

Atlantic Revolutions, Constitutionalism, and Liberalism during the Spanish American Independence Movements: An Ambiguous Legacy

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Revoluciones hispánicas and the Atlantic Approach

During the “constitutional explosion” that took place in Spanish America (1811–1825) in the context of the independence movements, dozens of constitutional documents were drafted. During the first five years alone, more than thirty constitutional documents saw the light in the region. Yet, it is only in the last two decades that this fecund constitutional period has received scholarly attention. This attention is long overdue, for the importance of this “constitutional explosion” can hardly be exaggerated from the perspective of political history, as well as intellectual history.¹ The renovated study of the *revoluciones hispánicas* since the 1990s has fueled some of the most dynamic fields in contemporary Western historiography. Atlantic history and, more specifically, the study of the “Atlantic revolutions” have contributed in this regard. The four Atlantic revolutions that are considered the most important are the independence process of the Thirteen Colonies, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the Spanish American independence movements. As is well known, these four revolutionary processes, along with all the others that constitute the Age of Revolutions, represent the birth of political modernity.

Two issues are important before proceeding. First, it is still possible to find books on the Age of Revolutions that exclude the Spanish American independence movements from the Atlantic revolutions and the Age of Revolutions in general. A recent example is *Rivoluzione*, by the well-known Italian historian Enzo Traverso.² Second, the Atlantic character of the Spanish American independence movements stems mainly from its political and military origins in Peninsular Spain in 1808. The *crisis hispánica*, which began that same year, can be considered the starting point of those movements. In fact, the expression *revoluciones hispánicas* is unintelligible without considering the multiple connections that existed between the Spanish liberal revolution of 1808–1814 and the Spanish American emancipation processes.³ This perspective is now well established in Western historiography, but that was not the case before the historian François-Xavier Guerra started to write about these topics at the end of the 1980s. Guerra's *Modernidad e independencias*, published in 1992, can be considered the beginning of a whole new way of looking at this period of history in the Spanish-speaking world.⁴ In concrete terms, it represented a historiographic approach to a period in which the metropolis (i.e., Peninsular Spain) and its territories in America would no longer be viewed in separate or isolated terms but as the unity they constituted until 1810 or thereabouts (depending on the Spanish American territory considered)—as a single empire, the *monarquía hispánica*, that had, by that year, existed for almost three centuries.

The Atlantic perspective, which has received so much attention by Western historiography during the last decades, has made plenty of important contributions (regarding such topics as slavery, commerce, and migrations, among others); but like any other historiographic perspective, it should also be viewed with a critical eye. This has not been the case when Atlantic history deals with the Age of Revolutions and, more specifically, the Spanish American independence movements. The provisos or caveats I have in mind stem from some of the methodologic premises of the Atlantic approach, particularly its marked emphasis on continuities, sequences, and

analogies.⁵ These emphases are understandable because the approach itself requires the entity as a specific way of studying the Age of Revolutions. However, sometimes these assumptions go too far. This should come as no surprise to the approach's practitioners, for as Bernard Bailyn, one of the "fathers" of Atlantic History, wrote in a well-known book on the topic, "in an effort to find patterns in this multicultural history one runs the risk of exaggerating similarities and parallels unrealistically."⁶ It is worth adding here a geographical datum—namely, that more than half of the shores of Spanish America face the Pacific, not the Atlantic. It is considering this and several other issues that Brian Hamnett has expressed that it is "misleading to position the totality of Ibero-American experience within a narrower 'Atlantic' framework." In the introduction to a book devoted to the end of the Iberian empires, Hamnett immediately adds that the study of several aspects of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies during the Age of Revolutions "require parallel elucidation rather than subordination to a model that may well have outlived its original usefulness."⁷

In the case of the Atlantic revolutions, several authors suggest that a single revolutionary wave began in the Thirteen Colonies, jumped all the way to France, then to Haiti, and finally to Spanish America.⁸ The chronology of this wave, which spans from 1775 to 1825, and the way in which it is sometimes studied may make us think that there are causal links among these revolutionary movements. That may be the case when we consider the French and the Haitian revolutions, but the rest of the processes are not as connected as some historians tend to think. There are certainly evident connections in specific areas (commerce, for example), but the connections are not as constant, strong, meaningful, and consequential as certain historiographies suggest.⁹ My goal here is to nuance the magnitude of these revolutionary links and their purported implications. Some "Atlanticist" historians tend to forget that the speed of maritime transportation did not change much between Roman times and the eighteenth century (land communication was even slower). Besides, with the dangers and vagaries of

transatlantic shipping ever-present, a very small number of people could travel or did in fact travel; furthermore, language barriers hindered the kind of communication that some Atlantic and global historians rather frequently seem to assume. Given all the aforementioned elements, could the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century be as connected as is sometimes asserted? To insist on a point already made: it is not a matter of denying a considerable level of communication or intercommunication during the Age of Revolutions but of putting on the table some nuances and caveats that, inevitably in my view, should lead to a more cautious historiographic attitude.

