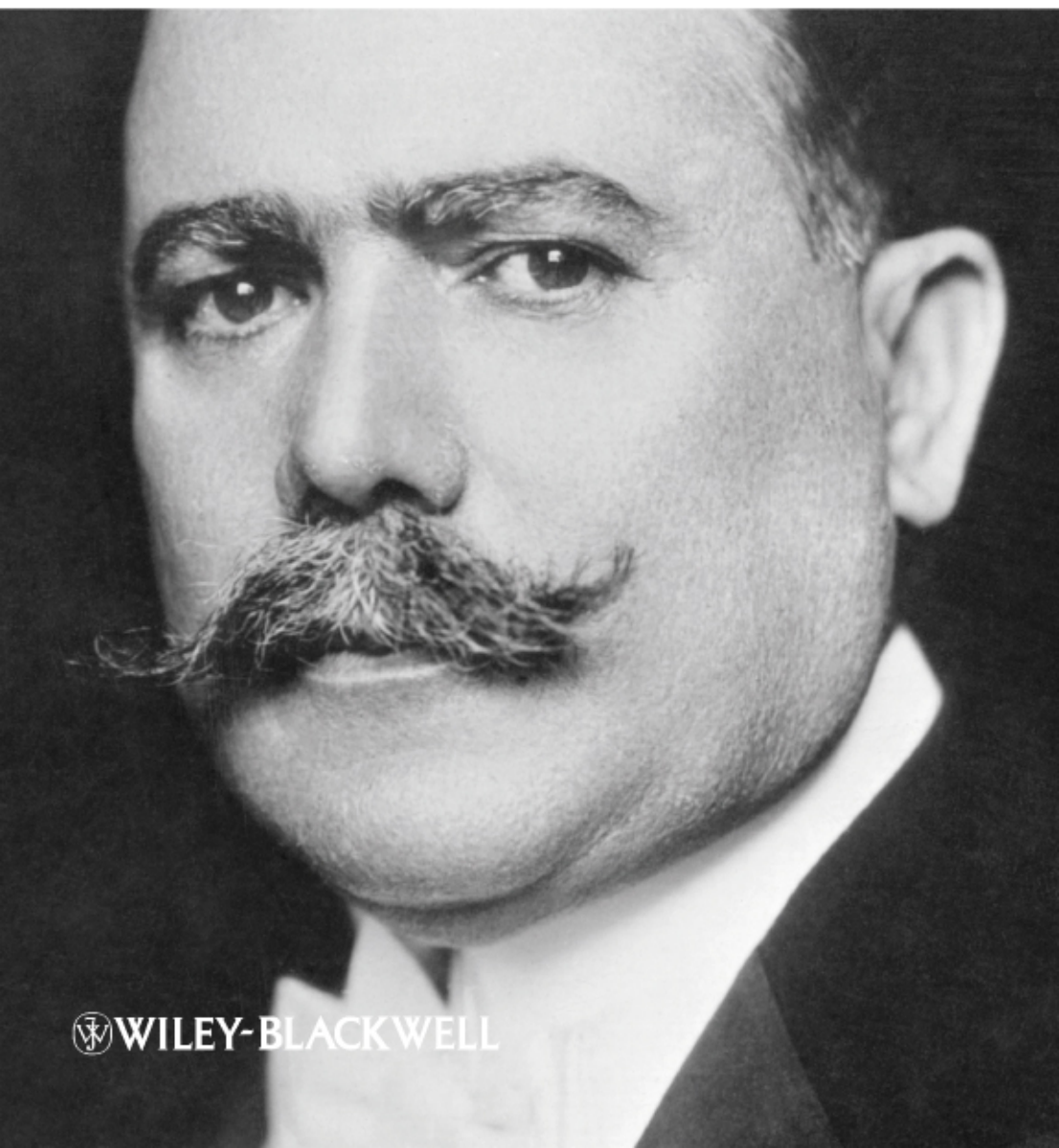


VIEWPOINTS / PUNTOS DE VISTA

THE LAST CAUDILLO

ALVARO OBREGÓN AND THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

JÜRGEN BUCHENAU



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The Last Caudillo

**Alvaro Obregón
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To my mother, Sabine Prange

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Preface

Each book in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series introduces students to a significant theme or topic in Latin American history. In an age in which student and faculty interest in the Global South increasingly challenges the old focus on the history of Europe and North America, Latin American history has assumed an increasingly prominent position in undergraduate curricula.

