I say that we can affirm that all that is fundamental and effective that has been achieved in the Republic of the United States is the work of man; and therefore I say that all can be attempted and realized among other peoples, within the sense, currents, ideas and compromises of the contemporary Era, taking into account, as to how it is applied, the singular elements and very particular conditions of the locality, the environment and the exigencies of History.

*Rafael María de Labra*, *La República de los Estados Unidos de América*, 1897

In the late nineteenth century the United States of America was habitually invoked by an epithet: in Spain it was the *gran república* or *república-modelo*; in Britain, the “great Republic of the West”; in Spanish America, *la gran república del Norte*. This image—of the United States as the model republic—was one of the most widely circulated in Europe and Latin America in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Constitution, the institutions, and the democratic practices of the United States lay at the core of contemporaries’ understandings of what that country represented in its modernity. When outside observers debated aspects of the United States, whether it was the issue of slavery, the state of the economy, or striking railroad workers, more often than not the underlying subtext of these discussions was the opportunity that they provided for either lauding or discrediting the United States as a model or anti-model republic.

The political actors of nineteenth-century Europe and Latin America, especially reforming and radical liberals, operated within deeply cosmopolitan networks for the circulation and exchange of ideas. Popular expressions of republicanism likewise drew upon an international
vocabulary and set of symbols. After the revolution of 1868 in Spain, for example, when numerous towns and villages declared themselves “for the republic,” a French traveler observed young republicans wearing “Garibaldian shirts,” witnessed the symbolic planting of the US federal flag alongside the Spanish one, and heard shouts of “Viva la República francesa” to accompany the ubiquitous vivas “a la República Federal.” The ultimate symbol of international republicanism was Giuseppe Garibaldi, who had cultivated an iconic status as a romantic political hero since his exploits on behalf of Latin American independence movements in Europe and the Americas. In the United States itself, Phrygian caps, habitually worn by Marianne, adorned the US national seal and featured in Washington Irving’s *Rip van Winkle*, whose eponymous hero awakes to find be-capped Americans celebrating their new republic.

The place occupied by images of the republic in the United States among Europeans and Latin Americans must be located within this transnational circulation of people, texts, ideas, symbols, and practices concerned with democracy, liberalism, national unity, and independence. The United States often perceived itself as the originator of an exportable political model, but it faced severe competition for the mantle of *república-modelo*. In the minds of both political reformers and grassroots republicans the political model of the United States jostled and competed with the models and symbols of French, Swiss, Italian, and classical republicanism as well as, in many cases, with a locally developed version of liberalism and/or republicanism. In addition, the British political system of constitutional monarchy was much admired for its liberal values, political tolerance, parliamentarianism, and cabinet decision making. Indeed the two—the British and the US political systems—were frequently conflated as originating from the same “Anglo-Saxon” political tradition. This was certainly the view taken in France, where among liberals it was rather a question of individual taste than of principled disagreement whether one looked across the Atlantic or across the Channel for political guidance. In Britain itself the “Anglo-Saxon” roots of American republican institutions were taken for granted, both by supporters and detractors.

While there may have been broad agreement that the US version of republicanism and democracy was at least one significant touchstone for anyone interested in developing more modern forms of government, there was little consensus as to how the founding documents, principles, and practices of the United States should be understood, or what exactly was the key to the seeming success of the US political system. The political model of the United States came to prominence in different countries in Europe and Latin America at different times, and was seized upon by different political groups—conservatives as well as liberals and radicals—with