The Spanish American revolutions were the last of the four Atlantic revolutionary movements. Yet significant differences from the other three characterize the Spanish American revolutions. Therefore, any sequential proposition about the Atlantic revolutions should be taken with more than a grain of salt.¹⁰ True, the Spanish American revolutions are to some extent linked with the French Revolution because Napoleon, who can be considered an “illegitimate son” of the French Revolution, and, more particularly, his invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808 represent, in retrospect, the starting point of the Spanish American independence movements. But this link could be considered relatively remote. The crisis of the Spanish monarchy in fact began in autumn 1807 when French troops occupied the Iberian Peninsula, an occupation that turned into an invasion in spring of the following year. This became a crisis of such magnitude that in a matter of days the Spanish Crown changed hands from Fernando VII to Carlos IV. Then Napoleon decided the monarchy’s fate, and the crown literally ended up on the head of his older brother, Joseph, who in July 1808 became “José I, rey de España y de las Indias.”

Almost all Spaniards, Peninsular and American, viewed the foreign king as a usurper. Their lack of recognition provoked a series of political declarations throughout the Spanish territories, basically stating that Spaniards would never accept José I as monarch. However, not long after, political leaders in some Spanish American territories expressed their desire to establish a new

relationship with the metropolis, one that would be politically and economically advantageous for both parties. It should be underlined, however, that during the first years of the *crisis hispánica*—though the chronology varies from one Spanish American territory to the next—the goal was not absolute independence from Spain. This final objective would take some time to develop, though, again, timing varied considerably among the different administrative entities of the Spanish monarchy in America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At first, all the territories sought something more akin to autonomy or emancipation than to independence as we understand it today.

The Spanish American revolutions were not initially motivated by issues of taxation and political representation (as in the case of the Thirteen Colonies) or by fiscal concerns (as in the French Revolution), much less by anything related to slavery (as in the Haitian Revolution). They were not organized against a king, as in the Thirteen Colonies at first or in the secondary stage of the French Revolution. In fact, the Spanish American emancipation processes started as movements of a completely opposite nature: their aim was to support Fernando VII, whom Spaniards considered their legitimate king. Nor were the Spanish American revolutions preceded by anything similar to an intellectual and cultural process like the French Enlightenment or by the “revolutionary temper” that characterized Paris several decades before the French Revolution, a period described by Robert Darnton in a recent book.¹¹ In other words, there was no “revolutionary sequence” linking Philadelphia, Paris, Saint-Domingue, and Mexico City or Buenos Aires, at least not in the magnitude that certain recent historiography suggests. The Spanish American revolutions, in short, resulted from an occupation in European territory that in spring 1808 turned into an invasion and, finally, into the imposition of a foreign king on the Spanish throne. From there, the *crisis hispánica* evolved in unpredictable ways for all the actors involved, until by 1824—that is, sixteen years later—seven new republics had emerged in continental America (this number would increase to eleven by 1830 and to more than fifteen by the end of that

decade). After 1824, Spain's American territories were reduced to the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico.¹²

In ideological terms, the Spanish liberal revolution (in its two phases: 1808–1814 and 1820–1823) and the Spanish American independence movements (1810–1824) meant the beginning of the end of the *antiguo régimen* and the birth of liberalism in the Spanish-speaking world. In fact, the term *liberal*, with a political connotation, was first used in Cádiz, where the Cortes (congress or parliament) met from 1810 to 1814 and where the 1812 Constitution was promulgated. From there, the term expanded to the rest of Europe and then to the rest of the world. This first Spanish liberalism, like any other historic liberalism, did not come forth like Athena from Zeus's brain—that is, completely formed. It had to find its way, it evinced ambiguities, and it did not “comply” with the liberal credo in a very important aspect: religious freedom. Article 12 of the Cádiz constitutional document established the Catholic religion as the only one permitted in the new constitutional monarchy. All the constitutions promulgated in Spanish America would follow the Peninsular example in this important aspect.

The Spanish liberals should be understood in their own context, acknowledging the specific history of the society in which they lived, organized, and developed. We must take into consideration not only Spanish history since the Middle Ages but also Spain's role in the Counter-Reformation, the centuries-old coalition between the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church, and, most important, the specific political context against which the Spanish Peninsular liberals were reacting: the *antiguo régimen*. Only this context will enable us to assess the accomplishments and the failings of the Peninsular and American deputies who drafted the Cádiz Constitution and who, in the most unexpected of situations, tried to put an end to the divine right of kings that had defined and sustained the Spanish monarchy for centuries and replace it with a radical new notion: national sovereignty. Constitutional monarchy in Spain and republican institutions in Spanish America tried to leave behind the *antiguo régimen*; to do that, the emerging liberals on both sides of the Atlantic considered liberal principles as an

invaluable weapon and used them accordingly. The successes and failures of Spanish-speaking liberalism during the first decades of the nineteenth century thus compose a complex, interesting, and unique story.¹³

Following the path of Peninsular liberalism is easier than examining that of Spanish America, because in Cádiz there was a political group that called themselves *liberales* and were also defined as such by their political adversaries. This was not the case in Spanish America during the independence movements. It would take some time before a political group in the region called itself liberal and even more time for a political party to explicitly embrace liberalism as a political credo. This was so because, among other reasons, liberalism was just developing in the region. Yet liberal political notions, values, and principles expanded throughout the territories of the Spanish monarchy between 1808 and 1824. This important presence of liberalism very often appeared hand in hand with republicanism in the Spanish American case, making them the two most influential political ideologies during this period. Both were useful ideological and political instruments in the struggle against the structures and institutions of the *antiguo régimen*.

