espinosa's *Diccionario para el pueblo* (Lima, 2001), pp. 11–100.

6 For example, works by Bauer, Bengoa, Cavieres, del Pozo, Grez Toso, Jaksčić, Romero, Salazar, Serrano, Villalobos, and Woll, listed in Sources.

7 For example, works by Brahm García, Bravo Lira, Gazmuri, Kinsbruner, Loveman and Lira, and Stuvén, listed in Sources.

and Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, and their Conservative colleague Ramón Sotomayor Valdés, wrote about segments of the period, but did not cover it as a whole. Their various partial narratives never quite coalesced, at the hands of the next generation (as they could easily have done), into a Chilean equivalent of the “Whig interpretation” of English history.<sup>8</sup> We owe perhaps the most seductive of later “revisionist” interpretations to the lively mind of Alberto Edwards (1874–1932). In a classic book of 1928, he presents the politics of the period (and beyond, to his own time) in terms of what he calls an “aristocratic *fronde*,” comparable to the mid-seventeenth-century efforts of the French nobility (and Paris *Parlement*) to rein in the Bourbon monarchy.<sup>9</sup> Edwards’s reading fits the facts to the extent that the political agitation of 1849–51 and 1857–9 resembled the French *frondes* in their attempts to curb a powerful regime, and that one of the standard Liberal demands throughout the early republic (and well beyond) was the reduction of executive power. My sense is that there is a case here for Ockham’s razor. The pressure for greater elite control over government, if that is what it was, was not expressed in those terms, but simply as a liberal demand, and historians are generally chary of identifying underlying motivations in the absence of hard evidence. Like Queen Elizabeth I of England, we have no way of opening “windows into men’s souls.”

A more recent interpretation, lucidly presented by Bernardino Bravo Lira, views the early republican governments (especially those of Diego Portales in the 1830s and of Manuel Montt in the 1850s) as prolongations of the enlightened despotism that had striven to overhaul and remodel the Spanish Empire in the later colonial period.<sup>10</sup> This is persuasive as a description of how the governments of the early republic actually *behaved*, and even, maybe, as a picture of their style. The first two or three generations of Chilean politicians were still close to the colonial era and its authoritarian framework. “The monarchical state,” as Mario Góngora once put it, “may have disappeared in 1810, but not the notion of . . . an active and decisive state.”<sup>11</sup> Portales and Montt combined a genuine (in Montt’s case a zealous) interest in practical reform with a distinct reluctance to liberalize the political system. At a subconscious level the model of enlightened despotism may possibly have exercised its pull in the early republic. Once again, however, it is not a point that can easily be established from what politicians *said* or *wrote*. For all their constantly reiterated emphasis on order, Chilean Conservatives did not espouse despotism (enlightened or otherwise) as a

8 I explored this point (briefly) in “The Historiography of Chile’s ‘Portalian’ Period,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 57:4 (1977), pp. 666–69.

9 Alb. Edwards, *Fronde*, pp. 46–119.

10 Bravo Lira, *Absolutismo*, pp. 183–430.

11 Interview in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 63:4 (1983), p. 668.

political ideal, and certainly did not affectionately look back to the colonial era, however often their Liberal adversaries may have depicted their regime as a “colonial reaction.”

Rather in the spirit of the old Liberals, Julio Heise González once described the early republic as “the last and most beautiful chapter of Spanish colonial history.”<sup>12</sup> It was not. It was the first (and by no means the least interesting) chapter of Chile’s political life as a free republic. My own view, hopefully insinuated in the pages that follow, is inclined to attribute the political change of the early republic to the impressive thrust of nineteenth-century liberalism, to which educated upper-class Chileans (whatever their party label) became increasingly susceptible as their wealth expanded and their society became more sophisticated, as it did between the 1830s and the 1860s. By the end of the 1850s, the majority of the Chilean political class clearly wished to embrace the nineteenth-century modernity of which liberalism was the supreme emblem. A glance at the terms of debate at certain points (the elections of 1851 and 1858, for instance) shows, very revealingly, that in appealing to public opinion government and opposition alike used more or less the same language. Despite certain differences of emphasis, it was a fundamentally liberal, even liberal-democratic language. It may seem trite to argue that the eventual liberalization of the Chilean political system was the result of liberalism, but why should this surprise us? The same pressures were felt virtually everywhere in the Western world of which Chile was (and is) a part in that “century of hope,” as the British Socialist politician John Strachey once memorably defined the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

