Leadership carries certain stereotypes when applied to Latin America. We often envision a painting of a caudillo figure – a military dictator on a horseback – or a photograph of a populist in a balcony waving to an adoring crowd below. Great leaders are those who “get things done,” a man (or woman) of action. In reality, the study of “great leaders” is much more complex than a photo opportunity. Latin America is filled with leaders who are considered “great,” but many of them died in the agony of defeat. So, what makes them “great?”

In this essay, we interpret “greatness” as a sociopolitical phenomenon – the product of unique leader-follower relationships that endure beyond the leader’s exit from power, or even beyond his/her life. We approach this abstract phenomenology through three levels of analysis: (1) human; (2) superhuman; and (3) meta-human. Each provides the elements for the construction of a narrative that blends both myth and reality; legends and facts. The study of greatness, therefore, involves both the understanding of leadership as an art form – the expression of the human spirit in search of transcendental meaning – and as a science – the knowledge of human behavior as rational and predictive. Artistic expressions within a society often serve to elevate “great leaders” into this meta-human condition, while celebrating superhuman qualities.

The Study of ‘Great’ Leaders in Latin America

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The scientific study of “great” leadership traces its roots to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of large corporations in the early 20th century, which ushered in a hierarchical view of leadership with top managers and their subordinates/followers. Studies focused on the traits of top managers as great leaders. The literature was dominated by the perspective that leaders were endowed with great attributes, such as self-confidence, extroversion, emotional stability, and enthusiasm, which naturally placed them at the top of their organization/society.

Scholars of the period, including the great German sociologist and economist, Max Weber (1864-1920), devoted considerable research into uncovering the secrets of personal traits that would make someone an effective leader. This analytical focus is known today in leadership studies circles as The Great-Man Theory – often used in a negative connotation because of the popular belief in the early part of this century that only “great men” could be leaders. From this perspective, leaders were born, not made.

By the 1940s, the academic focus on the characteristics of great leaders had run out of steam – primarily because scholars could not agree on the essential traits of great leaders. If great leaders, for instance, are supposed to be tall and imposing, as the leadership theorists of the period would have us believe, how does one account for the
slight-built Getúlio Vargas’ deep impression on Brazil’s struggle for modernization in the 1930s.\(^5\)

The lack of consensus on the essential traits of great leaders led scholars to concentrate instead on “great” leadership as a *behavior act* – specific behaviors that produce effective leadership. This change in focus did not eliminate interest in the study of leadership style and traits. Rather, scholars turned to “action” as an essential component of “great” leadership.\(^6\) This shift was consistent with the behavioral revolution that swept the social sciences after World War II. The focus was no longer on the individual leader but on the structural conditions that shaped his/her “greatness.” Trait theory gave way to the study of structural variables, such as income and education, as determinants of social behavior.

This second phase produced two major approaches: behavioral and situational. *Behavioral Theory*, popularized by scholars such as Ralph Stogdill and Harold Lasswell, focused on the way great leaders treated their subordinates – coercion versus rewards.\(^7\) This theory is also referred to as a “functional approach” to the study of leadership, because it studied the classification of functional roles in groups. Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats, for instance, argued that there were three types of group roles: (1) task-related roles; (2) roles related to group building and maintenance; and (3) individual roles. Using a similar approach, D.G. Bowers and S.E. Seashore conceptualized leadership in terms of functional roles by individuals in an organization. Leaders could play four possible roles in order to obtain organizational effectiveness: (1) supporter of others; (2) interaction facilitator; (3) goal emphasized; and (4) work facilitator. These leadership styles centered on the leader’s ability to behave in a way that would maximize the achievement of organizational objectives.\(^8\)

The *Situational Approach* to leadership, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on the factors that influenced the effectiveness of a leader. Behavior was not the only variable that produced effective leadership. *Situation* was added as a variable. Fred E. Fiedler, for instance, suggested a “contingency model” of leadership under which there were three primary factors that controlled the amount of influence a leader had over followers: (1) position power (the great leader’s ability to reward and punish); (2) task structure (highly structured/unstructured environments); and (3) leader-members relations (good/poor relationship). The most favorable conditions under this model would be good relationship between leader and followers, highly structured tasks, and a strong position power.\(^9\)