Of course, other ideologies existed during those years. Already mentioned was republicanism in the Spanish American context, but conservatism also played an important role, for not everybody agreed with the doctrinal and political revolution that in 1808 began to take place in the *mundo hispánico*. Reactionary ideologies also played a role, very often with the enthusiastic support of the Catholic Church, especially its high hierarchy.¹⁴ As suggested and contrary to some accounts, in Spanish America liberalism and republicanism were, in institutional and constitutional terms, very often indistinguishable during the independence period and beyond. At the same time, liberalism could also easily be reconciled with conservative positions, depending, of course, on the political or social issue in question.¹⁵ Nationalism also played a role, though a much more important one in the Peninsula than in Spanish America.¹⁶ This can be partly explained because Peninsular Spaniards fought for their survival as a nation during the *Guerra de*

la Independencia (War of Independence), a five-year-long war (1808–1813) against the best army of that time, Napoleon's. This war represented the birth of Spanish modern nationalism. In Spanish America, by contrast, nationalism was almost nonexistent when movements against Spain started in the region around 1809 and the more so in 1811, when some territories began to seek independence. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the different administrative entities that divided the Spanish Empire in America could not have developed a sense of community that could be defined as nationalist in any meaningful sense.

Because almost any generalization about the independence movements in Spanish America risks missing the mark, at this point it is important to briefly mention the different entities that constituted the Spanish Empire in America when the *crisis hispánica* began. Notwithstanding the final result (independence and republicanism) and the common elements that these entities shared (language, religion, social habits, and type of governance), the different movements were far from identical or even interchangeable. In this short article, it is impossible for me to delve into the numerous differences among the seven entities that can be easily identified during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century: New Spain, Central America, Venezuela, New Granada, Peru, Chile and River Plate.¹⁷ These entities correspond to the following political and administrative divisions: the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the Captaincy General of Guatemala, the Captaincy General of Venezuela, the Viceroyalty of New Granada, the Captaincy General of Chile, the Viceroyalty of Peru, and the Viceroyalty of the River Plate. These territorial units changed greatly from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and overlapped with the administrative entities in which the empire was subdivided, especially the *audiencias*. Besides, it should not be forgotten that at the time, the notion of borders or boundaries as we understand it today simply did not exist.

Any generalization should be made with caution, as will become evident when we review certain aspects of the independence movement in New Spain. This movement was headed by a

few priests and was thus much more traditional in several doctrinal and political aspects than almost any other insurgencies in South America. Differences among the territories became more evident as the emancipation processes progressed and the territories defined themselves vis-à-vis Peninsular Spain. It should not be forgotten that the various Spanish American political entities were constantly in conflict throughout the whole independence period. The cement originally holding the territories together—the recognition of Fernando VII as the legitimate king and the hatred for the French usurper—gradually lost strength in the Spanish American context. Little by little, political leaders in the different territories decided to find their own way out of the *crisis hispánica*. The initial unanimous Spanish American reaction to the crisis of 1808, to safeguard the sovereignty for the absent king until his return to the throne, gradually lost ground in the *mundo hispánico*. Viewed from America, the Peninsular situation seemed helpless from a military perspective, and logically, many Spanish-Americans felt that their political survival was at stake. Therefore, in several territories Spanish American political leaders began to view absolute independence as a desirable and even attainable goal.

For evident reasons, Spanish Peninsular liberalism could not turn to French authors or ideas, at least not openly. The republicanism adopted by both the North American revolutionaries and the French revolutionaries since 1792 necessarily diminished their doctrinal and ideological influence in metropolitan Spain. The situation was different in Spanish America. Some of the several constitutions drafted in the Thirteen Colonies and the 1787 Constitution of the United States were known in certain territories (as is well documented in Venezuela and New Granada), and some French constitutional documents exercised considerable influence on the Constitution of Cádiz. At the same time, Neo-Scholastic thought, modern European authors of the school of natural rights, and certain aspects of the Spanish Enlightenment could also be found in the doctrinal and ideological mixture that nurtured the political thought of the Spanish liberal revolution of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The most important of the several doctrinal and ideological strands within early Spanish liberalism was historic nationalism, or *nacionalismo histórico*. This current of thought started to play a significant role with Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, the most important of the Spanish Enlightenment thinkers. This happened several decades before the *crisis hispánica*; once this crisis began in 1808, it was developed by Francisco Martínez Marina and Agustín de Argüelles. Marina, a thinker and politician of fluctuating political sympathies, wrote two books regarding Spanish medieval history, both fundamental for the interpretation of *nacionalismo histórico*: *Ensayo histórico-crítico sobre la legislación y principales cuerpos legales de los reinos de León y Castilla* (1808) and, most important, *Teoría de las Cortes* (1813). With these two works, the Spanish medieval representative institutions or Cortes were transfigured into significant political bodies that, according to Marina's interpretation, played a decisive role in diminishing kingly power. This ideological and historiographic operation became an essential ideological and political device with the deputy Argüelles, the leader of the liberal group in the Cortes of Cádiz (1810–1814). He was the main author of the *Discurso preliminar a la Constitución*, considered by many historians to be the most important document of early Spanish liberalism.¹⁸ This *Discourse* clearly lays out the liberal assumptions, contents, and objectives of the *liberales* who controlled the Cortes until 1813. This group had the upper hand in the congressional gathering that was responsible for drafting the Cádiz Constitution, also known as the Constitution of 1812.

