

# Revisiting Richard Morse's Theory of Spanish American Government for Classroom Use

*Revisitando a teoria do Governo Hispano-americano de Richard  
Morse na sala de aula*

Peter L. Blasenheim<sup>1</sup>

*Artigo recebido em 19 de agosto de 2006 e aprovado  
em 16 de outubro de 2006*

## Resumo

Este artigo analisa um dos primeiros escritos de Richard Morse, "Por uma teoria do governo hispano-americano", publicado em 1954 no *Journal of the History of Ideas*, e explica como o autor – Peter Blasenheim utiliza-se de tal texto para dar início e estruturar seus cursos sobre História da América Latina ministrados no Colorado College. Morse correlaciona filosofias européias com história política latino-americana justapondo valores tomistas medievais e maquiavélicos renascentistas, os quais foram trazidos de Espanha para o continente americano no século XVI. O calendário acadêmico singular do Colorado College, cujo sistema de blocos prevê classes diárias de 3 horas, oferece tempo suficiente para levantar questões – e gerar discussões – a partir do provocativo ensaio de Morse. O que ele quer dizer ao apresentar o componente tomista como oposto ao maquiavélico? Que ele quer explicar ao fazer suas considerações sobre a natureza da mudança através dos tempos na América Latina? Continuará a complicada coexistência entre Tomismo/Maquiavelismo a interferir na idade moderna, e em caso positivo, como? Este artigo também facilita as aulas e seminários que se seguem na medida em que oferece formas de periodizar a história política da América Latina. Em suma, o artigo de Morse é tão penetrante, que prepara o palco para curso inteiro.

**Palavras-chaves:** Maquiavelismo; Tomismo; periodização da História latino-americana.

**Abstract:** This article looks at one of Morse's early essays, "Towards a Theory of Spanish American Government," published in 1954 in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and explains how the author uses it

<sup>1</sup> Doutor em História pela Stanford University.



to introduce and structure courses taught at Colorado College on Latin American history. Morse correlates European philosophies with Latin American political history by juxtaposing Thomistic medieval values and Machiavellian renaissance values, which Spain brought to the Americas in the sixteenth century. The three-hour classes provided by Colorado College's unique academic calendar, the Block Plan, provides the time to address the questions raised—and the discussion generated—by Morse's provocative essay. What does he mean by the Thomistic as opposed to the Machiavellian component? What larger point is he making about the nature of change over time in Latin America? Does the Thomistic/Machiavellian play off continue into the modern age and if so in what ways? This article also facilitates lectures because it provides a mean to periodize Latin American history. In sum, one trenchant article sets the stage for an entire course.

**Keyword:** Machiavellian; Thomistic; periodization of Latin American History

Professor Jeffrey Needell referred to Richard Morse as Latin Americanists' "only *pensador*"<sup>2</sup> in a 2001 obituary published in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*. I agree with Needell and other historians of the region who acknowledge Morse to be one of the deepest thinkers in the field.<sup>3</sup> In particular, his insights into Latin America's political culture, expressed in relatively few, well chosen words, are profound.

This paper looks at one of Morse's early essays, "Toward a Theory of Spanish American Government," first published in 1954 in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and explains how I use it to introduce and to structure several courses on Latin American history I have been teaching at Colorado College since the mid-seventies. The article serves two purposes: it provides students with a theoretical framework for studying change over time in Latin America and it suggests ways to periodize the region's history. In short, one very trenchant essay helps set the stage for an entire course.

In the article, Morse sets out to correlate European philosophies with Spanish American political history. To this end, he juxtaposes Thomistic medieval values and Machiavellian renaissance values, all of which were brought from Spain to the Americas in the sixteenth century. For the first half century of the Spanish Empire, Morse argues, "the administration hovered

2 Jeffrey D. Needell, Obituary: Richard M. Morse (1922-2001), *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 81: 3/4 (2001), p. 759.