The behavioral and situational approaches to leadership provided the foundation for the rise of “organizational theory” in the social sciences after World War II. In business schools across the United States, management programs turned to the latest scientific techniques, such as statistics, for the empirical study of human behavior. A certain degree of optimism, given the economic expansion in the United States and Western Europe in the 1950s, seemed to add credence to the notion that leadership studies had finally reached a mature stage in the social sciences.

This perception began to change in the 1970s, as economic crisis in the United States challenged the view that the country’s accepted organizational models were adequate. As other economic rivals appeared in Europe and Asia in the 1970s, we began to reevaluate our old managerial ways and conceptualize new ones. The central idea that
emerged during this period of self-reflection was the need to change – thus the emphasis on transformation. The old ways were no longer acceptable.

By the end of the 1970s, a new movement took hold in the leadership studies literature – one focused on the interaction among leaders and followers. The new focus on interaction had as its basis the need to transform the existing relationship between leader and followers. In the view of the scholars of this third phase, the United States, as a highly industrialized society, could not continue to use outdated management models, which viewed followers as subordinates and leaders as occupying the top of the organizational hierarchy. In a way, American economic decline was explained in part by the country’s inability to adapt to a new economic environment, which required more flexibility and less hierarchical structures.

The new literature draws a distinction between “transactional” and “transformational” styles. While the former is associated with management, or organizational skills, the latter represents leadership, with an emphasis on innovation and creativity. James MacGregor Burns, in a seminal study of leadership, suggested that as societies achieved the basic needs of their citizens, transformational leaders would lift their followers to a higher moral plane of self-actualization. This inspirational leadership style was developed within the context of advanced industrial societies such as the United States, whose high level of capitalist development had supposedly met their citizens’ physiological, safety and social needs.

Bernard Bass, another important transformational leadership theorist, suggested that transactional leadership was associated with passive behavior (status quo), while transformational leadership required active behavior (creative, interactive, visionary, and passionate). Abraham Zaleznik, in his insightful distinction between managers and leaders, argued that the former is associated with maintaining “the balance of operations,” while the latter “create new approaches and imagine new areas to explore.” While Zaleznik does not discount the possibility of the two co-existing in the same society, he suggests that the presence of one may stifle the growth of the other.

Joseph Rost even went so far as to borrow from the “futurists” the perspective that the Western world is at present in a state of transition to a postindustrial paradigm. Although Rost would like to be perceived as advancing a “new” paradigm (postindustrial), in actuality he is still part of the “transformation” movement, popular since the late 1970s. His very notion of a paradigm shift suggests that his approach is centered on the idea that the study of great leadership is an exercise in understanding change. He clearly belongs in the group of scholars who have focused in recent decades on the nature of interaction between great leader and followers within a context of change and transformation – the relative decline of the United States’ leadership role in the world and the rise of competing economic powers. Great leaders set the stage for transformation and meaningful change, as the following section will discuss.

‘Great’ Leaders as Transformational Leaders

The trend in the recent transformation movement has rekindled interest in visionary leadership, particularly focusing on “charismalike” relationships between leaders and followers. Ann Ruth Willner has offered one of the most significant
contributions in recent decades to the study of charismatic political leadership. In her 1986 study, *The Spellbinders*, she conceptualized the great leader relationship with his/her followers as involving four dimensions: leader-image, idea-acceptance, compliance, and emotional. First, a great leader produces strong images – savior, seer – that followers come to perceive as setting him/her above ordinary members of the community. This leader-image dimension is associated with what followers consider to be extraordinary qualities, such as the ability to operate effectively under tremendous pressure. Jay A. Conger, in an insightful study of great leaders, argues that the “mystique” of exceptional leadership comes from these strong images – seeing beyond current realities, communicating a vision that inspires, building impressions of trustworthiness and expertise, empowering others to achieve the dream, and encouraging extraordinary commitment in followers.¹⁴

Decisiveness is also mentioned as a possible trait of a great leader, particularly when high risks are involved. The heroic feat of a leader in rescuing followers from impending calamity casts the image of the leader as a demigod – if not a god himself. As historian Herbert Herring suggests about Peru’s Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, “Haya became a demigod to his ecstatic followers and a target for virulent abuse from almost everyone else.”¹⁵ Although he never became president, Haya dominated Peruvian politics for almost six decades, ultimately shaping the constitutional order of the civilian governments in the 1980s – before his death in 1979.