When considered in detail from a doctrinal, ideological, and political perspective, the *revoluciones hispánicas* do not easily fit into the model of a single revolutionary wave that swept the entire Atlantic between 1775 and 1825. The main objective of the Spanish liberals was to turn an absolutist monarchy into a tricontinental constitutional one (with the inclusion of the Philippine Islands), and therefore they were very far from North Americans and their anti-monarchic Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, until 1815 the Spanish monarchy was not able to send troops in important numbers to America as the English Crown did in North

America. Besides, the Spanish American revolutionaries did not receive the support that France, Spain, and Holland gave to the North American rebels. In fact, very few Peninsular soldiers were stationed in the subcontinent when the *crisis hispánica* began. It should also be remembered that the number of Peninsular Spaniards in America was negligible. This means that the wars for independence in Spanish America were fought, overwhelmingly, between Spanish Americans, not between Peninsular Spaniards and Spanish Americans. This means that the confrontations that took place during the emancipation processes in the region between 1809 and 1824 were, fundamentally, civil wars, a fact often ignored or set aside by traditional Latin American historiographies.

Another distinctive aspect of the Spanish American revolutions in the Atlantic context was the diversity of socioethnic groups that existed in the subcontinent. This diversity has no equivalent in either the North American or the French cases. This makes the *revoluciones hispánicas* seem more like the Haitian Revolution; but on further reflection, this analogy fails, as the Haitian Revolution was primarily fought by slaves against slavery. In any case, the socioethnic diversity of Spanish American societies had many consequences during the independence movements. This is particularly the case in those societies with a considerable number of inhabitants of Indigenous or African origin. Besides, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, an extensive and profound racial mixture existed due to the inevitable miscegenation that had been going on in Spanish America for almost three centuries.¹⁹

A word on the Haitian Revolution and its peculiar relationship with the Spanish American independence movements is in order. In a very important sense, what happened in Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804 was the most radical of all the Atlantic revolutions, for its main motive was ending slavery, a scourge that had accompanied humankind for thousands of years. However, it was precisely this social radicalism and its evident social explosiveness that horrified Spanish American leaders. With few exceptions, those leaders said that a social revolution resembling that of

Saint-Domingue should be avoided at all costs in Spanish America. The last thing the Creole elites in the region wanted was to upend social hierarchies. Of course, they sought the removal of the Peninsular Spaniard elite from positions of political, social, and economic power, but they had no intention of radically transforming Spanish America's social structure.

It may be important to add that during the last fifteen years, the study of the Haitian Revolution has been idealized, giving a picture that in very important aspects does not correspond to what actually took place in Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804. This idealization ranges from an otherworldly image of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the most important Haitian leader, to the purported republicanism of the Haitian revolutionary movement.²⁰ The most recent biography of Toussaint, Sudhir Hazareesingh's *Black Spartacus*, has an unmistakable hagiographic character.²¹ On the topic of republicanism, David Geggus, one of the foremost contemporary experts on the Haitian Revolution, writes the following: "Far from being driven by 'democratic ideals,' the revolution that grew out of the slave uprising was authoritarian from beginning to end. . . . The politics of Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe were unapologetically authoritarian."²²

Given the foregoing, we cannot uncritically accept the "continuity" thesis, which proposes direct connections between the three Atlantic revolutions mentioned and the Spanish American independence movements. Political and intellectual historians should acknowledge that links between the other Atlantic revolutions and the Spanish American independence movements are less significant than what is often suggested. The sequences, continuities, and analogies assumed by some Atlantic historians are not as evident nor as meaningful as they suggest. Their tendency to find connections at every turn may lead to facile comparisons and to generalizations about a single Atlantic revolutionary wave that tend to give the Age of Revolutions a more linear, more homogeneous, and therefore less complex trajectory than it had. In fact, if we accept the traditional 1775–1825

chronology, in its span of fifty years this age encompassed a large number of processes. The *revoluciones hispánicas* were integral to these, and this fact should increase the historiographic caution suggested here.²³

Of course, one cannot deny the presence of important similar elements in the four Atlantic revolutions. Precedence in time, inevitably, had consequences in an Atlantic region that was very much interconnected commercially, especially in the Caribbean. But the fact that some political notions repeated themselves throughout the Age of Revolutions and that certain movements or processes occurred closely together should not necessarily make us establish causal relations, direct links, or meaningful connections among them. To mention only one example, certain concepts considered very important and influential in certain revolutions played subsidiary roles in others.²⁴

Before delving into the constitutional revolution that took place in the Spanish-speaking world, I want to make clear that I am not trying to encapsulate the *revoluciones hispánicas* in any sort of geographic or historiographic bubble. Instead, what I am suggesting is that the notion of a single Atlantic revolutionary wave may hide, even ignore, important peculiarities and significant specificities that characterize many of the multiple revolutions that constitute the Age of Revolutions. This fact affects the kind of generalizations that some Atlantic and global historians tend to make. In the sequential approach criticized here, the Spanish American revolutionary movements are arguably the ones least understood in their own right, if only because they were the last of the four major Atlantic revolutions.

