

Comparative Historical Analysis

What have been the political correlates of Latin America's economic strategies? As shown in the previous chapter, countries of the region pursued a wide array of formulas for economic development—liberalism, industrialism, socialism, and neoliberalism. As cause and consequence of these alterations, social structures underwent change, cities burgeoned, and politics produced a bewildering assortment of experiments—revolution, reform, reaction, and democracy. Within the political realm, diversity and change have been the central and defining themes.

Comparative analysis offers an effective way to understand the underlying relationship between economic and political transformations. This chapter therefore has two goals. One is to sketch broad *similarities* in processes of political transition. Our intention is not to depict the history of any single country; rather, it is to present a composite portrait that can reveal the overall context in which individual nations have developed.

Our second goal is to identify key *differences* among the countries of the region. This allows us to pose intriguing questions. Why, for instance, were there social revolutions in Bolivia and Mexico but not in Peru? Why did such diverse countries as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile all succumb to military dictatorships at about the same time? Comparative analysis not only sharpens our perception of individual countries but also offers a key to detecting patterns of cause and effect.

To explore processes of transformation, we focus not on the rise or fall of individual presidents or of partisan administrations, but on fundamental transitions between *political systems* (a.k.a. *political regimes*). We are seeking to identify patterns of structural change over time.

For this purpose, we begin with a straightforward classification of political regimes. Under the general heading of *democracy*, we distinguish between the following:

- Oligarchic democracy, which restricted electoral competition to rival factions of the socioeconomic elite;
- Co-optative democracy, which invited rising middle classes to take part in elections;
- Liberal democracy, which combines free and fair elections with the full enjoyment of citizen rights; and
- Illiberal democracy, the most common form in recent years, which combines free and fair elections with the partial (but systematic) denial of civil liberties to citizens.

Further, we observe several types of *authoritarianism*:

- Traditional dictatorship, usually by individual military strongmen;
- One-party (or dominant-party) rule, often associated with the predominance of multi-class “populist” alliances between local entrepreneurs and organized labor;

- “Bureaucratic” authoritarianism, ruled by the military as an institution (instead of an individual officer) in collaboration with bureaucrats and technocrats from the private sector;
- Revolutionary states, intended to bring about structural change in accordance with socialist prescriptions.

As these classifications demonstrate, Latin America has experienced an unusually broad array of political regimes. The conceptual challenge is to make sense out of what might otherwise look like empirical chaos. In this spirit we offer analytical tools, not conclusive solutions.

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EXPLORATIONS IN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A second broad goal of this chapter is to explore (and explain) key differences in political conditions among countries of Latin America. Comparative analysis involves three steps: first, identifying elements shared in common by Latin American societies; second, uncovering key differences between their historical experiences; third, and most difficult, ascertaining the cause-and-effect relationship between those differences. Are there discernible patterns of economic and social development that can account for political trajectories of countries in the region? (Or, in formal terms, does variation in x really explain differences in y ?)

How might this actually work? Thus far we have described *common features* of historical change for two groups of nations in Latin America—(a) larger and more advanced countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, and (b) the lower-income ‘plantation societies.’ We now turn to the challenge of identifying and explaining essential *differences* among the nations of the region. We adopt two distinct strategies:

1. the analysis of differences in social structure and political experience *across individual countries*—an approach that would permit, for example, a comparison between Argentina and Brazil, or between Cuba and El Salvador, and
2. exploration of *change over time* within individual countries—a focus which would allow us to trace the formation of social coalitions supporting reactionary dictatorship in Chile, for example, and/or revolutionary rule in contemporary Cuba.

Once again, our goal is to present a schematic way of thinking about such developments, rather than a definitive set of rigid judgments.

Building a Conceptual Framework

Our first task is to construct a framework for analyzing social structures. We therefore concentrate on urban and rural social-class groupings:

- the *urban upper class*, consisting primarily of industrialists, bankers, financiers, and large-scale merchants;
- the *rural upper class*, mainly landowners;

- the *urban middle class*, a heterogeneous stratum including professionals, teachers, shopkeepers, and so on;
- the *rural middle class*, not often noticed in Latin America, one that includes small farmers as well as merchants in rural areas;
- the *urban lower class*, principally an industrial working class, but a stratum that also includes the services sector and growing segments of unemployed migrants from the countryside; and
- the *rural lower class*, either an agrarian proletariat or a traditional peasantry—some of whose members may take part in the national economy, some of whom (especially in indigenous communities) may subsist on the fringes of the marketplace.

