The publication of Knight and Pansters’s (2005) *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (2005) renewed a debate about the significance of *caciquismo* [boss rule] in Mexican politics that has spanned more than five decades. The volume’s immediate goal was to extend and deepen earlier historical studies of *caciquismo* in post-revolutionary Mexico (especially Brading, 1980). The editors and contributing authors succeeded admirably in this task, shedding new light on the role of caciques¹ (local or regional bosses) in different regions, sectors and time periods. At the same time, their research raised important questions concerning the broader relationship between *caciquismo* and different kinds of political regime (authoritarianism versus democracy) and about the ways in which Mexico’s slow, uneven process of democratisation has affected – and has been shaped by – instances of cacical domination.

*Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* thus contributed to broader, multidisciplinary exchanges about the scope and impact of democratisation in Mexico and, by extension, in Latin America more generally. Political scientists’ and sociologists’ interest in *caciquismo* peaked during the 1960s and 1970s when, for example, some analysts focused on local leaders as brokers or intermediaries in countries confronting challenges of national political integration (Chalmers, 1972: 110–111; Valenzuela, 1977: 155–68). At the time, many scholars viewed the phenomenon as a traditional, predominantly rural form of personalist domination that would disappear under the relentless, ‘modernising’ pressures of socio-economic change and rural–urban migration. Even those researchers who documented the presence of *cacicazgos* [instances of cacical rule, or political fiefdoms] in other contexts, particularly in urban squatter settlements, generally assumed that caciques would eventually be doomed to political extinction. And, with the gradual instauration of civilian democratic rule throughout the region after

¹ The general literature on this topic includes prominent examples of female bosses (*cacicas*). However, for simplicity of expression this article employs the term only in its more common, masculine form.
the late 1970s, many political scientists shifted their attention to more conventional political phenomena such as elections, political parties and the multiple challenges of democratic consolidation. More recently, however, some scholars have revisited related topics such as electoral clientelism and vote-buying (Auyero, 2001) – albeit sometimes in a more ‘formal’, mathematical fashion than their predecessors (Brusco, Nazareno and Stokes, 2004; Stokes, 2005) – as part of a growing interest in informal institutions and their political significance (Lauth, 2000; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Somewhat paradoxically, then, even those who apply formal methods to the study of contemporary Latin American politics pay at least indirect homage to the continuing importance of those quintessentially informal political operators, caciques.

This article contributes to the ongoing debate about caciquismo and its political importance by addressing three topics. The first section highlights the phenomenon’s core characteristics and assesses its place in twentieth-century Mexican politics. This discussion considers both those elements that might account for the durability of boss rule and the main factors responsible for the gradual erosion of caciques’ power and influence. It concludes by speculating about why, compared to some other Latin American countries, the phenomenon appears to have been especially prominent in Mexican politics.

The second part of the article takes as its point of departure the continued existence of cacical rule in Mexico and other Latin American countries, a fact that raises difficult questions about the scope of democratising processes and, indeed, about the very nature of pluralist democracy. There are fundamental tensions between the principles underlying caciquismo and democracy, and there is no doubt that personalist domination practiced in a broadly democratic context differs in crucial ways from more traditional manifestations of the phenomenon. Yet instances of cacical rule do exist in democracies, and, even more notably, new cacicazgos can be founded in democratic contexts. The circumstances that make this possible illuminate important qualities of pluralist democracy itself.

Finally, the third section turns to broader considerations regarding the study of caciquismo. Although scholars from different disciplinary traditions have employed diverse methodologies in their studies of boss rule, most analyses of caciquismo have surprisingly little to say about caciques themselves, as individuals. Because the academic literature on the topic often provides only fleeting glances of ‘live’ caciques, important dimensions of the phenomenon may go unnoticed. Some of these elements are, however, fundamental to appreciating the political culture of caciquismo and the obstacles that it poses to the construction of a participatory democracy in Mexico or elsewhere.

**Caciquismo in Mexico (and Latin America)**

There is widespread scholarly consensus regarding the core characteristics of caciquismo as a socio-political phenomenon. A cacique is a local or regional boss whose eminently personalist domination typically rests on a combination of family- and kinship-based (including ritual kinship, compadrazgo) alliances and patron–client networks, control over patronage resources and coercive sanctions – including the threat or actual use of physical violence against rivals.² A cacique is distinguished from a caudillo by the

---

² On the more broadly encompassing phenomenon of clientelism, see, among others, Powell, 1970; Kaufman, 1974; Roniger, 1990: 2–5; Roniger, 2004.
narrower scope of his authority and his smaller (local versus national) sphere of action (Wolf and Hansen, 1966–1967; Diaz Diaz, 1972: 2–5; Knight, 2005: 9–12), although a cacique who gains control over a larger-scale organisation (a labour confederation, for example) can sometimes exercise national power. Indeed, a cacique’s capacity to defend his position may vary inversely with the scale of his domain; patron–client ties can be more easily manipulated, and it is more difficult for opposition factions to form, at the local level.

