

# The Americas on the Eve of the Independence Movements

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In dealing with this broad topic, a first major problem that we should, at least, take into consideration, has to do with periodicity: How far back should historians be concerned with when we talk about the “eve of the Independence movements”? We probably could reach very different conclusions if our attention were to be focused on the more immediate context of Napoleon’s invasion of the Peninsula rather than in the Bourbon reforms, the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or the impact of the French Revolution, let’s say, in the Caribbean (Haiti) or Venezuela. In other words, not unlike what happens when we deal with the series of events of 1808-1810 and their projection into the 1820’s and thereafter, we ought to take into account the different extensions of “times and speeds” that come into play in the period previous to the collapse of the monarchy and the creation of *juntas de gobierno*. Both after, and on account of, Independence, there seems to be a heightening or speeding-up effect which clearly divides waters between Colonial rule on the one hand, and nation and state building on the other, but this does not necessarily mean that everything accelerates at the same pace.

Moreover, given that regional and local differences are also key historical factors, an obvious question is sure to follow: How far can we “globalize” the late-imperial experience? Evidently, there is still an Empire to contend with well up-to the break-point which takes place in 1808-1810; however, if one thinks this out a bit more, one begins to wonder if we should take it at mere face value. A closer look might allow a more complex picture. What was happening in the

River Plate region or in the Caribbean (or to be more precise, in Buenos Aires and Saint-Domingue) bears comparison with what was going-on, at the same time, in Mexico, Peru and Chile? The point I am aiming at, here, is to question somewhat some of the premises with which we usually work. Perhaps there are sufficiently good reasons to conceive this late Empire as a powerhouse of various and multiple changes which, nonetheless, did not, could not, guarantee an over-all common effect on this other side of the Atlantic beyond an all acceptance of progress, modernization, and a greater sensitivity and proclivity to far-away dictates along reformist lines with different doses of authoritarianism.

All in all, my impression is that, in the light of what was to follow after 1808-1810, to look-back at the last stages of imperial rule implies that there are a number of phenomena which were taking place then which could help us explain why Spanish America eventually became an assortment of fragmented states, why republicanism ended-up imposing itself as the legitimating political doctrine *par excellence*, and, finally, why this subsequent greater autonomy or independence, however successful it may have been, did not lessen our interdependence with other imperial powers.

There is also the question of loyalty. If we tend to accept an over-all absence of disaffection or infidelity in this period why, then, did we eventually go to war with Spain or with those who proclaimed themselves in favor of maintaining the traditional links with the metropolis? Was this loyalty conditional, and if so, what were the terms of these conditions? Or better still, how did the Crown do it, maintain the necessary equilibriums that favored this loyalty while at the same time allowing a greater openness in some cases? Needless to say, accepting and concomitantly demanding metropolitan reforms, has often been interpreted as a determinant in weakening local Creole

obedience to authority. Perhaps, we should not be so assertive when arguing this position. Loyalty becomes politically contingent, and after 1808-1810 all seems to point to a confused scenario where no one in particular could demand or impose it.

External stimuli: A whole line of conventional treatment concerned with this aspect seems to think that the period before the constitutional crisis gave us, Spanish-Americans, a hint, if not an irresistible impulse towards the future; exactly what subsequent events, certainly Independence, confirmed in its effects. On the other hand, more traditionalist or Hispanicist currents tend to underplay this external influence. Is this a pointless debate or should we take a look at it once again?

All in all, to what degree could we say that the 18<sup>th</sup> century is equally crucial than what follows after? The tendency to emphasize the importance of Independence as a foundation of our modern and contemporary world most probably derives from a retrospective and doctrinaire argument, phobic in its rejection of the Spanish past, that prefers to assimilate –rather too slippery perhaps– Independence with revolution. But we know that many of the leading figures of Independence were intent in wanting and trying to avoid a social revolution from happening in the former Spanish colonies, attempts –all of them serious– which in the long-run tended to be successful. Consequently, it might be useful to speculate up to what point some of de Tocqueville’s theses can be applied to the Latin American case. This not to deny the turning point significance of Independence, but rather to put it in a wider context permitting us to appreciate not only its purely disruptive effects but also the long lines of continuity arising from the previous century.

However noticeable is the impact of Independence in politics and government well into the decades that follow, we are still talking about literary, artistic and cultural figures which were intellectually schooled and became visible in the period immediately preceding it. What does this say about a possible prolongation of an earlier stimulating creative milieu irrespective of the subsequent disruptive consequences that Independence brings about? Some of these figures accommodate well to the new set of circumstances, but it is not entirely implausible that, in many other ways, they simply carried-on working according to paradigms that they valued or thought to be still viable. Once again, the argument here tries to put into perspective the too often clear-cut distinctions we tend to make concerning periods, supposedly because Independence is simply incomprehensible unless we understand it as an irrefutable watershed.

Violence: How violent was pre-Independence Spanish America and how much does rampant fury before the crisis of sovereignty accounts for the bloodshed and bitter feuds which explode after 1810? The point has recently been argued by Jeremy Adelman questioning the view that, indeed, there was a Pax Colonial. However, as I read it, this explorative thesis admits limits; violence is a precondition for more violence, but it is arguably a determinant for an all-out revolutionary scene.

Hence, the question of the significance of the period just before Independence has to be seen in the light of an overall persistence of an *ancien régime* well beyond that dividing line. Again, the point I shall try to argue here is that Spanish American Independence can hardly be seen as a revolution, irrespective of the possibility that it could very well have turned into one. Quite the contrary, a number of factors seem to point to its opposite: elite or

oligarchic rule still within the bounds of a traditional society intent, though, in modernizing itself; something they learned or became conscious of when they were still under Spanish rule.

Yet another way to validate some of these points is to see the experience of regions or countries which show a greater continuity between periods; definitely, Cuba, but also Chile, though granted, to a lesser degree in this last case. In other words, we should take into account situations, conditions, trajectories, which could serve as analytical counterfactuals of an otherwise normative behavior that may have been not so, or at least, not so distinct, universal or unquestionable. I mention Chile because it was a relatively successful early case of institutionalization of power while at the same time, it fits perfectly well with pretty much the same changes, innovations and reforms brought about by Independence.

This is a tentative advance outline or preview of some of the topics that I would like to explore in my turn at the table.