3 The point is made in several book reviews and by scholars who contributed to the conference prepared by the Oliveira Lima Library in Washington, D.C. entitled "Reflections on Culture and Ideology in the Americas: A Conference in Honor of Richard M. Morse." These essays were published in the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 32/ 2 (Winter, 1995). See also Gerald Martin, "Rev. of *New World Soundings: Culture and Ideology in the Americas* by Richard M. Morse," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 22/3 (Oct., 1990): 623-24; Mark D. Suchman, "Rev. of *New World Soundings: Culture and Ideology in the Americas* by Richard M. Morse," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 71/4 (Nov. 1991): 869-70.





between medieval and Renaissance orientations.<sup>4</sup> But after Philip II came to power in 1556, the Empire fell into a predominantly Thomistic mold in which it remained until independence. Then the “recessive” or latent Machiavellian traits became dominant in the form of the rise of the *caudillos*, Latin America’s famous and infamous strongman leaders.

Colorado College’s Block Plan, our peculiar academic calendar, which consists of eight three-and-a-half week “blocks” per academic year, fosters intensive study of one subject at a time since students enroll in only one class each block. This means three hours of Morse on Day Two and usually a good part of Day Three of a class that meets a total of merely eighteen days. At first, this might seem like an inordinate amount of time to devote to one twenty-two page article but experience has taught me that it pays to take the time to address the questions raised—and encourage the discussion generated—by Morse. What exactly does he mean by the Thomistic as opposed to the Machiavellian component and what are the attributes of each? On what grounds does he consider his explanation of political instability and *caudillismo* “positive” in contrast with the “negative views” held by other scholars of *caudillismo*?<sup>5</sup> Does the Thomistic/ Machiavellian play-off continue into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries and if so in what ways? And what larger point is he making about the nature of change over time in Latin America as opposed to conventional liberal and even some neo-Marxist notions of change, theories explained in a few other classic sources in the field which we compare with Morse during the first week of the course?<sup>6</sup>

I can only suggest answers to these questions, more complicated, multi-faceted and problematic than they might at first appear. Yet the most compelling class sessions in my career I owe to the students who have challenged my opinions and each other’s opinions about what Morse is really trying to say—sometimes by comparing and contrasting him with those other historians. The important point is that in the course of debate and discussion, that theoretical framework I refer to above finally emerges by the end of class on that first Thursday—with only two more Thursdays left to the block!

4 Richard M. Morse, “Toward a Theory of Spanish American Government,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15 (1954): 74.

5 Morse, “Toward a Theory,” 78-79.

6 See, for example, Charles C. Griffin, “The Enlightenment and Latin American Independence from A. P. Whitaker (ed.), *Latin America and the Enlightenment* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, N.Y., 1961): 119-41; Charles C. Griffin, “Economic and Social Aspects of the Era of Spanish-American Independence,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 29 (1949): 170-87; R. A. Humphreys, “The Fall of the Spanish American Empire,” *History* (October 1952): 213-27 and selections from Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin-American Mind* (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); O. Carlos Stoetzer, *The Scholastic Roots of the Spanish American Revolution* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979); Francisco José Moreno, *Legitimacy and Stability in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); and Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). I also use the section on independence in Morse’s chapter “The Heritage of Latin America,” in Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964): 159-69.



Having said that, what *does* Morse mean by the “Thomistic” as opposed to the “Machiavellian” mode, reminding my students of his supposition (which I explain to them in the form of an admonition) that whenever one was dominant the other was recessive? Surely, this is not a course on St. Thomas Aquinas, scholasticism and thirteenth-century Europe nor, for that matter, on Machiavelli and the amoral statecraft of renaissance Europe, topics well taught by my departmental colleagues. Suffice it to discuss behaviors and attitudes one might associate with the Thomistic mode—genuinely living up to one’s obligations towards fellow humans, obligations determined by one’s station in life and based upon principles of Christian justice—contrasted with the “sheer personal verve and cunning”<sup>7</sup> we associate with Machiavelli and attributes we Latin Americanists are always busy ascribing to conquistadors and *caudillos*.

