

MARCELA ECHEVERRI AND CRISTINA SORIANO

Introduction

Rethinking Latin American Independence in the Twenty-First Century

Two hundred years ago, in 1825, Bernardo Monteagudo, a revolutionary publicist from Buenos Aires who supported José de San Martín and later became Simón Bolívar's interlocutor and ally, wrote an essay in which he reflected on the "extraordinary epoch" that *América* was experiencing.¹ "Each century," he wrote "brings with it the seeds of those developments that will unfold in the following century. . . . The Revolution that has swept the American world stems from the development of ideas that emerged in the eighteenth century, and our triumph is nothing more than the repercussion of the bolts of lightning that struck the European thrones that dominated the rest of the world."² For Monteagudo, the profound and radical changes experienced in different Spanish American regions (from Mexico to Chile) in the nineteenth century, which gave place to their definitive independence from Spanish domination, were tightly and deeply connected to the Era of the Revolutions that had transformed Europe and North America in the previous century.

In his proposal for the creation of a confederation that could unite the various regions of *América*, Monteagudo acknowledged challenging impediments, "The immense distances separating the various sections that are now independent nations, and the difficulties of all sorts that obstruct communication and potential collaborations for the provisional governments, have postponed the project of a general confederation."³ In addition, he stated that the relatively scarce knowledge that communities in the southern regions had about *americanos* north of the equator, and vice versa, had kept them increasingly isolated from each other and ignorant of their particular histories and circumstances. The American regions that previously were part of the Spanish monarchy were indeed diverse, complex, and

dynamic and, according to Monteagudo – who was assassinated before he could finish his essay – if the emergent leaders of these regions wanted to create a “Hispanic American Confederation,” they needed to be aware of the common past and present threads that connected these regions, and willing to experiment with an original political program that could guarantee the preservation of the independence and sovereignty of the new nations.⁴

The idea of an Hispanic American confederation had different genealogies, including the early vision of Francisco de Miranda for a continental Colombia and Simón Bolívar’s own attempt to bring it to life through the Panama Congress, which he convoked soon after Colombia claimed independence.⁵ Both Bolívar’s and Monteagudo’s projects for an American Confederation encountered a fervent and stiff resistance; the failure of the 1826 Panama Congress cast a heavy shadow over any future confederation plan. By the 1830s, the emerging national projects in Gran Colombia, the United Provinces of Central America, Mexico, the Empire of Brazil, Chile, and the United Provinces of Río de la Plata turned their backs on those shared realities that used to connect the American regions among themselves, and more so, sought to distance themselves from their past links with the Iberian world. However, Monteagudo’s consideration of Latin American independence within the Era of Revolutions that shook the western world, as well as his reflections on its longer temporality (which included eighteenth-century ideological forces and crises), invite us to take a step back and reconsider Latin American independence in a larger and more comprehensive context, one that can help us distill, analyze, and restore the geopolitical dimensions of this process, its uniqueness, and the complexity of its outcomes.

The field of Latin American independence historiography has undergone a major renovation in the past three decades precisely by having reframed the region’s transformations during the nineteenth century in an Atlantic context. The rich works by and profuse dialogue among historians in Latin America, Europe, and the United States in the late twentieth century were fueled by new questions about the revolutionary character of the independence processes from an imperial perspective. Building upon these contributions, the chapters in this *Companion* explore the intersections of the study of Latin American independence with several crucial historiographical subjects. These include the approach to the Age of Revolutions from Latin America, the study of Atlantic geopolitics in the nineteenth century, as well as research on science, gender, the public sphere, and labor.