Some of these books discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Others offer an introduction to a particular theme by means of a case study or biography in a manner easily understood by the contemporary, non-specialist reader. Yet others give an overview of a major theme that might serve as the foundation of an upper-level course.

What is common to all of these books is their goal of historical synthesis. They draw on the insights of generations of scholarship on the most enduring and fascinating issues in Latin American history, while also making use of primary sources as appropriate. Each book is written by a specialist in Latin American history who is concerned with undergraduate teaching, yet has also made his or her mark as a first-rate scholar.

The books in this series can be used in a variety of ways, recognizing the differences in teaching conditions at small liberal arts colleges, large public universities, and research-oriented institutions with doctoral programs. Faculty have particular needs depending on whether they teach

large lectures with discussion sections, small lecture or discussion-oriented classes, or large lectures with no discussion sections, and whether they teach on a semester or trimester system. The format adopted for this series fits all of these different parameters.

In this fourth volume in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series, I analyze the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940) through the lens of one of its protagonists: General Alvaro Obregón Salido, one of the greatest military leaders in the history of Latin America. The Mexican Revolution is of global historical significance because it was the first great revolution with an agrarian and social basis, and its successes and failures helped inform more radical social revolutions in Russia, China, and Cuba.

Obregón was the “undefeated caudillo of the Mexican Revolution” whose military genius and political acumen always put him on the winning side. His alliance of middle-class landowners from the northern border state of Sonora directed the destinies of Mexico between 1920 and 1935, a period that featured the formation of many of the institutions and political practices of modern Mexico. The life of Obregón therefore offers an ideal vantage point from which to appreciate the causes, process, and outcome of the Mexican Revolution. It also affords an opportunity to study political leadership, authoritarianism, and political culture in Latin America more generally.

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Acknowledgments

The idea for this book was born in 1998 during a Latin American Studies Association meeting at a bar at the Chicago Hilton, when Colin MacLachlan suggested that I write a biography of Obregón. At the time, I resisted the idea, as I knew and admired Linda Hall's *Alvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico, 1911–1920*, the only extant English-language biography of Obregón and a meticulously researched work focusing on his role in the violent phase of the revolution in the 1910s. Instead, I wrote a life and times of Obregón's most significant political ally, Plutarco Elías Calles, a leader among the primary architects of the country's modern political institutions. But Colin's suggestion never completely left my mind, and my examination of Calles raised fresh questions about the nature of leadership in the revolution and Obregón's role, specifically. Almost twelve years later, at the centennial of the revolution, I have finally written the book that Colin suggested, as part of a larger research agenda on the Sonoran Dynasty in Mexico.

I appreciate the assistance of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which provided a year-long fellowship that gave me the time to write this book. Financial support from UNC Charlotte, and particularly a Faculty Research Grant and an award from the Small Grants Program of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, allowed me to undertake the necessary research. I appreciate the permission of the University of New Mexico Press to republish, in shortened and revised form, my book chapter "The Arm and Body of a Revolution: Remembering

Mexico's Last Caudillo, Alvaro Obregón," from Lyman Johnson, ed., *Death, Dismemberment, and Memory: Body Politics in Latin America* (2004).

I could not have written this book without the assistance of the superbly competent staff at the Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca, probably the finest private archive in all of Mexico. In addition, I appreciate the help of my research assistant, Xenia Wirth. Xenia spent six weeks in Mexico City working through thousands of files in the Fideicomiso, and the research for the manuscript would have taken much longer to complete without her help.

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Finally, a word of thanks to my family: Anabel, Nicolas, and Julia. Writing this book was a time consuming exercise, which was even more taxing on all of them at a time when I also assumed administrative responsibilities at my university. I know that they are as glad that this book is completed as I am.