The second dimension in the great leader-follower relationship involves what Willner calls “idea-acceptance.” It refers to the extent to which followers internalize ideas that the leader espouses. While leaders may have excellent communications skills, the content of their message matters just as much as the delivery. If followers can accept the message and incorporate it into their belief system, the relationship is strengthened. In turn, the personal authority of the leader grows deeper roots. In Latin America, the Argentinean doctor-turned-revolutionary, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, became a “great” leader figure once he assisted Fidel Castro in the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Che’s image is still strong in the minds of many Cubans.¹⁶

In the Latin American case, “great” leaders have never achieved the type of high idea-acceptance, as prescribed in Willner’s model. Simon Bolívar (1783–1830) finished his military career disillusioned with the region’s lack of support for his republican ideals.¹⁷ From his perspective, the Americas were not ready for the liberal republican governments that he had fought to establish. Bolívar’s leadership skills won praises in the battlefield where soldiers readily accepted his idea of a free and united Spanish America. In the liberated cities, however, the political elite challenged his “greatness” and eventually drove him to depression and a sense of failure. However, Bolívar’s idea of unity in the Americas persists to this day. We find Bolívar’s concepts even in popular culture. In a recent concert, the popular Latin rock star, Ricky Martin, revved up the crowd by invoking the Liberator’s image: “One of his dreams was to unite the Americas, and we’re going to do some of that tonight.”¹⁸

The third dimension of the relationship involves “compliance” – the follower’s obedience to a leader’s directive. There are many possible reasons as to why followers obey, including respect for the law, fear of sanctions, and expectation of rewards. However, as Willner argues, followers comply with a great leader because for them “it is sufficient that their leader has given the command. If he has ordered, it is their duty to
obey.” Willner provides a tough standard from which to assess these relationships because the compliance dimension involves probing deep into the followers’ psyche to evaluate their motivations. Nevertheless, this dimension calls attention to the depth of commitment followers have for their great leader. If they consistently obey their leader over a wide range of directives, we can surmise then that the compliance dimension runs deep within the followers. *Aprismo* comes closest to Willner’s standard. The militant phase of Haya’s American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (*Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana*, APRA) in the 1920s and 1930s represented the strong belief by Haya’s followers that the transformation of the country could no longer wait.

The fourth dimension of a great leader-follower relationship involves the emotional commitment of the followers toward their leader. This “emotional dimension” gauges the intensity of feelings in a relationship and commitment to the leader’s vision. In particular, Willner argues that followers respond to great leaders with devotion and blind faith. These strong emotions, she adds, come close to religious worship. The cult of Che, for instance, has approached this level. As his body was brought back for final burial in Cuba in 1997, a devoted follower remarked,

In Che, I have found a kind of god because he embodies such sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice, which was death. When I seek inspiration to go on, this is what I see in his corpse. In this period of our history, when we are facing a tough economic crisis, we need to follow his principles of struggle and hope. We need the strength of Che.

Aside from these four dimensions that Willner discusses in her study of political charisma, we also need to point out that this relationship has a specific historical context. As K.J. Ratman argues, “In many cases it may be relevant to look not at the leaders themselves but at their societies to explain their exceptional popularity.” The traditional conception of charisma, going back to Max Weber’s formulation, invariably includes some type of extreme social stress or crisis that serves as the background from which the charismatic leader rises. As Willner argues,

If political authorities seem unwilling or unable to cope with or alleviate the crisis, people become alienated from the political system and susceptible to the political appeal of a strong leader who can be seen as the symbol and the means of rescue from distress.