European and American scholars have sometimes been patronizing in their interpretation of the liberal tradition in Spanish America, failing to understand the seriousness of the liberal thrust in the region, and conveniently overlooking its vicissitudes in mainland Europe for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to mention the persistence of slavery in the United States and its disgraceful sequel, the long reign of Jim Crow in the South. What can be detected beneath all such patronizing (and surely unhistorical) attitudes is the assumption that there was somehow a “lack of fit” between liberalism and some of the hierarchical, conservative societies in which it took root. Chile would definitely be a case in point. In the most controversial chapter of his great masterpiece, Edward Gibbon (tongue in cheek) contrasts “Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity” with the “inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted . . . among a weak and degenerate race of beings.”<sup>14</sup> Something

12 *150 años de evolución institucional* (1960), p. 45.

13 *The Menace of Fascism* (New York, 1933), title of chapter 2.

14 *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London, 1994), I, 446.

similar could be said of liberalism. None of the societies (in either hemisphere) where it appeared, at the time it appeared, remotely measured up to its long-term democratic implications. Do any of them, even today?

The materials on which this study is based are drawn mostly from an exhaustive survey of what literate and articulate Chileans wrote or said – in their newspapers, books, pamphlets, and broadsides, in their parliamentary debates, and sometimes in their private correspondence, although too much of this is still hidden away in inaccessible family archives. (I have made only light forays into archival sources.) Foreign comments on Chilean affairs (easy enough to find) are kept to a minimum. My interest is in how *Chileans* saw their own affairs. Not all of them. Not even very many of them. When I use the phrase “educated Chileans,” as I do (deliberately often), it serves as a reminder of the fact that educated, upper-class Chileans were a very small minority in the early republic, and articulate, educated upper-class Chileans an even smaller one. They were, however, for better and worse, the Chileans who *mattered* in political life, and who had an overwhelmingly greater influence than anyone else on the making of the republic.

This book deals with their “public” face. It does not go into their private *mores*, their deepest personal thoughts, or their intimate culture as a class – a fascinating topic in its own right and one that could do with a full-scale study. It also must be admitted that their thoughts and opinions are easier to reach and reassemble than those of, say, the vast mass of the laboring poor, the numerical majority of Chileans at this period, whose story needs to be approached by more indirect means. Here there have been some valiant efforts in recent years, and it must be hoped that such efforts will continue. Until we have further studies of social history, our picture of the early republic will remain incomplete. Yet, while we can all surely rejoice that history is nowadays less than ever “the propaganda of the victors,” in the poet Ernst Toller’s phrase, it remains important not to lose sight of what the “victors” (in this case, at least in a vague sense, the upper levels of Chilean society) were up to, or what they thought they were up to. I share Eric Hobsbawm’s wish to rescue not only “the stockinger and the peasant, but also the nobleman and the king”<sup>15</sup> from what another fine English historian, Edward Thompson, once called the enormous condescension of posterity.

Posterity should feel no condescension, enormous or otherwise, toward the upper-class Chilean writers and politicians of the early republic. They were engaged, in their own eyes at least, in finding a decent political framework for themselves and ultimately their country. The Conservatives can hardly be faulted for their belief in order, without which no society can easily make progress, and their opponents cannot be faulted for their faith in liberty, our prime political value in the era since the eighteenth-century

15 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York, 1997), pp. 184–85.



Enlightenment. The ferocious storms through which the Chilean republic had to pass in my own time (which marked everyone who lived through them) are a sufficient reminder of the permanent importance of the quest for a proper balance between order and freedom, in Chile – and everywhere else. If we ever abandon that quest, we are lost, perhaps irretrievably, in Dante’s dark wood, and in the inferno lying beyond.

*A note on language.* The terms “Liberal” and “Liberalism” in this book are applied to the Liberal *party* of the period, while “liberal” and “liberalism” refer to the broad nineteenth-century liberal political *philosophy*, which was by no means confined to partisan Liberals. The same goes for “Conservative,” “conservative,” and so on. It also should be remembered that the seasons of the year, when mentioned, are those of the Southern hemisphere.