To sum up, regarding certain issues, it is intellectually salutary to be less ambitious in historiographic terms and pay more attention to contexts and peculiarities. As Lester D. Langley wrote some years ago, "An inquiry uninformed by theory, I concede, may contribute little more than a narrative account. A study oblivious to the nuances of the particular and to the parallel complexities that an awareness of the place can inspire, however, can be sadly lacking in explanatory power."²⁵ Closer to us in chronologic terms, Richard

Stites wrote what follows in the introduction to *The Four Horsemen*: “This book, a narrative history of the revolutions in Spain, Naples, Greece, and Russia and their relationships, *has no overarching thesis or theory to bind it together*; the analysis changes from one topic to another.” And a few lines below, he adds, “The revolutions retold in the present book took place in three countries and one homeland of a subjected people: Spain, Naples, Russia, Greece. They shared some common ground, *though acute differences disallow any kind of universal applicability*, especially of the kind that bleeds into speculative history with alleged predictive power.”²⁶

The Constitutional Explosion in Spanish America

Between 1811 and 1816 many constitutional documents saw the light in Spanish America, mainly in the Viceroyalty of New Granada. Historians have identified more than thirty documents of this type, and that explains why the expression “constitutional explosion” seems appropriate.²⁷ This constitutional boom has no precedence in quantitative terms in Western history, although during the period 1776–1783, eleven of the Thirteen Colonies drafted a constitution. Several of them would eventually influence the 1787 Constitution of the United States, which began operating in March 1789.

In Spanish America, most constitutional documents drafted were efforts to give birth to the new societies that were emerging in the region. They were also declarations against any kind of despotism; they showed a genuine desire to put laws over men, and they expressed the idealism and optimism that characterized certain sectors of Spanish Americans societies at the time. The sheer number of constitutional documents drafted during the first years of the independence period is striking. However, one is cautioned not to exaggerate the practical consequences, the weight, and the social repercussions of several of these documents. This tendency to exaggerate is often perceptible in jurists and experts on constitutional history. This is understandable when we remember that the nineteenth-century political history of Latin America was often viewed as governed by two terms: *caos* (chaos) and

caudillos—that is, by political instability at the highest level, no institutional life, and the absolute predominance of strongmen. The Latin American and Latin Americanist historiographies of the last decades have attempted to show that the situation was much more complex and that elections and public opinion, among other things, played a larger role than many historians had thought. This historiographic reaction should not, certainly, imply ignoring the conditions that explain some of the limitations of the Spanish American constitutional revolution.

It is true that the sheer number of documents is impressive, no matter how we look at this process. However, upon looking closer, it becomes apparent that several of these documents were stillborn. The state of war, the profound disruption of social relations that it implied, the Sisyphean task of organizing elections under the circumstances that prevailed in almost the whole of Spanish America, the practical impossibility of finding a peaceful gathering place to discuss and draft a constitutional document, political and territorial disputes among Spanish Americans, internal squabbles among the patriot elites, the variability of the political and military situation in each territory—these are some of the factors that help explain why few of those constitutional documents had a real possibility of becoming the Magna Carta of any of the new nations emerging in Spanish America.

It should also be remembered that on several occasions the declarations of independence did not imply factual independence. Often, what could be considered real independence took more time and, in more than one case, another declaration. The progress toward full independence in Spanish America was relatively slow, as the following chronology shows: Venezuela (1811), Uruguay (1811), Paraguay (1813), Mexico (1813), Argentina (1816), Chile (1818), Colombia/Gran Colombia (1819), Peru (1821), Mexico (1821), Central America (1823), and Peru (1824). After 1824, Bolivia became independent (1825), then Uruguay (1828); and in 1830, Gran Colombia, the most cherished of Bolívar's political projects, disintegrated. As a result, Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador became independent countries (although as part of "Gran Colombia", they were already independent from Spain).

Once the new political legitimacy in the Atlantic world derived from national or popular sovereignty, congresses, elections, and constitutions followed promptly. Notwithstanding the aforementioned aspects, an impressive number of constitutional documents saw the light in Spanish America in a relatively short time. Starting in 1808, a “revolution of political legitimacy” began in the *mundo hispánico*, which was followed by a “print and public opinion revolution,” an “electoral revolution,” and finally the “constitutional revolution” that has been mentioned several times in this article. In due time, this revolution begat new elections and new congresses and then more new constitutions. These revolutionary political processes dramatically transformed the social landscape not only in Spanish America but also in many societies around the Atlantic world, in which political groups, social debates, free press, new journals, thousands of pamphlets, elections, congresses, electoral strategies, electoral frauds, representative institutions at different levels, political cliques, political quarrels, clientelism, public opinion, and new *sociabilidades* saw the light.