The groupings in the “lower class,” often known as the “popular classes” in Latin America, represent, by far, the largest segments in society. These are poor people, undereducated and sometimes malnourished, and they have been systematically deprived of the benefits of development. Many of them participate in the rapidly emerging “informal sector,” working at odd jobs outside the formal economy. (The informal sector is an unusually amorphous group, including peddlers and beggars and small-scale entrepreneurs, and for simplicity’s sake, it does not receive separate consideration in this analysis.)

One additional social actor—not a class or stratum, but a critical group nonetheless—consists of the *external sector*. It includes private investors and corporations as well as international agencies (IMF, World Bank), foreign governments, and foreign military establishments. Though sometimes divided against itself, the external sector has often wielded enormous power in Latin America.

To enhance their relative position, these social actors typically compete for control of major institutions. The most crucial institution has been the *state*, which commands large-scale resources and usually claims an effective monopoly on the legitimate use of force (only a government, for example, can put a citizen in jail). One key group within the state has been the military; another consists of party politicians (when they exist); another is composed of technocrats and bureaucrats. Also important as social actors have been the Roman Catholic Church and other nongovernmental organizations.

Figure 13.2 provides a general picture of these groups and institutions. It does not depict the outlines of any specific Latin American society. It is an abstract scheme, a hypothetical means of illustrating the subject of concern.

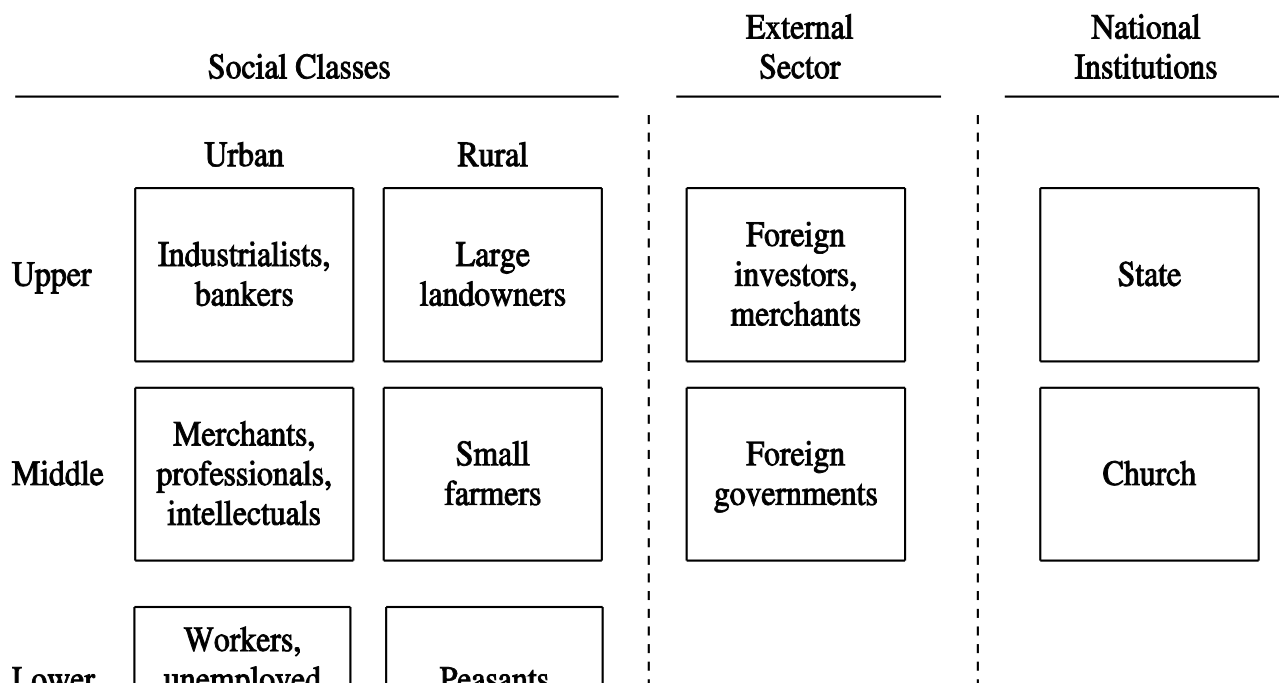


Figure 13.2 Hypothetical Array of Social Actors

To apply the framework to any historical situation, we need to pose a common set of fundamental questions. Here we thus inquire:

- What are the principal social classes? Which ones are present, and which ones are absent?
- Which social classes have the most power?
- Which groups are allied with which? On what basis?
- How powerful is the state?
- Is it captive to any of the social classes, or is it autonomous?
- What are the predominant factors on the international scene?
- What, in particular, is the position of the United States?