The main goal of the present volume is to offer a critical introduction to current studies about Latin American independence while also expanding the field in new directions. The authors in the *Companion* are therefore taking up subjects that are fundamental to the study of the region in the period known as “independence” both from a deep historiographical perspective and from a contemporary, and moreover forward-looking, view of the field. From the foundational texts penned by the protagonists of the process in the nineteenth century through works of historians in the twentieth century, the independence wars have been the subject of historical narratives and inquiry addressing questions such as the chronological depth of the colonial crisis, Enlightenment thought in relation to scientists’ and intellectuals’ anticolonial and republican visions, the fluid transatlantic networks of these intellectual and military actors – including freemasons – central to the revolutionary processes, and the Iberian colonial legacies that impacted state formation across Latin America. There were shifts in the approaches to these questions during the mid twentieth century with the rise of social and economic history that focused on class and fiscal affairs. While in some cases critical of the patriotic narratives of the nineteenth century, for the most part these histories continued to uphold views of the nation as the unit of study.⁶

In the last decades of the twentieth century, political history regained importance as it blended with social and cultural theory and expanded the very meaning of “the political” for the study of the past. At the core of this new historiography stood the question of anti-colonial or independence revolutions, which required scholars to revisit, from multiple regional perspectives, the complexity of what is known today as the Age of Atlantic Revolutions. The foundational paradigm of R. R. Palmer became an important springboard from which scholars of Atlantic history revisited questions of political modernity, social transformation, and institutional innovation, reinventing conceptual tools for the study of the revolutionary Atlantic world.⁷

Latin American historiography of the process of independence (1810–1825) has been at the forefront of this generative revisionist school, and has demonstrated the potential of two particular shifts in perspective: First, the expansion of the regional frame to include the Iberian Atlantic offers a more complex representation of the cycle of revolutions that led to the emergence of new republics in the Americas and the reordering of Atlantic societies – of which these were part – around liberal and republican principles.⁸ Second, the adjustment of the analytical lens at the micro

level in the study of Latin American independence allows us to focus on social sectors that played critical roles in the configuration of the new republics but were generally excluded, or had their participation distorted, in traditional histories.

Giving special importance to the years of the crisis of the monarchies in 1808–1810, this most recent political history's reinterpretation of the independence processes based on an imperial / Atlantic perspective has definitively freed narratives from the teleology of nation-formation. In Jeremy Adelman's words, "As empires gave way to successor systems in their colonies, those regimes began to call themselves nations not in order to cause imperial crises, but as the result of such crises. The study of imperial crises and the study of the origins of nationalism in colonial societies should inform each other more than they do."⁹

So, what was the depth of this imperial crisis? Monteagudo was correct, the eighteenth century had certainly brought important transformations for the Spanish and Luso-American worlds. The noticeable growth by the end of the seventeenth century of the population in most of these regions provided the necessary labor to respond to an increasing global demand for American goods, boosting in turn the economies of these provinces. While in the Andean region and Mexico the economy shifted from mining to a relatively diverse agricultural production, in Portuguese Brazil, the attention moved towards mining activities in the western part of the country, as the importation of African enslaved labor continued growing. In backwater regions such as Venezuela and Río de la Plata, planters discovered the economic potential of commercial crops such as cacao, sugar, tobacco, and other products such as cattle and leather goods that could be easily transported and commercialized in Europe. The Bourbon monarchs, who had recently occupied the Spanish throne in 1700, recognized the economic potential of its American possessions and, inspired by Enlightenment principles but also responding to circumstances on the colonial context, designed a series of reforms – commonly known as the Bourbon reforms – to optimize imperial administration and secure larger revenue for the crown.¹⁰ In a similar fashion, during the eighteenth century, the Portuguese monarchs developed new administrative measures under the guidance and administration of the royal minister, the marquis of Pombal; these were known as the Pombaline reforms. For both Spanish and Portuguese monarchs, the ultimate goal of the reformist projects was to increase imperial revenue and strengthen their empires' economic power by promoting colonial exports in the European markets, raising taxes, and

reducing bureaucratic corruption in the American colonies. “There were,” says Gabriel Paquette for the case of Spain, “state-led attempts to overhaul the navy, improve and expand the army and colonial militias, revamp coastal fortifications, modify university education, enact a less regulated trade regime, boost mineral yields, encourage export-led agricultural production, and wrest control of Church property and patronage.”¹¹ As Sinclair Thomson argues in this book (Chapter 1), these reforms did not merely respond to metropolitan interests to establish a top-down European “modern” system, but were also the product of reflections on the problems and challenges to colonial rule that had erupted on the ground in the Americas during previous decades.