Constitutions were conceived in the Spanish-speaking world as a sort of panacea, as a mirage that made Peninsular Spaniards and American Spaniards believe that the mere proclamation of a new constitutional document would solve some of their problems. The Cádiz Constitution serves as a case in point. Several Peninsular liberals thought that the 1812 Constitution would bring about not only the political institutions, social attitudes, and economic practices they thought the monarchy badly needed but also understanding and peace with the American territories. It was simply too much to expect from a document, and as could be anticipated, the 1812 Constitution was unable to play the wished-for role that the Peninsular *liberales* in Cádiz thought possible and plausible.

Something similar can be said of other constitutional documents drafted in Spanish America. Reality superseded optimistic and naive expectations. In fact, the independence period marks the beginning of the proverbial distance between legal principles and daily practices that has existed throughout the region since then. Charles Hale, a well-known historian of nineteenth-century Latin

American ideas, calls the gap between liberal institutional forms and political practice “the hallmark of Latin American politics.”²⁸ A contemporary historian, Hilda Sabato, similarly notes that between independence and 1870, in the region “egalitarian norms did not materialize in egalitarian institutions or practices.”²⁹

If it is important not to idealize the Spanish American constitutional revolution, it is equally important to underline its significance for political, intellectual, and constitutional histories. Spanish American constitutionalism of the period is still very often approached merely in terms of its lineage and how much it owes to the constitutional experiences of the Thirteen Colonies or French revolutionary constitutionalism.³⁰ Yet in significant aspects—the definition of citizenship (specifically, the inclusion of Indigenous populations), the breadth of the franchise, some electoral provisions, emergency powers, and constitutional review—the Cádiz Constitution and several of the Spanish American constitutions of the independence period are profoundly original.

Within the Spanish-speaking world, it was common in Latin American historiography to enumerate all the limitations the Cádiz Constitution imposed on the Spanish American territories. Yet we must remember what is a truism offered by professional historians: historical events should be considered in their own context. If we study the ways in which for almost three centuries the Spanish American territories were treated (*de facto*, not *de jure*) politically and economically (i.e., as colonies), the improvements of the Cortes and the Cádiz Constitution regarding American societies are considerable. This perception goes beyond the 384 articles of the document, for it includes the hundreds of edicts promulgated by the Cortes between 1810 and 1814. It is true that the political and economic changes implied by the Cádiz Constitution did not go as far as the Spanish Americans wanted, but to even suggest that the Peninsular liberals were as imperialist as Fernando VII—a claim that noted anglophone historians once made and that is repeated to this day by some Latin American historians—ignores dozens of administrative, social, and economic measures that the Cortes adopted for the benefit of Spanish America.³¹ The inclusion

of the Indigenous population in the definition of citizenship adopted in the Cádiz Constitution, the number of Spanish Americans who could vote, and the elections at different levels that took place between 1809 and 1814 in many parts of Spanish America should suffice to show the unhistorical character of such assertions.

It is also important to note that the debates that took place in Cádiz from 1810 to 1814 were known and followed with attention in practically all the Spanish territories in America. This was the case even where some assume its influence was scarce, as in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate, a territory where very few Peninsular soldiers set foot from 1810 onward. As Marcela Ternavasio has stated, "[A]ll seems to indicate that the Cádiz experience had a strong presence in the revolutionary process of the River Plate."³² As documented by François-Xavier Guerra and other historians, the most important Peninsular liberal newspapers reached the most important cities in Spanish America during those years, even those territories that did adopt the 1812 Constitution. Besides, it is documented that they were widely discussed. In this regard, the de facto liberty of the press in Peninsular Spain since 1808, confirmed de jure by the Cortes in 1810, was of the highest significance.³³

Yet one must not exaggerate the presence of the Spanish liberal revolution and of the Cádiz Constitution in the Spanish American independence period, as Guerra did in some of his texts. In important aspects, the Spanish revolution could not be exported to Spanish American territories. Guerra tended to overemphasize what could be considered consensual aspects of political history (among them, public opinion, elections, and *sociabilidades*). The historiography of the last decade or so has shown that elements like violence and war must also be given a prominent place in our interpretation of the independence movements to give a richer and fuller portrait of the whole period. In the case of the Spanish American revolutions, political history must be complemented by social, economic, and military factors that also defined this era.

In discussing liberalism and constitutionalism in the Spanish-speaking world during the nineteenth century's second and third

decades, one must pay attention to early Spanish liberalism in general and to the Cádiz Constitution in particular.³⁴ Both liberalism and constitutionalism are almost unintelligible in the Spanish America of this period if we ignore the events, doctrines, ideas, and debates that took place in Peninsular Spain between 1808 and 1814, and then again between 1820 and 1823.