A cacique’s position and power are generally informal, but the cacique might at different times also occupy formal elective or administrative positions. The cacique customarily acts as an intermediary or broker between his community or organisation and higher political or administrative authorities. Although ‘traditional’ caciquismo was most common in rural areas, where geographical isolation helped limit challenges to arbitrary strongman rule, its more ‘modern’ variants are found in such diverse and sometimes unexpected settings as trade unions, urban squatter settlements and universities (Hernández Rodríguez, 2005; Maldonado Aranda, 2005; and Pansters, 2005a).

Cacique was originally a Taíno (Arawakan) term meaning ‘chief’ (Schwerin, 1973: 5); cacicazgo referred to the cacique’s estates (Gibson, 1967: 150), which underscored the local, bounded character of cacical influence.3 These terms became part of Spanish conquerors’ vocabulary as they built alliances with local indigenous rulers in order to establish colonial administrative control, a strategy that emphasised the central importance of caciques as political intermediaries (Gibson, 1967: 149–151). In Mexico during the long rule of President Porfirio Díaz (1877–1880, 1884–1911), caciques sometimes held a similar position in the jefes políticos (political chiefs) system, in which national authorities bent on centralising political control depended heavily on local notables to impose their will (Falcón, 1994). For much of the twentieth century, caciquismo in Mexico was associated with the dominance of the ‘official’, state-subsidised political party, which was founded as the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (Revolutionary National Party, PNR) in 1929 in order to stabilise post-revolutionary politics and that eventually evolved into the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI). Although several decades passed before most local and regional bosses were effectively absorbed into the ruling party’s structures (Smith, 2009: Chapter 5), these figures eventually became bulwarks of ‘official’ party control, so that challenges to cacical dominance were often perceived as threats to the party itself.

There is also considerable agreement regarding the main roles that caciques have played in Mexican politics. Caciques have at different times constituted important links in the process of state-building, serving as intermediaries between federal and municipal authorities and, to the extent that they represented powerful local interests, thus constituting a significant element in preserving the regional balance of power (Falcón, 1994: 109, 112). During the extended period of ‘official’ party hegemony from the 1930s to the 1990s, their access to patronage resources and their capacity to employ selective violence against regime opponents made caciques effective mobilisers of

3 In the compelling image employed by Colombian writer Eduardo Caballero Calderón (quoted in Nason, 1973a: 39): ‘Power, to be absolute, must be bounded by a river, a mountain, a high plateau, i.e. things that can be encompassed in one’s gaze, and nearby so that they can be measured and roamed over on horseback.’
electoral support for the PNR and its successors (Boyer, 2003: 25–27). Most important, however, caciques entrenched in ejidos [a collective form of land ownership that was a principal vehicle for the distribution of land during Mexico’s post-revolutionary agrarian reform], trade unions, urban squatter settlements and elsewhere were key instruments of local social and political control. Indeed, some authors (see, for instance, Knight, 2005: 16) have argued that it was the effectiveness of cacical control at the local level that permitted Mexico’s ruling political elite to preserve a comparatively open regime and avoid the extensive, overt repression that so often characterised authoritarian rule elsewhere in twentieth-century Latin America.

Although there may be quite broad scholarly consensus concerning the main characteristics of caciquismo and its place in Mexican politics, there is much less agreement regarding those factors that account for its remarkable persistence over time. Early discussions of the phenomenon described caciques as a typical feature of rural Mexico, and, in line with the modernisation-theory assumptions that often underpinned these analyses, they assumed that social processes associated with economic development (especially urbanisation and increased geographic and social mobility) would eventually eliminate caciquismo by bringing rural areas into the (ostensibly rational-bureaucratic) national mainstream and eroding the geographic isolation (and de facto autonomy) of local bosses (Padgett, 1966: 83; Lambert, 1967: 154). Even those studies that highlighted the presence of caciques in such ‘modern’ settings as urban squatter settlements (Cornelius, 1973: 148–150) also assumed that this was a transitory phenomenon doomed to disappear as recent migrants and their descendants became more fully integrated into urban society.

Caciques were certainly not all-powerful, nor were they invulnerable to challenges from below (see, for example, Boyer, 2003: 123–124, 130). Nevertheless, earlier analysts’ expectations concerning the eventual disappearance of caciquismo were not borne out, and it is worth pondering why. Three possibilities merit consideration. The first would note the ‘incomplete’ character of economic and social modernisation in Mexico (and perhaps everywhere). Even if modernisation-theory interpretations accurately identify the principal social changes accompanying economic development and their likely impact over time, such broad processes of socio-economic change are notably – perhaps inevitably – uneven. They unfold at different rates, and they may differ considerably in character and impact in different places and at different times. Thus, even though cacicazgos may have declined in number and importance as Mexico experienced rapid urbanisation in the late twentieth century, caciquismo survived – and not just in the countryside.