We next present schematic analyses of political and social transitions in selected countries. We concentrate here on the years from the 1950s through the 1990s, though the method could just as well apply to other periods in time. This is an interpretive exercise, we emphasize, not a definitive statement; it requires estimates and judgments that should provoke discussion and debate. Nonetheless, we think the approach provides strong confirmation of our basic arguments: that political outcomes in Latin America derive largely from the social class structure, that the class structure derives largely from each country's position in the world economy, and that a comparative perspective on these phenomena can help elucidate the variations and the regularities in Latin American society and politics.

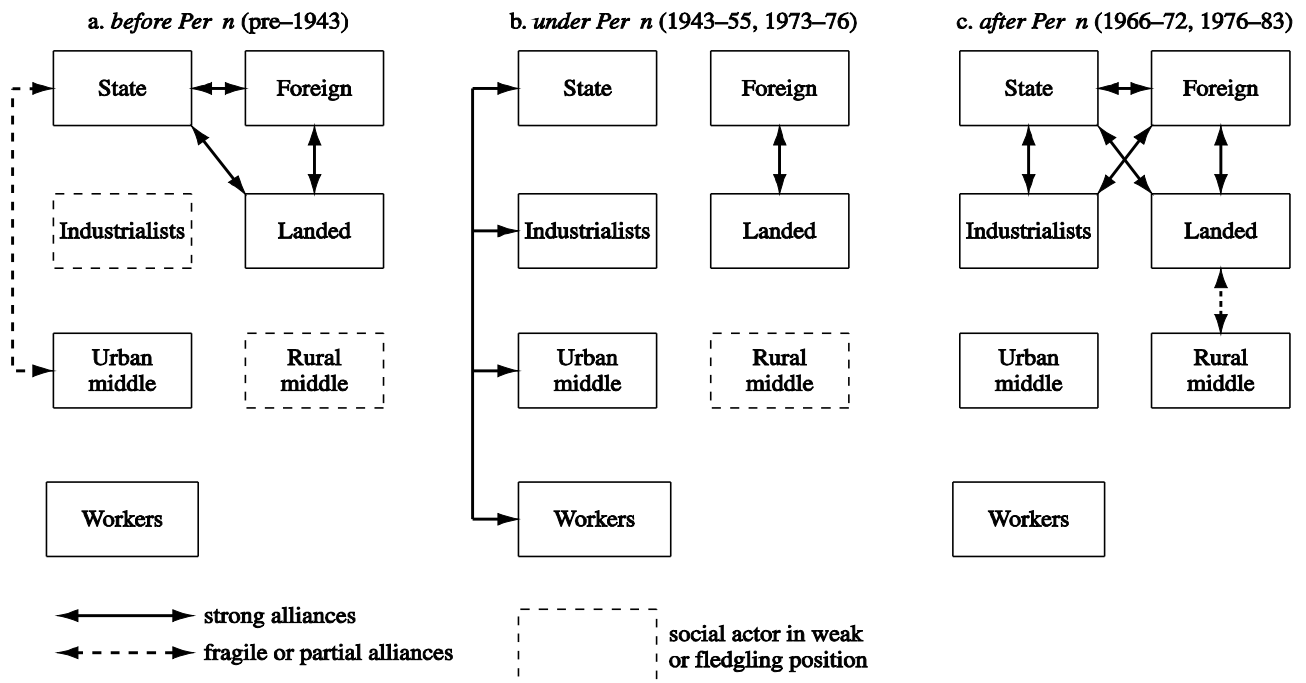
Getting Down to Cases

Our first application deals with Argentina, described in Chapter 9, where the economic dominance of beef and wheat produced two major social results: the absence of a peasantry, especially in the *pampas*

region, and the importation of working-class labor from Europe. In the years before Peron, the state and the foreign sector were mostly in league with landed interests, as shown in Figure 13.3. (Solid arrows represent relatively firm alliances; broken arrows represent fragile or partial coalitions.) Even the Radicals who governed with urban middle-class support in 1916–30 tended to favor the cattle-raising oligarchs.