Taking a cursory look at the development of Western historiography, it appears that the study of certain political periods or processes follows a pendular pattern. The political history of nineteenth-century Latin America is no exception in this regard. From the days when *caos* and *caudillos* were predominant explanatory devices, we are moving at present to what could be considered an opposite interpretation—namely, that nineteenth-century Latin America was a region where constitutionalism, liberalism, republicanism, and citizenship were very much present. As usual, the facts lie somewhere between. In this regard, the importance given to language in contemporary cultural and intellectual histories has played an important role. However, it is important not to lose sight of political and social practices, in order not to intellectualize political history.³⁵

Hispanic liberalism, or more properly *liberalismo hispánico*, serves as a case in point. If we concentrate our interpretation of Spanish America during the first half of the nineteenth century on liberal principles, liberal discourse, and liberal constitutional arrangements, we will most probably perceive a coherent, solid, and socially ubiquitous liberalism. What can have more coherence and be more widespread than a constitution that is in principle going to be applied in a whole country and that will therefore affect every member of a specific society? Every constitution is, at the same time, a series of doctrinal principles, a set of political values (inter alia, individual rights and liberties), a certain discourse, and an ensemble of institutional arrangements. If we want to avoid presenting a certain historical period as much more homogenous, stable, coherent, and harmonious than it really was in political and social terms, we should also give what may be called concrete practices a prominent role in our interpretation. As French historian

Roger Chartier has written, “[N]on-discursive practices [are irreducible] to the statements that, in different ways, describe them, prescribe them or proscribe them, and try to organize them or control them.” Chartier is right to challenge the excessive heuristic weight that certain historiography has given to discourse. This goes hand in hand with his rejection of the linguistic turn and his vindication of what he calls the “radicalness” of facts.³⁶

The Case of the Viceroyalty of New Spain

Let us consider the political and constitutional experience in the Viceroyalty of New Spain during the independence period, a case that illustrates some of the points made thus far. New Spain was the richest and most important territory of the Spanish Empire in America (in economic terms, but also in population, urbanization, and educational institutions) and one of those in which the Cádiz Constitution was accepted and applied (at least in principle, though the war against the insurgents imposed serious limitations in its application).³⁷ New Spain also shows quite clearly the influence that metropolitan events had on other Spanish American territories throughout much of the independence period or, as in this case, in its entirety.

Unlike most other emancipation movements in South America, the revolutionary process in New Spain started not in the capital of the Viceroyalty but in a little provincial town called Dolores. This fact can be explained partially by the events that took place in Mexico City in September 1808, when a group of Peninsular merchants evicted the viceroy José de Iturrigaray through a coup, seeking to curb the city’s Creole elite from furthering their autonomist intentions. From that moment on, the Viceroyalty’s capital was under the control of royalist sympathizers. Two years after the events just mentioned, Miguel Hidalgo, the local priest of Dolores, started a movement not only against the Peninsular authorities of the Viceroyalty and the excessive taxes they had imposed on the population but also against the French and their purported atheism, as well as in favor of Fernando VII and against the spurious king imposed on the Spanish monarchy. It is not clear that Hidalgo

sought absolute independence from the beginning of his insurrection, as many Mexican historians have asserted.³⁸ Regardless, the uprising he started in September 1810 would change the face of the Viceroyalty forever.

Hidalgo was defeated in January 1811, made prisoner in March, and executed in July of that same year. But the movement he started continued under the leadership of another local priest, José María Morelos. Morelos maintained the notion that the war against the Spanish authorities and against the French usurper was essentially a religious war, but he differed markedly from Hidalgo in several important aspects. He organized an army that contrasted with his predecessor's improvised followers, many of them were disbanded and the rest turned by Morelos into a reliable fighting force. Around the end of 1812 or the beginning of 1813 (depending on the source consulted), Morelos sought absolute independence from Spain. He was not only a charismatic leader with considerable popular support, like Hidalgo, but also a sharp politician and even a statesman. He organized the insurgency not only in military but also in institutional and constitutional terms. He was responsible for the insurgent congressional convention of September 1813, eventually known as the Congreso de Chilpancingo. More important, the following year he oversaw the drafting process of the Constitución de Apatzingán, the first and only insurgent constitution in New Spain, which was issued in October 1814.³⁹ Because the Chilpancingo Congress had declared Mexico's independence in November of the previous year, the Apatzingán Constitution was drafted, in principle, as the Magna Carta of the new nation.

Morelos was ultimately captured by the royalist army in November 1815 and executed in December of that same year. With his death, the Mexican insurgency entered a hibernation period, until it reemerged in 1820 under the leadership of Agustín de Iturbide, who during several years had been the most successful royalist commander in the fight against Mexican insurgents. Iturbide would eventually become the liberator of Mexico, the *consumador* of its independence, and the first emperor of the country (though only for a brief period: May 1822–March 1823).⁴⁰