That there’s something inherently Thomistic and Machiavellian about Latin American civilization is a concept some of my students find difficult to grasp and often they don’t like it even when they do. Perhaps this is because they’re more Lockean than they realize. Sometimes they challenge it on the basis of its apparent elitism, the value system of the dominating class brought over from Spain. I counsel patience. Compare it with other ways of looking at Latin America that we will be discussing tomorrow, I tell them, and then challenge it. For the puzzled student, asking the class for good synonyms for “Thomistic” and “Machiavellian” often helps. Morse associated the Thomistic mode with Queen Isabella and the Machiavellian with King Ferdinand. What about Don Quixote and Sancho Panza...or Ideal and Real? And for the student who is still confused and/or unconvinced—please don’t fret—all Morse means is that the more dominant the Thomistic component, the more the system is working the way it *ought* to really work; the more dominant the Machiavellian, the more the system is a free for all...but with the caveat, of course, that power contenders are pursuing their selfish interests in the name of the king.

Indeed this is the time to segue into some essential and very compelling attributes of Latin American political culture, attributes which even well educated Anglo-Americans with little knowledge of the region could better understand in light of Morse. As just suggested, the colonial practice of reaffirming allegiance to the Crown while breaking the law—let’s call it the *obedezco pero no cumpro* (I obey but do not comply) or the *iMuera el mal gobierno...viva el rey!* (Death to the government...Long live the King!) formula we all studied in our first encounter with colonial Latin American history—makes so much sense when seen from the perspective of the Machiavellian mode. So do its post-independence manifestations, the overthrow of a *caudillo* or a Constitution in the name of a “republican” version of a “higher” law, that is, an even more popular, charismatic *caudillo* or another idealistic (Thomistic?) Constitution.

<sup>7</sup> Morse, “Toward a Theory,” 73.



So this is what Morse means when he challenges the “somewhat negative view” that “attribute[s] Spanish American instability to the imposition of French-, British- and American-type constitutions upon peoples whose illiteracy, poverty, provincialism, political inexperience and social inequalities rendered ineffectual the mechanisms of constitutional democracy.”<sup>8</sup> His “positive” explanation, let’s call it his thesis even though it comes seven pages into the article, holds that in Latin America the Enlightenment and political independence simply triggered the Machiavellian component. In other words, asking if Latin American nations are “prepared” for constitutional democracy is not the appropriate question. It makes no sense to consider what the Enlightenment and political independence did *not* achieve. Latin Americans are neither politically backward nor corrupt. Rather, much like Anglo-Americans, they’re the products of their own history.

And if indeed *caudillos* and constitutions are effective to the degree that they restore what Morse, citing Weber, calls “the authority of the eternal yesterday,”<sup>9</sup> what point is he making about the nature of change over time in Latin America? Does all change occur to prevent change? Is there a tremendous difference between what Latin Americans have chosen to say for the last two hundred years...and what they have meant? Have they in fact only been “groping to recover and legitimize an overarching patrimonial state,” that is, what Morse calls the “clandestine” force at work?<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, as good historians, shouldn’t we be relying on evidence rather than clandestine forces to prove our points? And Latin America *has* changed over time. There are the classical articles by Charles Griffin who argues that the Enlightenment and the independence movements might not have sparked genuine revolutions but that they did set the stage for evolutionary change in the region. And then there are (or were) the *dependistas* who insist that the decisive stimulus to change is always external.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Morse is flawed. Perhaps his argument *is* elitist...and deterministic. Let’s not confuse twentieth or twenty-first century Latin America with medieval Spain.

Perhaps. In fact, I try to keep my own opinions out of our debates. But however valid the criticism of *Toward a Theory of Spanish American Government*, Morse does an extraordinary job of assessing change over time from a strictly Latin American perspective. As a student and scholar of Latin America, I appreciate what he has done.

And speaking as a teacher of Latin American history, I’m also grateful. This is because by that first Thursday, thanks to many hours of Morse and an hour or two of a half dozen other historians,<sup>12</sup> some who tend to

8 Morse, “Toward a Theory,” 78.

9 Morse, “Toward a Theory,” 87.

10 Morse, “The Heritage of Latin America,” 169.

11 See the two articles by Griffin cited above in note 4; Stein and Stein, 109.

12 See note 4, above.



sympathize with his ideas and others who don't, most of my students have some theoretical foundation for studying Latin American history; and they have the tools to evaluate the sources they will be reading and the lectures they will be attending for the rest of the block.