For economic and demographic reasons, Argentina’s urban working class began exerting pressure on the political system in the 1930s, but there was no possibility of a class-based alliance with a peasantry; the most likely allies, instead, were newly emergent industrialists who were ready to challenge the landowning aristocracy and its foreign connections. The preconditions thus existed for an urban, multi-class coalition of workers, industrialists, and some segments of the middle class. It took the political instinct, the populist rhetoric, and the personal charisma of Colonel Juan Peron to make this alliance a reality, and he used a corporatist state structure to institutionalize it. One reason for its initial success was that the landowners had no peasantry with which to form a common conservative front. A reason for its ultimate failure was that limited industrial growth led to class-based worker-owner conflict within the coalition itself.

Figure 13.3 Political and Social Coalitions: Argentina



Starting in 1966 and again in 1976, the military, committed to barring the Peronists from power, seized the state and attempted to impose a “bureaucratic-authoritarian” regime. The dominant alliance consisted of military officers, foreign investors, local industrialists, and landowners. Workers were repressed and forcibly excluded from power. The middle sectors played a waiting game, then found their opportunity with Alfonsín’s election in 1983. Their party was, in turn, displaced by an elected Peronist president, Carlos Menem. He soon launched an orthodox stabilization program that turned Argentine class politics on its head. The Peronists, once the implacable foes of economic orthodoxy, now provided the congressional votes to put that doctrine, including wholesale privatization, into action.

Chile is quite a different case. It has contained every type of social actor, including a peasantry (and migratory rural proletariat) and a working class that, by 1900, was well organized, at least by Latin American standards. Foreign interests, especially the copper companies, collaborated with an upper class that, in contrast to Argentina, was deeply involved in finance and industry as well as land. Though political parties represented specific social groups, the state generally allowed free political competition.

So there existed elements of a powerful socialist movement (see Figure 13.4). Party politics could (and did) lead to ideological polarization. The alliance of the foreign sector with the upper class added a nationalistic dimension to antiaristocratic resentment. A broad-based coalition of workers and peasants seemed possible: hence the triumph and euphoria of the early Salvador Allende government. Chile’s socialist movement was not able, however, to expand its support much beyond its industrial working-class base. Allende supporters failed especially to convert many of the lower middle class. Urban and rural elements of the upper class, on the other hand, maintained their solidarity, partly through family connections, and landowners managed to get support from other strata in the countryside. U.S. undercover intervention further hastened the downfall of Allende’s regime and thereby ‘saved’ the Chilean conservatives.

After 1973, the Chilean military, like its counterpart in Argentina, established a bureaucratic-authoritarian system. The ruling coalition included industrialists, landowners, foreign investors, and a state that possessed extraordinary power. Staffed by generals and technocrats, especially the ‘Chicago boys,’ the Chilean government set about its course determined to prevail over any and all opposition. In the course of financial reorganization and extensive privatization, the government also increased the concentration of wealth, when a few rich clans and conglomerates bought the privatized state enterprises.