This classic interpretation of the generation of political charisma ties great leaders and their followers to a specific historical condition (crisis situation and followers’ distress) that opens the system to the possible development of a sociopolitical phenomenon, under which an aspiring leader offers his/her vision of deliverance. Bolívar took advantage of Napoleon’s control over the Iberian peninsula in the early 1800s to foment his wars of liberation. Likewise, Eva María Duarte Perón built on economic crisis in the 1930s and her husband’s popularity to fight for “los descamisados” – the shirtless ones – in Argentina. Getúlio Vargas pursued a similar strategy in Brazil by mobilizing the labor movement on the heels of the Great Depression and the collapse of the landed
aristocracy. Che Guevara’s rise to prominence cannot be separated from the Cold War as an underlying context influencing U.S. policies in Latin America.

While Willner accepts the general tenets of the conventional formulation (Weberian), she argues that it does not adequately emphasize the role of the leader as “active initiator” in the relationship. While the conventional formula assumes the existence of crisis prior to the rise of a leader, Willner stresses the possibility of a crisis induced by a leader. The former places the emphasis on context, while the latter focuses on the element of leadership as a catalyst. Bolívar, for instance, brought fighting to Peru through his vision of liberty from Spanish rule, even though the local elite seemed content with the status quo.

Another important element of “great” leadership, which Willner does not provide sufficient discussion of, is the dynamic nature of historical context. Willner’s focus is on creative leadership as a catalyst in the making of charisma. This proposition is particularly important in explaining the rise of great leaders to power. However, we cannot discount the element of continuity; that is, what happens to a great leader after power is attained? Many great leaders, who reach office with wide acclaim, leave the same office in disgrace.

In Bolívar’s case, for instance, he retired disgusted with the way his republican vision had been subverted by the regional caudillos. Bolívar’s vision was a contradictory one. He amassed power, including the title of “Supreme Dictator,” in order to realize his vision of a united Spanish America. Yet, the more power he used to stave off anarchy, the more despised he became. In the end, the same adoring crowds that once welcomed the Liberator eventually cheered his exit from Lima in 1826.

Why is it that so many of these great leaders are unable to sustain their vision and go down in history as failures? A possible explanation lies in what Conger calls the “dark side” of charismatic leadership. The advantage of the great leader – impatience with the status quo – can also become a liability: “a price must be paid for such impatience. In large organizations, the charismatic’s intolerance for the status quo may alienate others.” As great leaders attempt to make dramatic changes, opponents balk in predictable fashion. The more power a leader uses to attain his/her goal of transformation, the more his/her vision becomes associated with the leader’s personal political survival. Eventually, perception changes and followers become disillusioned with the “dictatorial” methods of their once-considered “great” leaders.

Once the initial crisis that propelled the leader to office is overcome, such as the end of Spanish rule or hyperinflation, power and the image of “greatness” are used to control the political system, thus compromising the transformational gains. As Weber argues:

It is usually the wish of the master himself, and always that of his disciples and, even more, of his charismatically led followers to change charisma and the charismatic blessings of his subjects from a once-for-all, extremely transitory free gift of grace belonging to extraordinary times and persons into a permanent, everyday possession. The inexorable concomitant of this change, however, is a change in the inner character of the structure.
Ultimately, opponents attempt to undermine the success of great leaders. Amid gridlock and opposition, the great leader centralizes more power in order to remain effective; that is, popular. In the end, vision is lost and power politics takes over. Candidates for the title of great leaders, therefore, are well advised to leave the scene before this historical shift takes place, thus guaranteeing their perpetuity as the defender of their original vision. Such were the cases of Vargas in Brazil, Evita in Argentina, and Che in Bolivia. Bolivar, however, had the unfortunate experience of a slow decline in his health, and in the meantime, witnessed his power and prestige slipping away.