As teacher, I also find the article an effective tool for periodizing Latin American history, a point I made above and the subject of the remaining pages in this essay. Morse suggests a timeline that students can visualize with a very simple diagram depicting the shifting structure of the Empire, hovering between Thomistic and Machiavellian orientations in the first half century of the Empire but predominantly Thomistic from the accession of Philip II in 1556 until the Napoleonic invasion released the latent, recessive Machiavellian tendencies kept in check by the Crown since the mid-sixteenth century. What I do is turn up the power of the microscope on this timeline, sometimes refining it, always expanding and developing it and usually taking some liberties with it. Beyond providing students with an outline of Latin American history, this also gives me the opportunity to introduce them to the terms they will be hearing repeatedly in the days ahead. And it provides a way of illustrating some of the difficult concepts that have already been introduced.

Let's start in 1474, the year of Isabella's accession to the throne, rather than 1504, the year of her death, because to understand the mindset and, thereby, the reign of this most Thomistic of monarchs it must be understood that she inherited Castile from her half-brother, the allegedly incompetent Henry IV whose nobles, according to the chroniclers, ran roughshod over their lord.<sup>13</sup> Isabella, Morse's "Thomistic" monarch, brought this "Machiavellian" situation back into some sort of equilibrium, restraining her nobles and increasing the real authority of the Castilian state. But even Isabella, the Thomistic ruler *par excellence*, was "recessively" Machiavellian. We see this after the appearance of Columbus when the queen, who had labored so assiduously to increase her power, gave some of it away as part of her deal with the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. And yet what the queen gave away, the queen had the right to take back. As she (and Morse) remind us, as early as 1493 she asked by what authority the Admiral had enslaved her new Amerindian vassals.<sup>14</sup> What a good illustration of the system's Thomistic underpinnings even though the queen was behaving in such Machiavellian fashion.

So much for Isabella and Ferdinand, the Trastámara period. Now let's look at the reign of the first Hapsburg monarch, Charles V, and the Age of the Conquest or the Encounter. Recall that Morse said the system hovered between the Thomistic and Machiavellian modes during this period. Yet surely if we zoom in and examine the first chaotic decades of the sixteenth century—let's say from 1492 to 1542, when the New Laws made an attempt to restrict the

13 Ramón Menéndez Pidal, "The Significance of the Reign of Isabella the Catholic," in Roger Highfield (ed.), *Spain in the fifteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 380-86.

14 Morse, "Toward a Theory," 73.

powers of the conquistadores and their heirs—the orientation of the Spanish New World, to use Morse’s language, was predominantly Machiavellian. To illustrate this, let’s draw a line back from the Thomistic to the Machiavellian side of the chalkboard and write in the year “1542” just below where we began in 1474. After all, the conquistadors got their *repartimientos* and their *encomiendas*, slaves in the Machiavellian “Real” if not the Thomistic “Ideal,” during these years. After all, Charles V reversed decisions to restrict *encomienda* to encourage the Machiavellian designs of his conquistadors and, consequently, his own wealth and influence.

But with enough power, the Crown could take control back from the conquistadors and their heirs...or at least try...as it did by promulgating the New Laws which restricted *encomienda*, that is, elite control over Amerindian labor, at first in theory and then gradually in fact. The system was moving back into the Thomistic mode, which it did definitively after Philip II came to the throne in 1556. Of course, it remained recessively Machiavellian. The New Laws were suspended in response to the defiance of the *encomenderos*, who, predictably, broke the law in the name of the Crown. Suspended but kept on the books, symptomatic of the fact that the Spanish state was growing stronger, as it had under Isabella but now on an imperial scale. Phase Two of the Hapsburgs...the reign of Philip II...the height of Spanish power...predominantly Thomistic.