Introduction

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (p. 102)

On November 16, 1989, descendants of General Alvaro Obregón Salido gathered to cremate his arm. He had lost the limb on June 3, 1915 during a battle that pitted his troops against the legendary “División del Norte” (Division of the North) commanded by General Pancho Villa. While Obregón lost his arm, Villa lost the decisive battle of the Mexican Revolution. The arm was all that was left of the general, assassinated in 1928 and buried in his hometown of Huatabampo in the northwestern state of Sonora. Preserved in a formaldehyde solution, since 1943, it had been displayed in a jar in the Mexico City monument to Obregón. Located at the exact spot of the assassination, the monument was an impressive testimonial, even featuring the holes in the floor left by the assassin’s bullets. Its role was to remind Mexicans of the sacrifice that the leaders of their revolution had made for their nation—a message useful to a ruling party that claimed its legitimacy from the revolution itself: the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party). At the time of the cremation, which

occurred exactly one week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PRI and its predecessors had ruled Mexico for sixty years. By 1989, the PRI's leadership had given up on most of the goals that identified "the revolution" in the eyes of the public: democracy, national sovereignty, and social justice. The arm eerily resembled this ruling party in that the decades had taken their toll. A ghastly white color, it had swollen to the point that the fingers had acquired the shape of tomatoes. Frayed tendons issued from its severed end. The limb had run its course, both physically and symbolically.

The fact that a severed arm had been on display for so long was a testament to its owner's great stature in history as the "undefeated caudillo of the Mexican Revolution".¹ A farmer who had worked hard to achieve a modest prosperity, Obregón did not participate in the first phase of the revolution, which began on November 20, 1910 as a movement to overthrow dictator Porfirio Díaz. Under Díaz's long tenure (1876–1880 and 1884–1911), a small clique had dominated politics in a primarily rural nation. Large haciendas and foreign-owned mining corporations controlled most of the land and mineral resources. In the spring of 1912, after the triumph of that movement had installed democratic rule, Obregón joined the fighting as the head of an impromptu military force to help defend his state from rebels trying to overthrow the newly elected government. Victorious, he returned to the battlefield in March 1913 following the coup d'état of General Victoriano Huerta, and his army made decisive contributions to Huerta's defeat in July 1914. The war against Huerta mobilized hundreds of thousands of *campesinos* (poor rural dwellers) and workers. Success in this conflict required leaders like Obregón to broaden their aims to include reforms that would benefit campesinos, workers, and an increasingly beleaguered middle class. Relying on different regional and social bases in a far-flung and diverse nation, the winners could not agree on common goals beyond the removal of two dictators, and they turned to fighting among themselves in an all-out war. In this conflict, Obregón combined an appeal to campesinos and workers with a commitment to reestablish political legitimacy. After his army had defeated Villa's División del Norte, Obregón emerged as the nation's preeminent political figure. In 1920, he became president and embarked upon a rebuilding program based on the new, revolutionary Constitution, which promised democracy,

Mexican ownership of resources, land for campesinos, a wholly secular society, and improved working conditions.

Once in power, however, Obregón disappointed those who had hoped for fundamental social reform along the lines of this constitution, and he ended up resorting to some of the same authoritarian tactics that he had opposed during the decade of fighting. He became a representative of personalist leadership—a style of rule in which a strongman becomes the arbiter of social and political conflict. In 1924, he imposed a fellow Sonoran, General Plutarco Elías Calles, as his successor, despite a civil war that turned much of the military against him. Obregón continued to wield considerable influence during Calles's presidency and asserted that influence to assure his return to power. His allies in Congress pushed through a constitutional amendment to allow him to run for a second term in the 1928 elections, and in the fall of 1927, the government executed both of his major rivals. Ironically, two weeks after his election, the bullets of an assassin cut short Obregón's own life on July 17, 1928, at the age of forty-eight.