Levels of Analysis

The previous discussion of transformational leadership and the development of charismatic relationships suggest three levels of analysis that can be used to study “great leaders” as both art and science. First, we have to investigate “greatness” imbedded within a human experience. This human level presupposes the common linkage – humanity – that exists between the leader and the individual. Leaders are born, bleed and die like everybody else. Second, leaders seem to have certain traits that stand out when compared to average humans. Despite the critics maligning the “great-men theory” of many decades ago, we continue to be fascinated by leaders, regardless of gender or race, who seem to have a prodigious memory and a “natural” ability to connect with followers. Third, we have to take into consideration a “meta-human” level of analysis; that is, the way followers (and even societies) elevate their leaders to a historic level, beyond even their seemingly superhuman abilities. At this level of analysis, society itself creates myths and legends that bestow “greatness” to certain leaders.

1. Human Level: Great leaders are associated with ordinary deeds that we all share, particularly those that characterize our human experience on earth – life and death. This “ordinariness” is important because it is essential to our understanding of our leaders’ behavior. We celebrate success in the midst of adversity, but we characterize certain experiences as “adversities” precisely because of our recognized limitations as human beings. The “great-men” theorists of the last century and recent studies on charisma often fail to recognize this important quality in great leaders.

There were no angels singing to shepherds in the fields when Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna was born in Rosario, Argentina, on June 14, 1928. Likewise, the earth did not tremble when he was killed in Bolivia on October 9, 1967, following his capture by counterinsurgency troops. In between these two events, Che suffered from asthma – a debilitating condition that tested the limits of his physical endurance.

Before she met Juan Perón and rose into popular acclaim, Evita was a minor actress with little prospect for great stardom. She had to struggle for many years to develop her acting career. She rose to prominence in the radio industry, which placed her in contact with the military government that came to power in the 1940s. Otherwise, she would have become a minor footnote in the country’s history. Her death from cancer at the age of 33 also provided another human connection to her followers, who felt robbed by fate of many more years with their popular leader.
2. **Superhuman Level**: Great leaders are associated with extraordinary deeds that elevate them above ordinary life. These deeds are usually a product of unusual personal characteristics (e.g., high endurance and energy levels, ability to communicate a goal) combined with specific historical circumstances that provide the perfect mix that give rise to great leaders. The two components (personal characteristics and specific historical context) are imperative. The “great-men” theorists often underestimated the latter, while overestimating the former. The situational theorists underestimated the former, while overestimating the latter. In studying “great” leaders, we need a balance between the two.

In Che’s case, for instance, if he had chosen to stay in Argentina and practice medicine, as he had been trained to do, we would not be writing about him in this paper. However, his decision to explore Latin America, coupled with events in Guatemala in 1954, eventually put him in touch with Cuban exiles in Mexico City, which led to his inclusion in the Gramna expeditionary force that ultimately toppled the Batista dictatorship in 1959.  

Given a certain combination of circumstances, great leaders emerge. History is filled with leaders with impressive personal characteristics who did not face historical conditions that tested their creative abilities. Likewise, we also find leaders who were only recognized as “great” once faced with specific situations. For instance, when Getúlio Vargas came to power in 1930 through a military coup, he was considered an unimpressive leader brought to power largely through his connections with the Rio Grande do Sul elite conspiring with the generals. However, once he amassed enough power to extend his tenure in office, his political ambitions blossomed to the point that he deeply transformed the country from an agricultural oligarchy to an incipient industrial power. Every Brazilian president since then, including even the military leaders in the 1964-1985 period, have drawn from the Vargas leadership model of extending the power of the executive vis-à-vis the other branches of government.

3. **Meta-human Level**: While we appreciate their humanity, we also elevate them above that same humanity. Artistic expressions play a role in developing the myths and legends associated with great leaders. This paradoxical process of detachment – canonization, some might say – instills the reverence and status that great leaders attain in history. In his August 1954 suicide note, Vargas was well aware of this dynamic, when he wrote: “Serenely I take my first step on the road to eternity and I leave life to enter history.” Great leaders often have to die before they reach this third level, because it is through their death – usually a dramatic event in itself – that they gain a symbolic status as a “great leader.” In reflecting on their lives, we impart certain leaders with ideals and dreams that may not have been articulated at the time. Or, the leader himself/herself may embody the dreams of a society, thus representing the collective aspirations of the whole.