Next comes the Century of Decline beginning roughly with the accession of Philip III in 1598 and lasting until the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession brought on by the death of the childless Charles II in 1700. The weaker the Empire, the more predominant its Machiavellian tendencies. Our timeline moves back to the Machiavellian side of the chalkboard. Here we look at the growth and institutionalization of the *haciendas* that enabled the creole elite to pursue their feudal fantasies, *haciendas* grudgingly legalized by an enervated government desperate for revenues. This is when a semi-legal labor system of debt peonage replaced *encomienda*, thus making the *haciendas* economically viable. Surely, too, the growth of contraband so characteristic of the seventeenth century fits into this “Machiavellian” chapter of the story. As does the practice of purchasing office and even “whiteness” by economically successful but racially suspect vassals of the Crown.

After 1700, the more the Bourbon dynasty strengthened its grip on Spain and the Empire, the more Thomistic the system became. As for our diagram, let’s distinguish between the early Bourbon period, say 1700 to 1760, when our timeline inches back towards the Thomistic side, from the Bourbon Reforms of Charles III and IV, that is, 1760 through 1808, when it starts to move much more rapidly...all the way back to the far edge of the Thomistic side of the chalkboard.

Napoleon invaded and toppled the Bourbon dynasty, the Thomistic foundation stone that held the system together. This was the event that

unleashed *caudillismo*, the clearest manifestation of the Machiavellian component of Latin America's "dual heritage"<sup>15</sup> and the inspiration for Morse's article. As for our diagram, our timeline rushes headlong back to the Machiavellian side of the board.

Now is the time to make some suggestive points about Charles III's policies even though the Bourbon Reforms have been introduced solely for purposes of outlining Latin American history. Bourbon "liberalism" really meant progressively tighter government control, less as opposed to more personal freedom for the creole elite, right? Of course, as I explain to the class, this all played out in different ways among different groups in the several Latin American viceroyalties and their capitals. But might the exaggerated Machiavellianism of the *caudillos* have followed inexorably from the exaggerated Thomism, that is, the tightening up of the system, under the later Bourbons? Perhaps the Bourbons were too successful in making the Real conform to the Ideal. And they paid for their success. Just food for thought for the class at the end of a taxing three-hour class.

I want my students to decide for themselves how much they want to talk about the applicability and relevance of Thomistic and Machiavellian attributes when discussing post-independence governance in Latin America and, for that matter, modern Latin American history in general. Predictably, Morse suggests that the pattern he has described for the colonial system persists, that is, the political system continues to alternate between the two orientations, with one dominant and the other recessive.<sup>16</sup> Accounting always for wide variation among the several Latin American nations, by the middle of the nineteenth century, he points out, the system was shifting back from the Machiavellian to the Thomistic mode in the region's major countries thanks to "successful" *caudillos* who managed to bring peace and even some economic growth or Lockean constitutions modified to reflect the region's cultural reality.

The important point here is that I can extend our outline, often on the other side of the chalkboard, for courses focusing on the modern period. Here are a few examples.

Brazil, thanks to the peculiar circumstances of its independence movement, surely remained Thomistic until the fall of Pedro II in 1889, with perhaps a short Machiavellian interlude between the abdication of Pedro I and the Interpretive Law of 1840 which recentralized the political system.<sup>17</sup> The Old Republic, famous, even by Brazilian standards, for its backroom deals, political violence and corruption brings us right back to the Machiavellian side of the diagram. The Age of Getúlio takes us back once again to the Thomistic side...at least until the Second Republic began to unravel in the late

15 Morse, "Toward a Theory," 73.

16 Morse, "Toward a Theory," 85-91.

17 Morse makes this point specifically in "Toward a Theory," 91.



1950s. I'll end my outline here, only because the class has neither the time nor background to begin the always informative and sometimes troubling and contentious debate regarding placement of the Military Republic and the New Republic.