Obregón's career elicited comparisons to Napoleon Bonaparte, who had emerged from the French Revolution by surviving each of its twists and turns. Napoleon became the most successful general of modern Europe, and his empire controlled most of the continent at the height of his power in 1812. Not by coincidence, Obregón's supporters called their leader the "Napoleon of the West."² His detractors, on the other hand, pointed out the parallels between Napoleon's violent seizure of power and Obregón's ambition and cruelty, especially with regard to his effort to dominate the political scene in the 1920s.³

As the comparisons to Napoleon demonstrate, Mexicans have held ambivalent views about Obregón ever since his time in power. Through a school curriculum that features both towering heroes and evil villains, Mexican children know Obregón as a hero. But he does not figure among the seven greatest popular idols. That list contains Aztec Emperor Cuauhtémoc, independence heroes Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, Benito Juárez (the only indigenous Mexican to ever occupy the presidency), three important revolutionary leaders—Madero, Emiliano Zapata, and Villa—and twentieth-century president Lázaro Cárdenas. Except Juárez and Cárdenas, those leaders died violent deaths before they could accomplish their goals. Nor can Obregón be found among

the “black sheep” of Mexican historiography, which include, among others, Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, Austrian-born Emperor Maximilian, and dictator Díaz, whose long rule from 1876 to 1911 precipitated the revolution. Instead, Obregón inhabits an ambiguous space in the historical memory of a nation that continues to struggle with poverty, violence, and social inequality at the centennial of its revolution. To most historians, the man who emerged triumphant deserves credit for many of the accomplishments of the revolution, but also part of the blame for its shortcomings.⁴

As this biography will demonstrate, this ambivalence reflects Obregón’s progression from young revolutionary to repressive strongman. Helped by his military genius, prodigious memory, and ability to relate to ordinary people, Obregón rose to power as a unifying force and, at least by rhetoric, a champion of social reform. Once installed in the presidency, however—and even more so in his effort to return to power despite constitutional provisions barring the reelection of presidents following Díaz’s long rule—he abused his power. Over time, his strong-arm tactics came to destabilize the political system that he had helped create. Meanwhile, many of his erstwhile supporters from among the agrarian and workers’ movements became representatives in Congress, cabinet secretaries, and members of the bourgeoisie.

Because Obregón therefore symbolized the promise of the revolution to his supporters, the “longevity” of his arm illustrated the performative aspects of the efforts of the Mexican state to capitalize on his personality cult. The notion of performativity originated with the 1940s work of the British linguistic philosopher John L. Austin. Austin posited that messages were not always true or false; rather, they could contain an emotion or intention such as a promise or a prohibition. For example, when a groom says “I do” to his bride, he states his intention to marry her and, in so doing, enters into matrimony. Transferring this idea to social science, the gender theory philosopher Judith Butler defined performative messages as the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”⁵ A performative message can therefore define reality rather than describe it. In this case, the public display of the arm represented a form of political speech that highlighted the Mexican state’s devotion to one of its heroes and held up his sacrifice as a model for citizens to follow. In the narrative of the monument,

Obregón's arm represented both the revolution and the nation for which the leader had sacrificed it in battle. Like a Catholic relic, the arm established a link to a past constructed as heroic. The fact that the monument stood at the precise location of Obregón's assassination further impressed upon visitors the drama associated with the general's dual sacrifice. In the official rhetoric of a government that derived its legitimacy from the revolution, the severed limb served as a fetishistic embodiment of national sovereignty.⁶

Other examples from history reveal the same dynamic; for instance, the arm of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, along with Robert E. Lee one of the two preeminent military leaders of the Confederate States of America during the US Civil War (1861–1865). Each year, thousands of Civil War aficionados travel to Orange County, Virginia, to visit the burial site of Jackson's left arm, lost to friendly fire on May 2, 1863 during the Battle of Chancellorsville. Eight days later, Jackson died from the complications of pneumonia, which set in following the loss of the arm. Just like Obregón's arm, Jackson's was buried separately from the body. Adorned by a simple marker, the arm reposes near the battle site. The body lies in an impressive grave site at Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery 124 miles west in Lexington. And just like Obregón's arm symbolized victory in the Mexican Revolution to those who visited the monument, Jackson's arm represented the struggle and defeat of the Confederacy. As today's supporters of the Confederacy see it, Jackson's injury and death doomed the Southern cause. Lee certainly understood the symbolic significance of his friend's dismemberment and death. Upon hearing of Jackson's impending death, he penned a note of farewell, pointing out that "you have lost your left arm but I my right."⁷ Thus, a severed limb of someone famous reveals insights about the culture of leadership.