A second interpretation would highlight the dynamics of revolutionary transformation and the characteristics of Mexico’s durable post-revolutionary authoritarian regime. Pansters (2005b: 370–371) has argued that ‘disorder, instability, insecurity and conflict’ give rise to, or facilitate the reproduction of, caciquismo. On these grounds, it is not surprising that caciques were a particularly prominent feature of the Mexican political landscape in the decades immediately following the 1910–1920 revolution. Indeed, in some places it may have been the very process of social revolution (for example, village authorities’ violent confrontations with landowners in their struggle to gain access to land and form ejidos, or conflicts with the Catholic Church in the 1920s) that initially strengthened caciques (Ugalde, 1973: 125–127; Schryer, 1980: 145; Boyer, 2003: 77, 115–116, 124; for contrasting cases, see Lewis, 1951: 51; Boyer, 2003: 77; Butler, 2005). There is, in fact, significant evidence showing that the importance of caciquismo declined in many areas as state-building and national political integration

© 2009 The Author. Journal compilation © 2009 Society for Latin American Studies
Bulletin of Latin American Research Vol. 28, No. 3
414

Yet one could also argue that the gradual process of political centralisation under PRI dominance actually fortified some cacicazgos by embedding local power brokers in a political machine with national reach, simultaneously expanding caciques’ access to patronage resources while making them less dependent on the support of their followers (Bartra, 1989: 68–69; Gledhill, 2000: 13; Boyer, 2003: 124, 227). It is, moreover, quite plausible that the importance of caciquismo increased in some areas and sectors even while it declined in others. Mexico’s post-revolutionary authoritarian regime rested on a combination of both formal state controls on different forms of political participation and alliances that the national political elite forged with labour unions, peasant organisations, regional and local power brokers and their followers, and a diverse array of other groups (Middlebrook, 1995: 5–10). The survival of these alliances over time depended on the governing elite’s willingness to provide various forms of political, financial and legal backing to ‘official’ (state-subsidised) groups, whose reliance on such support converted them into reliable instruments of control. Despite the violence, corruption and extremely arbitrary abuses of power historically associated with caciquismo, many local bosses were able to maintain their position – and thereby contribute to the broader stability of the PRI-led regime – because of their place in a hierarchical authoritarian system in which citizens had few effective opportunities to hold ‘elected’ officials accountable for their public actions.

The existence of cacicazgos in diverse geographical and sectoral contexts and in widely separated time periods suggests that caciquismo is not the product of, or uniquely associated with, a particular political culture. Indeed, the simple fact that forms of personalist rule structurally similar to caciquismo have been identified in highly diverse historical and social settings (Kilson, 1966: Chapters 1–2; Migdal, 1988: 104–124) should induce a more general caution about cultural explanations of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, one must give due consideration to a third possible explanation for the observed fact that caciquismo has persisted over time in Mexico and is more prevalent in some places than in others: congruence between cacical rule and the country’s (or a particular region’s) underlying value structure.4

Attempts to explain differences in political behaviour in terms of variations in deep-rooted cultural values have a long (though not always distinguished) pedigree in comparative politics (Elkins and Simeon, 1979; Inglehart, 1988; Lane, 1992). Yet the question remains whether some attitudes and norms (for instance, extreme deference in hierarchical authority relations or low levels of interpersonal trust) might be particularly congruent with such personalist modes of domination as caciquismo. The internal diversity of all cultures makes it difficult to argue that any particular cultural tradition is (or is not) inherently conducive to authoritarian or democratic

4 Although contributors to the Knight and Pansters volume drew their materials from only seven of Mexico’s 32 federal entities (the states of Chiapas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, México, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Puebla), the editors did not suggest that there are any within-country differences in cultural values or social structures that might make caciquismo more important in some areas than in others. Many earlier studies examining the phenomenon (Vogt, 1969: 285–287, 290; Ugalde, 1973; Friedrich, 1986) were based on field research conducted in these same areas. Roniger (1990) offered additional examples from Hidalgo and Morelos.
political arrangements. In the end, assuming some capacity for change in cultural norms (even if such change only occurs over an extended period of time), the most important issue may be the impact that specific political practices have on citizens’ attitudes, beliefs and values. Comparative political experience powerfully demonstrates that, even though some societies may have weak democratic traditions, individuals in those societies can be moulded into practising democrats. Thus, from this perspective, the persistence of caciquismo in Mexico is not necessarily the product of immutable cultural norms; rather, it is a challenge for democratic reformers, who must identify ways of strengthening the rule of law and ensuring the public accountability of elected and appointed government officials (Middlebrook, 2004: 43–44).