Doubtless, Morse's theory also helps illustrate and organize the post-independence history of Chile. Frustrated by the failure of a half dozen "exotic" liberal constitutions foisted on the country by would-be *caudillos* and mere politicians (some idealistic and some venal), the "conservative" classes rallied to the quasi-monarchic presidential system established by businessman Diego Portales in 1830. Thus did Chile become the first Spanish American country to restore some sort of Thomistic equilibrium to its politics in the aftermath of independence *without* having to rely on a *caudillo*. But Chile was outgrowing the Portalian system by the third quarter of the century, in large part because economic growth, fostered by political stability (paradoxically) revealed and then exacerbated the shortcomings of the ultra-conservative regime. On the basis of a (revived) liberalism, the Chilean elite now insisted upon curbing the powers of the president and did so but at the cost of a bloody civil war. In fact, the Chilean political system was shifting into the Machiavellian mode, a trend that continued during the "lost" decades of the parliamentary period, from 1891 to 1920 when the president of Chile was a figurehead and the country was rudderless. Arturo Alessandri and his successors restored presidentialism, (the Thomistic system?) now moderated of course by a relatively powerful, democratically elected legislative branch. The Radical presidents of the mid-twentieth century, the *caudillo* Carlos Ibáñez (1952-58), the Conservative Jorge Alessandri (1958-64), and the Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei (1964-70) were all heirs of this system. But what about the election of the Socialist Salvador Allende in 1970 and the brutal seventeen year dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet who led the coup against Allende in 1973? Don't these events challenge Morse's assumptions and ideas? Perhaps they do...but maybe they don't; they might even confirm them.

Modern Argentina also fits into the model, not so neatly, perhaps, but Argentine history is anything but neat. I choose 1835, the year Rosas acquired total and unlimited power, to reverse direction and head back from the Machiavellian and towards the Thomistic side of the diagram. With our hats off to Bartolomé Mitre, the Conciliators and the Oligarchs continued the trend Rosas started. Just when the system began to short circuit is a very debatable question, as is the appropriate year to mark a shift back to a more Thomistic orientation. Some historians, I suspect, would argue that Argentina has never recovered from the political "fall" of the Oligarchy in 1916, in the sense that the country stalled in the Machiavellian mode and has remained there ever since. Be that as it may, for purposes of my course on modern Argentina, I'm comfortable citing the Sáenz Peña Law of 1912 and the emergence of the Radicals as the moment when Argentina's Machiavellian characteristics began to come to the fore again, a situation the *Concordancia*

and the *golpistas* of 1943 tried but failed to reverse. I really want to leave the Peronist heyday, 1946 to 1952, open to debate; as I confess first week, I expect my students to develop and propose radically different arguments about what we should do with this relatively short period of time...and where we should place it on our timeline. After Argentina imploded in the mid-1950s, of course, we're back to (or *still in*, depending upon what we've done with Perón) the Machiavellian mode.

Finally, there's Mexico. Surely, we could ascribe some "recessive" Thomistic characteristics to Mexico in the Age of Santa Anna. After all, he oversaw a few peaceful moments and his links with the "conservative classes" combined with his charisma made him more legitimate than any other Mexican chief of state in the first half-century of Mexican independence. Still, the Age of Santa Anna, and the period that followed, the Age of Juárez and the Reform, clearly illustrate the Machiavellian side of Mexican history. It's Porfirio Díaz and his cohorts who reversed this trend only to pave the way for a new Machiavellian phase beginning with the Revolution of 1910 and lasting until 1940 when the revolution became implicitly and then explicitly "institutionalized," that is, increasingly Thomistic. Who knows which side of the diagram we should use to describe Mexico since the election of Fox in 2000. It's much too early to tell.

The first Friday of the block is upon us. For colonial classes, students are learning about pre-Colombian America and the Age of Discovery from various perspectives. For classes in modern Latin America, they're studying in some detail the late colonial period in one or the other of the several viceroyalties. Thanks to Morse, they have an outline that helps them organize and digest the vast amount of material they are taking in this morning from their assigned reading and my lecture, an outline that will serve them for the rest of the block. Thanks to Morse and a few of his colleagues they also have a theoretical framework to help them analyze all this material. And thanks exclusively to Morse, I say with some assurance, they've set aside many of their stereotypes about Latin America and they're thinking about the region in entirely new ways. Incidentally, this means they're thinking about Anglo-America in new ways too...but that's a different story.