This biography of Obregón examines the culture of leadership more generally. Obregón's political abilities characterized "charismatic leadership" as defined by German sociologist Max Weber in the 1920s: "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which one is ... treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader."⁸ Complementing this definition with regard to prophets as

representatives of religious authority, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out that charisma must be understood in relational and socially grounded terms. In other words, charismatic leaders embody exemplary conduct as measured against the traditions and customs of their context, including the social inequalities that characterize that context. In order to displace social conflict, they deliver symbolic capital for the consumption of their followers. Unlike real capital, symbolic capital cannot be used to feed the hungry or provide shelter for the homeless.⁹ Rather, symbolic capital can hold a palliative effect, no matter whether it pertains to religion (Karl Marx's "opium of the masses"), nationalism, or personal devotion to a leader. As the discussion of the discourse of the arm's "sacrifice" has shown, Bourdieu's concepts work well with regard to Obregón's charismatic leadership.

Obregón's life and career offer insights into a particular type of charismatic leader: the "caudillo." Historian John Chasteen has characterized a caudillo as someone "capable of inspiring intense devotion among a loyal personal following independent of any formal institution, leaders who became generals *after* acquiring an army of followers rather than the other way around."¹⁰ Crucial elements in caudillo rule include a macho personality cult; heroism in war; and a large number of followers who felt intense personal loyalty to the caudillo. Leading impromptu armies, caudillos filled the void left by the collapse of the Spanish colonial government during the Wars of Independence, and they dominated many of the newly emergent nations until the 1850s.¹¹ After that decade, in most of Latin America, modernization erased the conditions that had allowed the rise of caudillos. By the 1890s, the caudillos on horseback were "no longer a match for government armies, now equipped with Mauser rifles and Krupp artillery, coordinated by telegraph and transported by rail ..."¹² This infrastructure extended the reach of the central government. Imbued with greater power, the leadership of Latin American nations became institutional rather than personal, creating bureaucracies that administered stronger state apparatuses.

In Mexico, however, modernization under Porfirio Díaz did not bring about the definitive eclipse of the caudillo. Due to its rugged geography and vast regional diversity, the nation experienced political centralization later than other major Spanish American countries. Díaz himself came to power as a caudillo, and his imprint on the era in which he ruled led

to its popular label as the “Porfiriato.” His government could not break the sway of many powerful regional clans, let alone control the countryside. The waves of violence that swept Mexico beginning in 1910 destroyed the central state and the army that had enforced stability under the Díaz regime, re-creating some of the conditions that had permitted the rise of caudillos a century before. However, this twentieth-century upheaval also produced movements and leaders who desired to redeem the aspirations of campesinos and workers: for example, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Zapata fought for the return of campesino land appropriated by large agricultural estates in the areas south and east of Mexico City. Cowardly assassinated by his political enemies in 1919, Zapata enjoyed a long posthumous career, focused on his iconic image among the dispossessed; for example, the 1994 campesino uprising in the southern state of Chiapas titled itself the Zapatista Front of National Liberation. He emerged as the primary popular hero of the revolution, representing the struggle of the poor for a better life.¹³ Likewise, Villa led an army of *rancheros*, day-laborers, and sharecroppers from northern Mexico. Many of the Villistas fought to resist the encroachment of modernization on their land, their lifestyle, and their autonomy. Had Villa’s troops won, rather than lost, the war between the factions in the revolution, he might well have emerged as a caudillo in his own right. In 1923, Villa, too, fell victim to assassination.¹⁴

Separated from nineteenth-century caudillos by seven decades, Obregón therefore fundamentally differed from his predecessors. His leadership style blended that of the traditional caudillo with the ability to relate to modern popular movements. Unlike the old-style caudillos, many of whom paid homage to traditional Catholicism and oppressed those who did not, Obregón was not a believer, considering religion a private rather than a public matter. Nor, however, did he share the rabid anticlericalism of Calles and some of his other Sonoran associates. As he believed, quite correctly, efforts to destroy the Church in deeply Catholic Mexico would be futile and undermine attempts to centralize political authority.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the caudillo label aptly describes Obregón’s position in 1920s Mexico. His contemporaries used the term, uniquely, to refer to this leader, and especially when he was preparing to return to the presidency. By the time of his death, “*el caudillo*” had become synonymous