If there is continuing debate about those factors that might account for the persistence (or inversely, the eventual disappearance) of caciquismo in Mexico, there is even greater uncertainty about how to explain what appear to be considerable differences in its relative importance in twentieth-century Latin America more generally. The phenomenon is certainly known elsewhere, albeit sometimes under different names and with somewhat different associated characteristics. There is, for instance, an extensive literature on coronelismo in Brazil (Skidmore, 1967: 3–4; Schmitter, 1971: 73, 78, 294; Pang, 1973; Roniger, 1987; Hagopian, 1996: 47–49) and gamonalismo in Peru (Cotler, 1967–1968: 236–237; Bourricaud, 1970: 30–31; Karno, 1973; Mörner, 1985: 131, 185–186). Based on a survey of literary works, Nason (1973b: 103–116) identified it in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia (see also Deas, 1993: 211, 214, 217–218, 227) and Uruguay as well. Indeed, if we define caciquismo as local or regional boss rule and highlight such elements as caciques’ linkage roles in political and socio-economic exchanges, then there are strong reasons to believe that it is essentially a universal phenomenon. Nason (1973b: 99) suggested one possible explanation for cross-national variations in the importance of caciquismo when he argued that its deepest historical roots are in those Latin American societies in which Spanish colonisers relied most heavily on indigenous leaders as political intermediaries in a coercive, highly hierarchical administrative system. An explanation couched in these terms might account for the comparatively greater historical prominence of caciquismo in Mexico than in Latin American countries without a large indigenous population. It would not, however, elucidate why the phenomenon appears to have been more politically significant in Mexico (or at least has seemingly drawn more scholarly attention, although there does not appear to be any objective means of verifying the impression that there is a larger historical and social science literature on caciquismo in Mexico than on other Latin American countries) than in Bolivia, Ecuador or Guatemala.

Of course, the distribution of academic effort may not be an entirely reliable indicator of the phenomenon’s relative significance in Latin America. Even if it is, national historical experiences differ so greatly that it would be difficult to devise an explanation that could convincingly account for variations in the relative prominence and/or political importance of caciquismo across the entire region (or even the subset of countries in which Nason clearly identified the phenomenon) and over different time periods. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, perhaps the most fruitful approach is to reflect on the reasons why caciques held such a comparatively significant

5 The perceived importance of caciquismo as an obstacle to democratisation may be one explanation for the attention that social scientists writing on Mexico devoted to the phenomenon from the 1960s onward.
place in twentieth-century Mexican politics, framing the discussion in terms of elements that together constitute a potential framework for comparing the experiences of Mexico and other Latin American countries.

As already noted, the processes of revolutionary transformation and subsequent political centralisation deeply embedded *caciques* in Mexico’s post-revolutionary political order. Of course, neither political instability nor an extended period of authoritarian rule distinguishes the Mexican experience from that of many other Latin American countries. However, the historical sequencing of these developments, the exceptional resilience of post-revolutionary authoritarianism (Mexico’s ‘official’ party held national power from 1929 until 2000) and the fact that authoritarianism in Mexico took the form of a civilian-led political machine (rather than a military junta) that linked political brokers at the national, regional and local levels and, over a prolonged period of time, placed a premium on the repeated mobilisation of electoral support for the ‘official’ party and its candidates, were all factors that heightened the political importance of *caciquismo* and distinguished Mexico’s twentieth-century history from that of many other Latin American countries.

Moreover, the specific circumstances of social reform and state-building in post-revolutionary Mexico may have particularly favoured a significant role for *caciques*. The propagation of one of Latin America’s (and the non-socialist world’s) most extensive agrarian reforms – including large-scale land redistribution to peasants, successive governments’ provision of public financial credits and infrastructure support to rural producers and the development of extensive agricultural marketing and distribution arrangements – led to deep state penetration in rural areas.\(^6\) *Caciques* often had the capacity to determine who gained access to land and other government resources, which greatly strengthened their control over rural communities and reinforced their role as intermediaries vis-à-vis national political and administrative officials (Warman, 2001: 59–60; Knight, 2005: 43–44). Indeed, the nature of property rights in Mexico’s agrarian reform sector (*ejidatarios* were typically granted use-rights to parcels within an *ejido* rather than individual title to land, an arrangement that prevented the politically destabilising reconcentration of land ownership but also largely precluded *ejidatarios* from using land as collateral to secure financial credits from private sources) heightened *ejidatarios*’ dependence on government resources and thus increased their vulnerability to PRI-affiliated *caciques’* manipulation of patronage (Purnell, 1999: 12–13; Boyer, 2003: 173). This was a key reason why *ejidatarios* remained one of the ‘official’ party’s most reliable bases of electoral support from the 1930s through the 1990s.