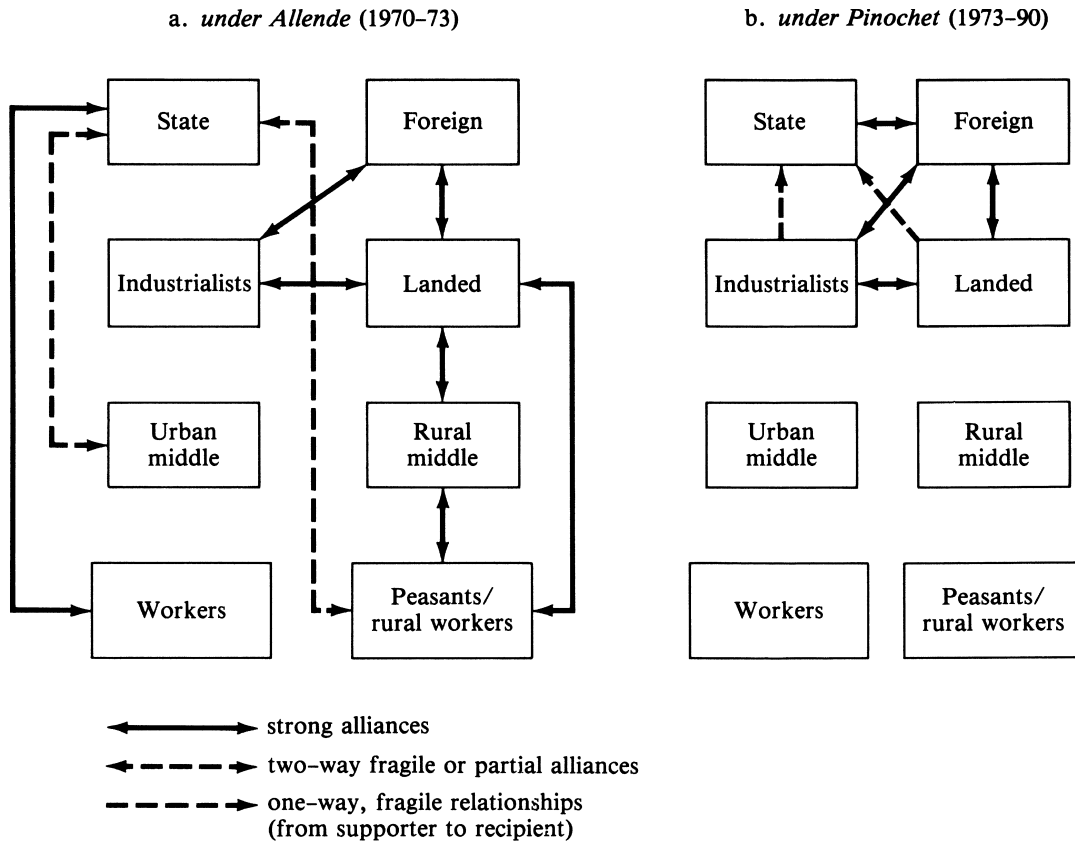


Figure 13.4 Political and Social Coalitions: Chile

Brazil presented a similar picture. Under Vargas, the Estado Novo organized urban workers under the auspices of state control. In the early 1960s, his protégé, Joao Goulart, stepped up the mobilization of the workers—and also fomented (or at least permitted) the organization of peasants in the countryside. The prospect of a worker-peasant alliance antagonized both the upper class and foreign interests, depicted in Figure 13.5, and prompted the military to intervene in 1964 and to establish a prototypical bureaucratic-authoritarian regime. Despite waves of repression that hit every social sector (although to highly differing degrees), the Brazilian government succeeded in retaining more residual middle-class support than its counterparts in Argentina or Chile, and this explains in part why the process of liberalization (*abertura*) was successful at an earlier stage there.