The martyrdom quality of sacrifice and death elevates our leaders to the level of saints. It was this fear that led military officials to ship Eva Perón’s body to Italy for an obscure burial site in the 1950s. When Che’s body was found in Bolivia in the 1990s and brought back to Cuba in 1997, Che was eulogized once again throughout Latin America as a symbol of the commitment to the struggle against injustice and oppression. He was presented as an example – someone whom others should strive however imperfectly to emulate – knowing that there can only be one Che!
The true test of a great leader, therefore, is his/her staying power – the way societies make him/her live in their collective memory through artistic expressions (e.g., poems, film, theatre, literature). Therefore, the study of great leaders is always an art work in progress because memories may fade with time, or, as a result of historical revisionism, may grow. Revisionism also runs the risk of manipulation by certain leaders who want to gain personal political advantage. Artistic expressions serve as the “barometer” for the “greatness” of a leader within a society. Therefore, the study of great leaders is always an artwork in progress because memories may fade with time, or, as a result of historical revisionism, may grow. Revisionism also runs the risk of manipulation by certain leaders who want to gain personal political advantage. Artistic expressions serve as the “barometer” for the “greatness” of a leader within a society.

This meta-human level can also affect the way we use the superhuman level of analysis. Superhuman qualities may be given to undeserving leaders. The cult of personality – the study of great leaders has to be mindful of this possibility – affects the way history is written. For instance, Fidel Castro exploited Che’s image as a way of boosting his own image in the 1990s, as Cuba faced a difficult economic transition following the end of the Cold War. Under Mexican President Alvaro Obregón’s careful plan to court the agrarian sector in the 1920s, Zapata went from “el Atila del Sur” (the Attila of the South), as the Mexican conservative press characterized him during the early revolutionary period, to the “defender of Democracy;” or the Great Sacrificed One;” or even “the Apostle of Agrarianism.” Today, Zapata is revered in Mexico as a great leader even to the point of appearing on the country’s currency.

Concluding Remarks

This essay has explored the nature of “great” leadership. The suggested three levels of analysis draw from the different approaches that have been articulated over the past decades since leadership studies began in the early years of the 20th century. These three levels take us from the most basic human condition – life and death – to the mythological realm produced through collective memories in artistic expressions. In between these two points, we should strive to understand the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers.

The study of “great leaders” is always a work in progress. We should be prepared to demystify those who have been canonized by history in order to understand the humanity of the subjects. At the same time, we need to understand the historical processes and collective angst that give rise to mythologies around “great leaders.” Not surprisingly, this academic enterprise lends itself to controversy. Many so-called “great leaders” turned out to be not demigods but demons incarnate, but that is a topic for endless debate: was Bolívar seduced by his own ego to become the Napoleon of the Americas? Was Vargas a manipulative schemer who took advantage of the poor? Was Evita a whore or a saint? Was Che an angel of liberation or an agent of the Evil Empire? Ultimately, great leadership – as in the beauty of art – is in the eyes of the beholder (potential follower).
NOTES

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3 Max Weber helped establish the foundations of modern sociology. See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). Weber looked at questions of authority, status and legitimacy. He offered three ideal-types of leadership styles: (1) charismatic; (2) traditional; and (3) rational-legal. As societies evolved, they would move from the first type through the second and achieve the third type, which he saw as the pinnacle of “modern society.”


Willner, 7.


Willner, 7.


25 Willner, 43.


30 Conger, 5.


34 See, for instance, Tomás Eloy Martínez’s macabre comedy, *Santa Evita* (Madrid: Alfaguara/Santillana, 2002).


For instance, Madonna, Antonio Banderas, Jonathan Pryce, and Jimmy Nail starred in the 1996 motion picture *Evita*, based on the musical play by Andrew Lloyd Webber.