**Caciquismo, Democratisation and Democracy**

Although boss rule clearly persists in Mexico (Morales, 2006) and elsewhere in contemporary Latin America, there are both strong philosophical and instrumental tensions between *caciquismo* and the democratic forms of governance that increasingly prevail in the region. At the philosophical level, *caciquismo* and democracy rest on sharply opposed foundational principles. Whereas *caciquismo* is a hierarchically organised system of domination based on the *cacique*’s often coercive manipulation of
relations of dependency with his individual clients, democracy presumes a fundamental political equality among individuals in their capacity as citizens. Whereas the essence of caciquismo is the boss’s exercise of highly discretionary personal authority, democracy grounds political authority in defined, publicly agreed rules and procedures that require elected representatives to be accountable to the governed for their public conduct. And whereas in a democracy citizens can claim equal rights and fair and impartial treatment before the law, a cacique’s clients have particularised access to patronage resources but are without rights per se.

Not only do the organising principles underlying caciquismo contrast starkly with those underpinning democracy, but as a practical matter as well, boss rule can be a significant obstacle to democratisation.7 Democratisation consists of ‘the processes whereby the rules and procedures of citizenship are either applied to political institutions governed by other principles . . . or expanded to include persons not previously enjoying such rights and obligations . . . or extended to cover issues and institutions not previously subject to citizen participation . . .’ (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 8). Those individuals subjected to cacical domination are unlikely to be in a position to exercise their citizenship rights freely. Indeed, in its most abusive forms, caciquismo involves strong compulsion (including the threat of physical violence or actual physical sanction) and extensive control over subjects’ actions, including voting and other forms of political action. Caciques can, for instance, prevent individuals from registering to vote or casting a free ballot, either by ‘buying’ the votes of poor or vulnerable individuals or by intimidating those inclined to support candidates other than those endorsed by the cacique (Fox, 1994a: 106–107).

In rural Mexico under the political hegemony of the PRI, for example, caciques often compelled ‘political subordination in exchange for material rewards’ (Fox, 1994b: 153). Overt political challenges to authoritarian rule were forcibly repulsed. Moreover, popular-sector groups often found themselves in highly unequal bargaining relationships with local bosses and federal government officials in which threats of physical coercion reinforced their political subordination as clients. Struggles by popular groups to win effective citizenship rights (in particular, to secure meaningful associational autonomy in their negotiations with government officials administering social welfare programmes) were central features of grassroots mobilisations in Mexico from the 1970s onward (Fox, 1994b: 153).

Successful democratisation certainly threatens caciquismo. It may do so by discrediting caciques for their past association with an authoritarian regime, by strengthening grassroots citizens’ movements or otherwise expanding democratic reformers’ scope for action against surviving caciques, or by highlighting values that challenge the central organising principles of boss rule. In particular, the everyday practice of political democracy and conscious efforts to establish democratic procedures and inculcate democratic values in various non-governmental spheres may eventually produce meaningful results that undermine established cacicazgos and make it more difficult for new ones to emerge. The expanded media freedom typically associated with successful political democratisation can be especially important in bringing critical public attention to bear on instances of cacical rule.

---

7 In some circumstances, however, caciques have facilitated democratisation. In Chile in the 1870s, for example, landowners and rural political brokers backed suffrage expansion as part of a limited process of political mobilisation. See Valenzuela, 1985.
Nevertheless, the struggle against caciquismo is likely to be a slow and uneven process. In part this is because democratic reform is an uncertain art. More specifically, however, the processes of administrative and fiscal decentralisation often associated with political democratisation may strengthen the position of local power brokers by expanding their access to budgetary resources (Fox and Aranda, 1996: 50), and competitive politics paradoxically may at times permit surviving caciques or cacicas to reinforce their position. For example, when Elba Esther Gordillo, former secretary general (1989–1995) and long the dominant figure in the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Education Workers’ Union, SNTE), found her options within the PRI blocked by rival politicians, she used her personal influence over Mexico’s (and Latin America’s) largest labour union to found the Partido Nueva Alianza (New Alliance Party, PANAL) in 2005. The PANAL’s candidate never had any serious prospect of winning the 2006 presidential election, but the party won sufficient congressional seats to give it and the SNTE a significant voice on educational policy issues. (Despite the public controversy provoked by the appointment, Gordillo succeeded in having her son-in-law appointed under-secretary of basic education at the outset of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa’s (2006–2012) administration.) Even more important, Gordillo ably exploited the SNTE’s proven capacity for electoral mobilisation and the heightened value of her support in a very tight presidential race to forge new alliances with other political actors (Raphael, 2007: Chapters 9, 10). These results greatly strengthened Gordillo’s position both within her union and in national politics.

The Gordillo case tellingly demonstrates that some caciques may possess sufficient political agility to survive the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule and deploy their influence as a powerful form of interest-group leverage. To the extent that caciques are able to preserve their power, they constitute significant obstacles to democratic reformers’ efforts to strengthen the rule of law (indeed, they help sustain a culture of impunity) and ensure transparency and public accountability in such areas as the management of governmental resources. Moreover, weak rule of law and the abuse of authority that characterises cacical domination leave citizens vulnerable to violence and serious human rights violations.