The increased vigilance and administrative control over American labor, land, and resources, the imposition of new criteria of economic efficiency, and the growing disciplining of social practices brought about by the reforms raised discontent among the population that inhabited different corners of the Spanish American and Brazilian territories; the reactions, however, varied by region and by socioracial group.¹² While some members of the white creole elite embraced the new ideas that promoted government efficiency and economic growth, others resented the imposition of new geopolitical administrative divisions that restricted their power and undermined their authority locally. White planters and merchants in Venezuela, Buenos Aires, and Cartagena, for example, benefitted from the attention that the Bourbon monarchy paid to their ports and economic activities, but some also denounced the increasing control that Spanish authorities and commercial companies had over certain economic activities, and advocated for more open, fair, and flexible market rules. On the other hand, though the crown’s centralizing thrust was grounded in legal changes that brought paternalist discourses closer to subordinated groups like indigenous, mixed-race, and black communities, these groups bore the brunt of the new taxes and of the implementation of more severe controls.¹³ The Bourbon reforms, for example, increased the tribute that indigenous communities were supposed to pay, while curtailing old mechanisms that these communities had used previously to avoid the burden of paying tribute. New commercial taxes were imposed too on small traders and merchants, and local authorities were stricter in the collections of such taxes, and new mechanisms of collection were implemented. Although the African and African-descent populations were not required to pay tribute, new commercial taxes on transportation and trading affected them notably. Both the Bourbon and the Pombaline reforms increased the hardships of most of the

population in the Americas. It was not long before diverse groups began to organize protests and openly rise up against the colonial state and everything they perceived as unfair governance.¹⁴

As Thomson shows in Chapter 1 of this book, following the 1765 “Rebellion of the Barrios” that erupted in Quito, the decade of the 1780s witnessed the *Comunero* rebellion’s spread in parts of New Granada and Venezuela, while the impressive movements of Túpac Amaru, Tomás Katari, and Tupaj Katari extended throughout the southern region of the Viceroyalties of Peru and Río de la Plata (today Peru and Bolivia). Although traditional historiography has held that the latter movements, composed of different socioracial groups including white creoles, mestizos, indigenous and black people, did not question the legitimacy of the distant Spanish king and merely demanded “good and fair government,” Thomson offers compelling evidence that the rebels’ discourses were often ambiguous – as they appealed to diverse constituencies – and that some leaders expressed radical statements that showed a clear rejection of Spanish colonial domination, as calls for a legitimate Inka ruler became more frequent. In addition, the series of demands that accompanied these movements – such as the suppression of forced consumption, elimination of tribute and monopolies, and even the emancipation of slaves – show that they were anticolonial campaigns that called for a new political order that could overcome the critical abuses and oppression exercised by the colonial government. As Spanish authorities in Spain and in the Americas managed to control the crisis with a combination of repressive strategies and negotiation, on the Atlantic side of the continent, the spread of information about the North American and French Revolutions, and the Saint-Domingue rebellions fanned the fires of revolutionary politics in Spanish America and Brazil.

In December 1789, Venezuela’s captain-general warned the authorities in Madrid that since the previous August “gazettes, dailies, and supplements from or about France, providing news about current events in Paris, have entered Venezuela.” According to him, the “evil designs” of these texts represented a danger to the province and he was ready to use all possible means to protect the territory from the “revolutionary contagion that has shaken the world.”¹⁵ During the same year, Cuban colonial authorities worked tirelessly to confiscate foreign newspapers that might spread word of the revolutionary events in France among the population, including illiterate groups of color who relied on open readings and oral debates.¹⁶ Colonial authorities in Havana, Caracas, Cartagena de Indias, Rio de

Janeiro, Lima, Mexico, and Buenos Aires expressed concerns about the circulation of revolutionary information among the local population, arguing that in meetings and public spaces such as the markets and the streets, foreign newspapers and pamphlets with news about the French Revolution were not only read aloud to curious listeners, but were also transcribed and spread among the population.¹⁷ Foreign and locally produced papers, however, were not their only source of concern, as colonial authorities also denounced that the official newspaper *La Gazeta de Madrid* – widely read in the Spanish Caribbean region – offered detailed and “dangerous” information about both the French and the Haitian Revolutions that could incite sedition and insubordination among local groups.¹⁸