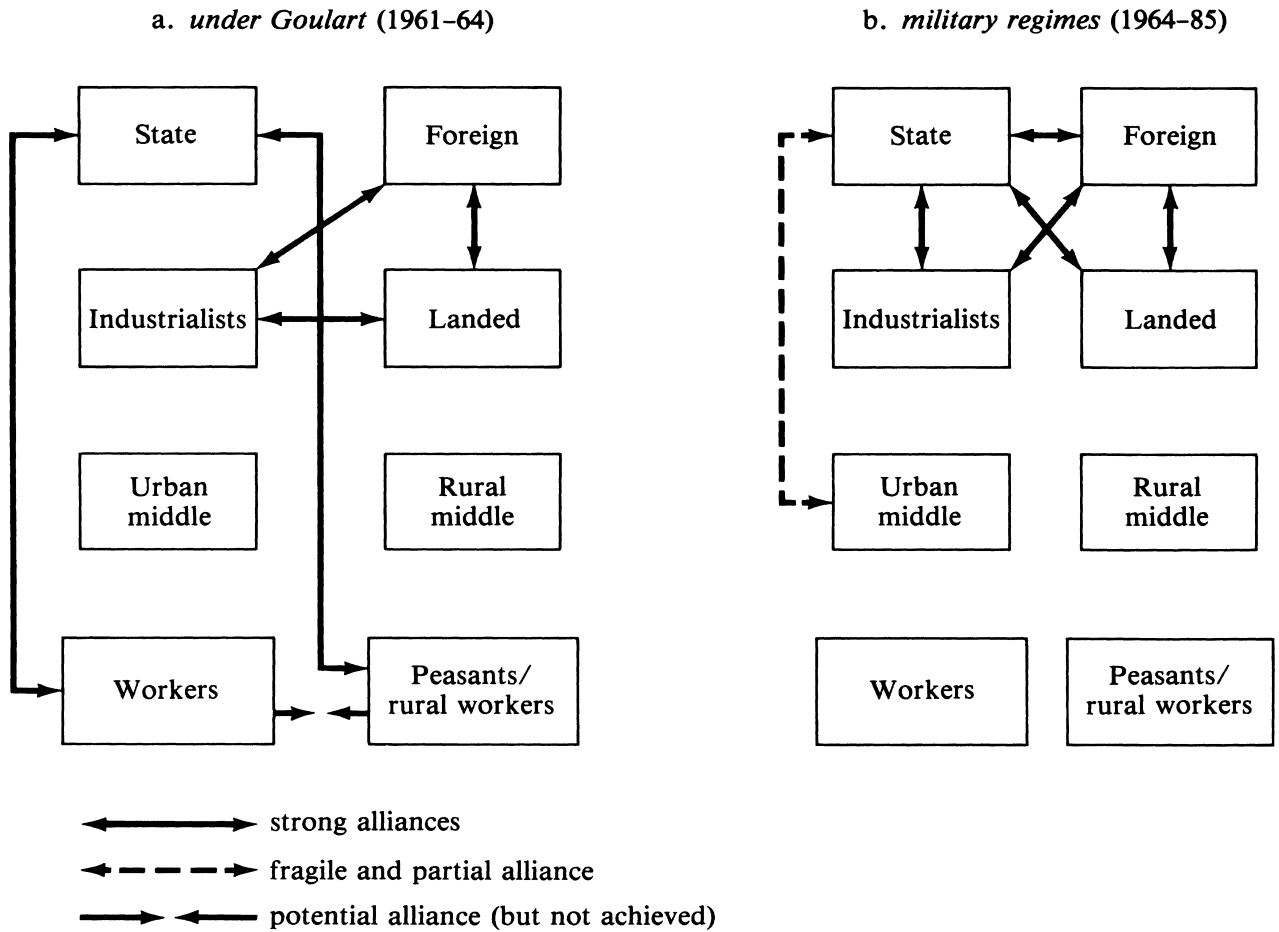


Figure 13.5 Political and Social Coalitions: Brazil

Mexico offers a different combination. Prior to the Revolution of 1910, the country had no indigenous industrial elite or rural middle sector; there was a nascent but unorganized working class. As shown in Figure 13.6, the ruling coalition, under the Porfiriato, included three groups: landowners, the foreign sector, and the state.

The Revolution ruptured this coalition and, through agrarian reform, weakened the rural elite. The state increased its authority and, from the 1930s onward, encouraged the formation of an industrial bourgeoisie. The postrevolutionary governments drew popular support from both workers and peasants, and under Cardenas developed a strategy for dealing with the masses: the state would organize workers and peasants in such a way as to keep them apart. The PRI developed separate “sectors” for workers and peasants, reflecting the regime’s obsession with heading off any spontaneous, class-based politics. By the mid-1990s, however, the PRI was suffering major electoral defeats, especially on the state and local levels. Furthermore, top-level feuds were threatening to destroy the party’s supposedly multi-class hegemony.

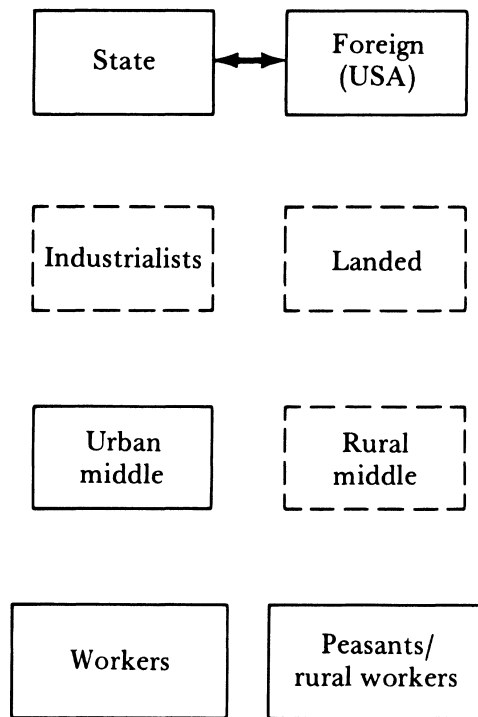
Figure 13.6 Political and Social Coalitions: Mexico