Even more fundamentally, however, some instances of cacical domination are likely to persist despite successful political democratisation because of the segmented quality of pluralist democracy itself. In a political democracy, the effective guarantee of citizens’ (often constitutionally defined) individual political rights – including freedoms of expression and association, and especially protection against arbitrary state action – necessarily means that the state’s capacity to transform authority relations in various non-governmental spheres is effectively constrained. State-led efforts to bring about such changes are in practice often viewed as illegitimate transgressions of the limits that societal actors impose on governmental authority. As a consequence, a central paradox of pluralist democracy is that decidedly illiberal authority patterns may prevail in the workplace, in community or professional associations, or in other such non-governmental arenas even while democratic norms govern exchanges in the public sphere.

Democratic political values certainly establish a normative context against which the legitimacy of decision-making arrangements in private spheres is often measured and sometimes held to account. Dahl (1971), referring to Eckstein’s (1966: Appendix B) argument that stable democracy requires congruence between the norms embodied in political institutions and underlying non-governmental authority relationships, suggested that ‘people may find it hard to reconcile markedly different beliefs about
authority; it is stressful to be required to believe in the validity of hegemonic authority in one relationship and democratic authority in another’ (1971: 141). Nonetheless, the prevalence of democratic values in politics does not automatically guarantee their triumph in other arenas. Indeed, because undemocratic authority relations or decision-making arrangements outside of government can often be justified on the basis of some alternative legitimacy claim (for example, an employer’s assertion of untrammelled authority in the workplace as a prerequisite of efficient production), the struggle for societal democratisation can constitute an even more daunting challenge than the conquest of political democracy. At a minimum, political democratisation and the transformation of authority relations in non-governmental spheres are processes that are only obliquely related and, in all likelihood, advance at very different rates.

Generalising about the evolution of such a highly varied phenomenon as caciquismo is a risky proposition. Nevertheless, where caciquismo coexists with democracy in twenty-first-century Latin America, the phenomenon is likely to differ in at least three ways from the ‘classic’ instances of cacical domination characteristic of traditional rural communities. First, the ‘modern’ cacique is likely to exercise less complete control over his subjects than his ‘traditional’ counterpart did. The dyadic ties that characterise patron–client relationships tend to be less encompassing and less exclusive in contemporary, especially urban, social environments than they are in isolated rural areas. This is because clients frequently have the option of establishing links with more than one patron, because geographic and occupational mobility offer them increased opportunities to escape such relationships when they become unacceptably oppressive or because an individual’s dependence on a particular patron is unlikely to affect all spheres of her or his life. As a consequence, even in the contemporary Latin American countryside, the cacique’s face-to-face contact with his subjects is likely to be less frequent, and his control over their lives less absolute, than it once might have been.

Second, the modern cacique is also more likely than his traditional counterpart to face constraints on his capacity to employ violence to enforce his decisions, repel threats to his position or eliminate actual or potential rivals. Neither in Mexico nor in other Latin American countries has the consolidation of electoral democracy automatically strengthened the rule of law. Moreover, the international drug trade (by promoting easy access to money and firearms) and the virtual breakdown of the state’s administrative and public-security presence in some areas leave ample scope for particularistic control over the means of violence. Yet on the whole, the combination of a more effectively consolidated state apparatus and greater public transparency in the investigation of violent crimes are likely (though not certain) to place some practical limits on how caciques conduct their affairs. As a consequence, although they may be able to discipline their clients or punish their opponents by denying them material resources, modern caciques are generally less able to employ assassination as a terminal sanction.

Third, because they are more likely to operate in contexts regulated by laws and rational-bureaucratic norms, contemporary caciques are more likely than their traditional, rural predecessors to depend on administrative rules and bureaucratic structures for both their legitimacy and their sources of patronage and influence. As such, they are correspondingly less likely to depend on family- or kinship-based alliances as a source of power. Rules and rule-making, as well as control over elective or appointive office, therefore become more significant for the potential cacique. In fact, rules hold a double importance for him: they are at once a source of legitimate authority and a potential basis for developing and exercising discretionary personal power. After all, without rules, there could be no exceptions to the rules.
Caciquismo and Democracy

In sum, there are several reasons why one might expect political democratisation to bring about changes that challenge cacical dominance, and caciquismo under democracy is likely to differ in important ways from its traditional manifestations. Yet caciquismo can and does survive democratising pressures, coexisting with consolidated pluralist democracy. Perhaps even more remarkably, cacicazgos can sometimes be created anew despite the prevalence of democratic norms and political practices. What might be the bases for doing so?