During the 1790s, several French and Haitian-inspired “conspiracies” were uncovered in different urban centers in Latin America, such as Buenos Aires, La Guaira, Cartagena, and Salvador da Bahia.¹⁹ In all of the cases, colonial officials realized that groups of discontented laborers, artisans, and even enslaved people met regularly with French immigrants and other foreigners in private homes and in semi-public spaces to read and debate not only about the events of revolutions, but about how ideals of liberty and equality would change their fate. Official records of the inquiries revealed that the insurgents translated foreign writings and produced a considerable number of materials designed to instruct their followers in the principles of their movements. Among these documents were local texts, such as proclamations of insurrection, poems, stories, letters, songs, as well as translations and adaptations of foreign documents like the “Declaration of the Rights of Man.”

As Thomson shows in Chapter 1, for decades prior to 1808 there were protests at the local and regional level in Spanish and Luso America that strongly challenged metropolitan privilege and colonial rule. These movements combined local struggles against imposed socioracial hierarchies, questioned the legitimacy of royal authorities, and even claimed rights for political autonomy and self-rule. Most of these late eighteenth-century movements promoting alternative projects – whether for indigenous rule, republicanism, independence, socioracial equality, or abolitionism – have been perceived and depicted within the Latin American Independence historiography as weak, isolated, fragmented, and disavowed. Yet as we open up the scope to analyze a larger temporal context of Latin American independence and its connections with the Age of Revolutions, it seems clear that these movements shaped the contemporary political landscape and left strong marks on Spanish and Portuguese communities on both sides of

the Atlantic. Spanish and Portuguese imperial rule struggled to contain, control, repress, or negotiate with rebellious and subversive actors who questioned the status quo and called for major change. Among colonial authorities, there was an urgency to bring back peace and order, but they also recognized a shift in the political scenario. These changes shaped the political actions and decisions of contemporary actors in Spanish- and Portuguese-held territories well before the Spanish throne was usurped by Napoleon and the Portuguese court was forced to move to Brazil.

The Napoleonic wars in Europe (1807–1808) triggered an important crisis within the Iberian monarchies that radically impacted the American possessions, opening a new and unstoppable phase of transformation. In November 1807, Napoleon – now emperor of France – invaded Portugal with the support of Spain. Facing the threat of capture, Prince Regent João of Portugal accepted the protection of the British to evacuate the royal family and the entire court from the Iberian Peninsula and transplant them in Rio de Janeiro. Brazil's economic prosperity offered a comfortable and secure environment to protect the crown and the court and, overall, to secure the preservation of the Portuguese empire. The presence of the Portuguese court in Brazil certainly inaugurated a new chapter in the Luso-American world, one that was characterized by an increasing imperial control, but also by the development of new institutions and intellectual, technological, and bureaucratic innovations that generated changes within Portuguese and Brazilian political culture.²⁰ For example, as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Neil Safier discuss in Chapter 5, the presence of the Portuguese monarchy on American soil brought about the transformation of discourses and practices related to technological innovations and scientific engagements that went from the operation of the first printing presses in Brazil to the foundation of important institutions like scientific academies and intellectual societies. This transformation went hand in hand with an imperial interest in improving the exploitation of natural resources, increasing enslaved labor, and the optimization of agricultural production and industry. João of Portugal, for instance, opened Brazilian ports to international trade in February of 1808, a complementary decree followed in April when he authorized manufacturing in Brazil.²¹ In addition, as Marcela Ternavasio discusses in Chapter 2, the moving of the seat of the Portuguese monarchy to the American territory also initiated a chain of events that opened debates about the appropriate constitutional structure that should be put in place, as well as questions of political representation among both peninsular and American inhabitants.

Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 followed a different path than in Portugal and had divergent effects both in Spain and Spanish America. After imprisoning the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, and his father Charles IV in Bayonne, in the southwest of France, Napoleon ordered his brother Joseph to fill the Spanish throne. Napoleon's capture of the Bourbon monarchy, however, activated a series of actions and events that escaped his control. Based on the Spanish principle that in the absence of their legitimate king sovereignty transferred back to the people (*el común*), local elites formed governing juntas in different Spanish and American cities. The members of these juntas swore to protect the rights of Ferdinand VII while acting as temporal governing bodies. It was in this context of invasion and war with France, that Spanish and Spanish American government officials and intellectuals inaugurated an intense period of political debates in which they produced new ideas about constitutionalism, the idea of the "nation," citizenship and patriotism, and liberalism.²² As José María Portillo discusses in his chapter (10), it was Joseph I who provided the first constitution for Spain, but most Spaniards who rejected the dynastic and constitutional changes joined efforts to create a Supreme Central and Governmental Junta of the Kingdom, known as the *Junta Central*. In Spain, the *Junta Central* coordinated the Spanish resistance from Cádiz, while in the rest of the country, Spanish guerrillas resisted and fought against the French troops. The Spanish monarchy undoubtedly faced an extremely complicated challenge, the product of the combination of a dynastic crisis with a constitutional one, and both the peninsula and the American territories were deeply affected and transformed by this inter-imperial war. They were also at the core of the "mutation" that occurred with the formulation of a constitution that could govern in the absence of the monarch. The Constitution of Cádiz was drafted by the Cortes with representatives of all Spanish possessions, proclaimed in 1812, and led to a revolution at all levels of government across the monarchy.²³

The effort to maintain an empire-wide unity through constitutional rule and establish, as Ternavasio calls it, "a bi-hemispheric nation," asserts the relevance of the imperial perspective on the period. As Adelman wrote, "the nation did not necessarily define itself in opposition to empire" but rather in a dialectical political dialogue in which American developments also shaped profoundly the European structural shifts.²⁴ In this line of inquiry, contributions in this *Companion* by Ternavasio (Chapter 2), Caso Bello and Paquette (Chapter 8), and Portillo (Chapter 10), discover new layers of the Atlantic and Iberian perspectives on the themes of representation,

liberalism, and the view of Latin American independence from the peninsula, and they insist on the importance of the integrated imperial / Atlantic lens for studying the period. This is also fundamental to the current historiography that focuses on royalism in the revolutionary age, which accounts for the transformative processes unleashed by the Spanish liberal charter and other dimensions brought about by the war. Because experimentation and negotiation of loyalty were fundamental to politics in the period, people of all classes mobilized in defense of the monarchy.²⁵

On the other hand, the series of events that the “Napoleonic moment” brought about in the Iberian monarchies opened divergent, yet parallel, paths for Spanish America and Brazil that need to be studied and analyzed with integrative and comprehensive lenses. In the last twenty years, historians like João P. Pimenta, Jeremy Adelman, Gabriel Paquette, Antonio Annino, Marcela Ternavasio, Manuel Chust, and Ivana Frasquet, for example, have shown us that an integral scope that considers both the Spanish American and the Luso-Brazilian independence developments allow us to better understand how the process of independence unfolded in Latin America by observing connections between actors from the Portuguese and Spanish realms.²⁶ Pimenta’s work has suggested that instead of repeating the assertion of an obvious singularity of the Brazilian case, it is more productive to inquire into the impact of the Spanish American independences on Brazil, and vice versa.²⁷ In this spirit, the chapters in this book have all pursued the goal of studying Spanish America and Luso-America together, within the context of the Atlantic Revolutions and through different thematic lenses. In particular, the chapters by Marcela Ternavasio (Chapter 2), Ernesto Bassi and Fabrício Prado (Chapter 3), Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Neil Safier (Chapter 5), Karen Racine (Chapter 6), and Álvaro Caso Bello and Gabriel Paquette (Chapter 8) have emphasized those historical connections between the actors and processes involved in both realms.

As Brazil witnessed the unique and unprecedented historical experience of its transformation from colony into a center of imperial power, Portuguese authorities and officials became increasingly concerned with the effects of the Spanish monarchical crisis in America, a territory that, in their views, was not only vulnerable to a potential French domination but that was about to confront its own transformational crisis. The multiple commercial networks that connected Brazil with regions of Spanish America, such as Montevideo and Buenos Aires, allowed for the circulation of rumors, news, and papers that informed the Brazilian public about the