Cuba's plantation society reveals still another profile. Foreign (that is, U.S.) domination of the sugar industry meant that, for all practical purposes, there was hardly any local upper class. Workers in the mills and on plantations formed an active proletariat, as pictured in Figure 13.7, and migration strengthened ties between laborers in the cities and the countryside. Unions were weak, the army was corrupt, and the state, under Batista, was a pitiful plaything of U.S. interests.

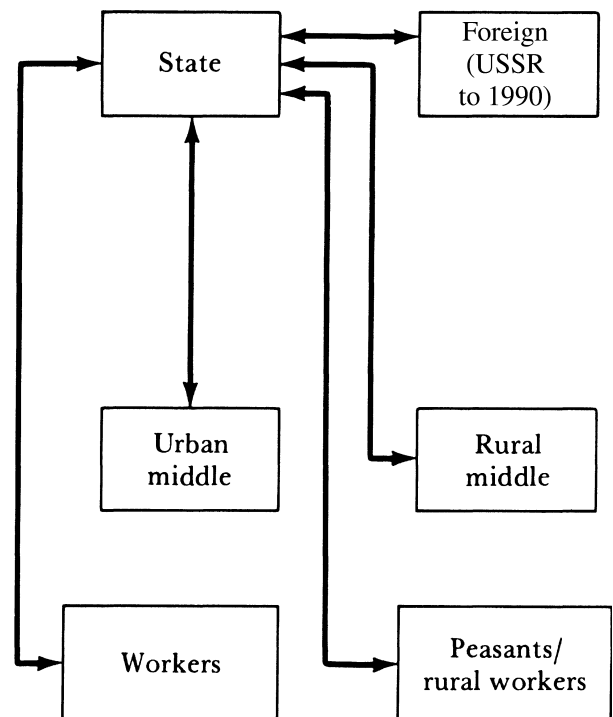
Cuba possessed elements of a socialist movement, one that could capitalize on anti-imperialist sentiments. There was another secret to Fidel's eventual success: his movement would meet very little resistance, except for the foreign sector—whose proconsuls did not use all the resources at their disposal. Since 1959 Fidel and his lieutenants have revamped the island's social structure, eliminating vestiges of the old upper class, organizing middle- and lower-class groups in cities and the countryside, and implementing a "command" economy. It was achieved, however, only with massive Soviet support. This dependency became painfully apparent when the Soviet Union and its subsidy both disappeared in the early 1990s.

The goals of this exercise have been both methodological and substantive. Our *methodological* goal has been to demonstrate principles and techniques of

a. before the Revolution (pre-1959)



b. since the Revolution (1959-)



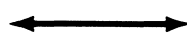

 strong alliances
 social actor in weak or fledgling position

Figure 13.7 Political and Social Coalitions: Cuba

comparative analysis in such a way as to illuminate differences and similarities among countries covered in this book. Our *substantive* intent has been to support the claim that, over time, changes in social structures—and in social coalitions—can shed significant light on patterns of political change in Latin America.

We wish to emphasize that this perspective illustrates only one approach to comparative historical analysis. There are many other ways of carrying out this kind of exercise. Political scientists have focused on the importance of formal (and informal) institutions, especially electoral institutions. Gender specialists have demonstrated the utility of comparing societies according to their treatment of women and families. Sociologists and anthropologists have analyzed comparative dimensions of social movements and grassroots organizations. Practitioners of cultural studies have revealed the contours of ideology and the subtle interplay among literature, the arts, and social formations. All such perspectives can be extremely useful.

Our basic point is modest: comparative historical analysis is feasible, constructive, and enlightening. It is more art than science. At the same time, it can illuminate whatever may be “unique” about specific societies, and it can shed light on patterns of cause and effect. That conviction has established a foundation for this book.