The essential requirement, of course, is the potential cacique’s desire to establish a sphere of personalist domination. Beyond that, however, the prospects for building a modern cacicazgo depend in substantial measure on the availability of some ‘protected’ space (Pansters, 2005b: 358–359) in which the cacique-on-the-make enjoys considerable operational latitude and in which prevailing democratic norms can be held at arm’s length, generally by invoking some other principle seemingly appropriate to the specific context (a formal grant of broad administrative discretion, the de facto autonomy ceded to the entrepreneurial founder of an organisation, and so forth). A modern cacique’s authority and power are in most instances bounded, but within certain limits he may still enjoy great freedom of operation.

The aspiring cacique’s main strategic challenge is to push back organisational boundaries or other constraints on his autonomy and discretion to the maximum extent possible. This might, for example, require suspending or eliminating any existing representative institutions that permit broader participation in decision-making or embody principles other than the centrality of personal authority. At the same time, a cacique might seek to create, and establish the legitimacy of, alternative ‘representational’ fora that are narrowly based and easily controlled or orchestrated, so as to forestall demands for more inclusive representational arrangements that might effectively hold him accountable for his actions. His exertions necessarily target both his superiors and his subordinates, although somewhat different tactics apply in each case. In both instances, however, the cacique-in-the-making may seek to justify his actions by invoking special claims—that broad operational discretion is necessary if he is to accomplish the tasks for which he is responsible (and for which, of course, he is ‘uniquely’ qualified), that unforeseen circumstances or external threats justify an extraordinary grant of discretionary authority, and so forth. The cacique’s capacity to maintain both his superiors’ support and his subordinates’ compliance, and ultimately his success at legitimating his actions, depend largely on the persuasiveness of such appeals.

At the tactical level, the cacique must establish informality and personal discretion as the dominant principles guiding his relations with those subject to his authority. In rational-bureaucratic contexts in which subordinates might hold contrary expectations, this task might not be accomplished quickly or without resistance. The key, then, is persistence—consistency in the cacique’s assertion of his ‘right’ to conduct business on such terms, his refusal to countenance rights-based claims by those under his sway, and frequent recourse to conspicuous acts of arbitrary generosity or punishment. Among other things, the cacique must personalise access to institutional resources by reserving for himself final decision-making authority in virtually all matters, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential they are.

8 These comments are based in part on the author’s observation of workplace politics at various sites in Mexico and elsewhere.
Kevin J. Middlebrook

The points outlined above would be logically evident to any aspiring cacique who is reasonably attentive to the opportunities and constraints existing in his immediate political environment. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible that some contexts are more conducive than others to the construction of modern cacicazgos. For instance, even in a consolidated pluralist democracy, the absence of an established democratic tradition or participatory decision-making procedures in a particular organisation, or the prevalence of broader societal norms condoning the exercise of autocratic authority in some spheres, might facilitate the potential cacique’s task by reducing opposition from those around him.

Studying Caciquismo, or the Importance of ‘Bringing the Cacique Back In’

Academic analysts have over several decades employed a range of research methods in their studies of cacical rule in Mexico and elsewhere. Historians, for example, have characteristically relied on a close reading of archival sources to reconstruct the histories of boss rule in particular regions or communities. Anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have typically drawn on contemporary journalistic accounts, oral histories, and/or direct participant observation of caciques. These different approaches have together yielded a rich literature on caciquismo.

Nevertheless, most analyses of boss rule in Mexico (or in other Latin American countries) have surprisingly little to say about caciques themselves, as individuals.9 Especially in those studies that stress the importance of caciques to linkage politics in contexts of ‘incomplete’ socio-economic modernisation and/or state building, the implicit assumption often appears to be that there is in Mexico (or in other societies) a ready supply of caciques-in-waiting who are capable of fulfilling the role of essential intermediary. Yet the obvious point here—though perhaps one that merits explicit mention—surely is that cacicazgos are built by people who strive to become caciques. These are individuals who are, in the wonderful term employed by Friedrich (1986), amply endowed with a libido dominandi—‘a lust for power as such, for the symbols and ego satisfactions that stem from dominating … or from winning influence in the region and the state’ and whose ‘three, interconnected passions’ are ambition, envy and egoism (1986: 134, 182).

For whatever reasons (Friedrich (1986: 276–289) had several of his subjects take Rorschach tests to assess their psychological motivations), these caciques-on-the-make seek to dominate others. Although one should not discount the possibility that an aspiring cacique may also be powerfully motivated by the opportunities for personal material gain that can be derived from discretionary control over public or institutional resources, they manifestly thrive on displays of public and private deference. They work doggedly to accumulate the material and symbolic resources that enhance others’ dependence on them, and they instinctively know how to manipulate access to information or patronage resources in ways that clearly convey to the recipient the

9 Perhaps the most notable exception is Friedrich (1986). Another exception is the portrayal of Gonzalo N. Santos, who was a prominent political boss in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, from the late 1930s through the late 1950s (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992).
personal obligation to the *patrón* that comes with the enjoyment of these benefits. And, of course, they have the political acumen, interpersonal and organisational skills, and tolerance of (even psychological addiction to) violence or other forms of sanction that permit them to build and sustain a hierarchical system of authority. Some *cacicazgos* might be inherited, but most are constructed – and one should not underestimate what is required for such projects to succeed.

There is also an important methodological issue at stake here. On the basis of archival sources and standard social science and historical research techniques, it is often very difficult to glimpse *caciques* in action (Joseph, 1980: 195). One can observe the manifestations of this form of domination in such things as the distribution of patronage resources, favouritism in promotions and rewards, deferential forms of address or action, and so forth. Nevertheless, in the absence of *cacique*-on-the-couch *testimonios* (of which there appear to be very few (Martínez Vázquez, 1975: 200–203; Santos, 1984), either because traditional *caciques* are not much inclined toward the literary effort required to produce a bluntly confessional autobiography, or because modern *caciques* overlay their ambitions and actions with multiple justifications and broader claims to legitimacy), it can be very difficult for the historian, anthropologist or political scientist – indeed, anyone external to the actual exercise of patrimonial authority – to capture the subtle, highly personalised ways in which a successful *cacique* builds and exercises his power.10

Part of the problem may be that academic analysts have typically approached their subject by producing biographical sketches of *caciques*, rather than by undertaking case studies of the actual exercise of cacical authority and power. That is, they have focused more on identifying who the *cacique* is rather than capturing how he goes about his business. Documenting the former can certainly be difficult, but illuminating the latter is without doubt an even more challenging research task.

Studies based on anthropological research methods can be especially important in this regard, although even they may not always capture fully the fundamental elements of cacical style – *caciquismo* as it is actually lived. For example, in his account of cacical politics in an irrigation district in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, De Vries (2005) stressed the ‘performative’ dimensions of *caciquismo* (see also Rap, 2007). In highlighting a local *cacique*’s ‘partying, story-telling, machismo and alcohol consumption’ (Pansters, 2005b: 367), De Vries insightfully portrayed the cultural dimensions of the exercise of power. Nevertheless, what he offered was a portrait of the *cacique* at play, not the *cacique* at work, and thus we never actually witness the *cacique* conducting his daily business on a one-to-one level. In the end, what we require in order to appreciate this phenomenon fully is some way of capturing ‘*caciquismo* live’. Close participant observation by professional researchers is therefore invaluable, as would be analytically framed accounts by those who have functioned within – or successfully challenged – cacical domination in their community or workplace.

The issue raised here involves more than a methodological quibble. In the absence of opportunities to observe *caciques* ‘up close and personal’, some important dimensions of *caciquismo* may go unnoticed. Following De Vries (see also Auyero, 2001: 175), these

---

10 The historical novel offers one way of revealing the subtleties of cacical dominance. A classic of this genre is Aguilar Camín (1986), an account of cacical rule apparently inspired by legendary oil worker boss Joaquín (‘La Quina’) Hernández Galicia’s fiefdom in Ciudad Madero, Tamaulipas. See also Nason (1973b).
might be grouped under the category of ‘performance characteristics’ and would include such matters as the cacique’s speech and body language. The vocabulary chosen to frame issues under discussion (‘We are a big family here’ is but one way in which a cacique might signal and asserts his patrimonial authority), the tone used in addressing those with whom he interacts, his mannerisms, and so forth are often heavily freighted with symbolic meaning as the cacique underscores the highly individualised nature of others’ relations with him, thereby reaffirming one of the central dynamics of cacical dominance.

Such matters of style and symbolism are key elements in the quotidian legitimisation of caciquismo, and they exemplify perfectly the challenges that caciquismo poses to the construction of the citizenship values required to build and sustain a democracy. Thus, without appreciating the political culture of caciquismo, it is difficult to understand how inhibiting this form of personalist rule can be to forging the interpersonal solidarities and the culture of rights necessary to advance more inclusive, participatory forms of governance (Putnam, 1993: 175, 183). Regular, direct interactions with the cacique constantly remind the subordinate that her or his choices – paralleling the classic options identified by Hirschman (1970) – are limited to: (a) playing by the established rules of the game – and thus perhaps advancing her or his own immediate position, even while legitimising this highly personalised form of domination by relying on the cacique’s ‘generous’ patronage; (b) exiting the situation, whether in the form of out-migration from the community or some equivalent action; or (c) openly confronting the cacique and risking all that potentially comes with political defeat. Those are, however, the dilemmas at hand when cacical control and democratic aspirations collide, whether in local or regional politics, associational life or the workplace.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges comments from H. Baitenmann and J. Fox.

References

Caciquismo and Democracy


Kevin J. Middlebrook


© 2009 The Author. Journal compilation © 2009 Society for Latin American Studies

Bulletin of Latin American Research Vol. 28, No. 3