As mentioned, the Viceroyalty of New Spain was one of the American territories that accepted and applied the Cádiz Constitution. However, in May 1814, Fernando VII reinstated absolutism, annulled everything that the Cádiz Cortes had done, and persecuted, imprisoned, and even executed some Spanish liberals. This means that by the time the Constitución de Apatzingán was promulgated (October 1814), there was no clash between two opposing constitutions, but an insurgent constitution, on the one hand, and an absolutist regime, on the other. It was during the years that the Apatzingán Constitution was, in principle, applied in insurgent territory that the military and political power of the Mexican "rebels," as they were defined by the Peninsular authorities, was at its lowest. This, more than anything else, explains why the document had little application. Another factor that did not play in favor of its legitimacy was that the members of the Chilpancingo Congress were put in place mostly through appointment rather than election, because of the military situation in the Viceroyalty. Finally, the document quickly fell into oblivion: the drafters of the Mexican Constitution of 1824, the first one of an independent Mexico, did not take it into consideration. All these elements contribute to explain the secondary role that the document played in Mexican constitutional history. Yet, from the perspective of intellectual history, or the history of ideas, the importance of the Constitución de Apatzingán seems to me unquestionable.

It is impossible to review here all 242 articles of the Apatzingán Constitution. However, some aspects should be underlined. First, the document has an unmistakably liberal character, an aspect that is striking given the religious traditionalism of the Mexican insurgency. This traditionalism characterized the Mexican insurgency because, unlike any other in the whole of Spanish America, it was under the direction of priests: Hidalgo during the first months of the revolt and Morelos until 1815. Besides Hidalgo and Morelos, several other important leaders of the Mexican emancipation were also traditionally minded. In fact, the Mexican insurgents were the only ones in all Spanish America that rejected the abolition of the

Inquisition, which had been approved by the Cádiz Cortes in 1813 (indeed, some of the Mexican insurgents even proposed reinstating it).

In any case, the Apatzingán Constitution is a clearly liberal document in essential aspects. The drafters of the document themselves divided the text into eight “fundamental chapters”: the monopoly of the Catholic religion; the sovereignty of the nation; the rights of the people; the dignity of man; the equality, security, property, and liberty that every citizen should enjoy; the limits of the power of the authorities; the responsibility of public servants; and the character of the new laws.⁴¹ With the exception of the first aspect, all the others fall squarely within the liberal credo. The only exception is not a minor one, no doubt, but the monopoly of the Catholic religion in the Spanish-speaking world must be understood, as noted, in the context of Spain’s history since the Middle Ages and of the historic compact between altar and throne in the Spanish monarchy, an alliance that cannot be explained without delving into the protracted medieval process of *Reconquista* against the Arabs. The Cádiz liberals knew that they could not directly oppose the Catholic Church. However, in social aspects as important as education and freedom of the press, Title IX of the Constitution (arts. 366–71) clearly shows that *liberales* sought to end the monopoly in education that the Catholic Church had enjoyed for centuries and took the first clear legal steps to guarantee the freedom of Spaniards to publish without interferences of any kind.

Given that both the Cádiz Constitution and the Apatzingán Constitution were eminently liberal documents, the constitutional experience in New Spain can be considered integral to the revolutionary ideology par excellence of the Age of Revolutions: liberalism. Ideologies that appeared later in the nineteenth century, like Marxism, socialism, and social democracy, were identified with profound social changes. This perception ended up hiding or blurring the fact that liberalism was the most revolutionary ideology during the Atlantic revolutionary period.⁴² The intrinsic value of each individual, liberty, individual liberties, individual rights,

political equality, separation of powers, and constitutionalism formed a set of doctrines, principles, and ideas that accompanied and nourished the Age of Revolutions since its origins, which could be traced to the Bill of Rights of the English Revolution of 1688–1689 and which remained influential until the European revolutionary movements of 1848.

Gauging the profoundness of the political and ideological revolution that took place in the Spanish-speaking world between 1808 and 1824 is not easy.⁴³ One of the best ways of doing that is to study the political principles that gave life to the *antiguo régimen* and then analyze how the Spanish liberal revolution and the Spanish American independence movements turned these principles upside down, starting with popular or national sovereignty instead of the divine right of kings. Only by studying the *mundo hispánico* in historical terms can we grasp the period under study in political terms. In this regard, we must look beyond the restricted sense of the term *political* and pay close attention to political culture and to social practices, as well as to the doctrinal, ideological, and intellectual transformations that took place during those sixteen years. The profound changes experienced in the *sociedades hispánicas* in very important political aspects during those years do not deny the persistence of values, habits, and practices of the *antiguo régimen* in other social and cultural aspects of these societies, often for a very long time.⁴⁴ This persistence should not obscure the magnitude of the political revolution that took place in the Spanish-speaking world during those years.⁴⁵

Historic and Historiographic Issues That Touch the Twenty-First Century

Given the historiographic revolution that François-Xavier Guerra spearheaded in the 1990s, the growing number of historians examining Atlantic history and global history in many Western universities during the last few decades, and the fact that since 2008 we have seen an increasing number of titles published because of bicentennials commemorations, it can be said that the historiography of the Spanish American independence movements

is experiencing a rich and fructiferous moment. Important contributions have been made since the 1990s, not only by political and intellectual historians but also by those in other historiographic fields such as social, cultural, economic, and military histories. New authors, new approaches, new hypotheses, and new topics have deeply changed our understanding of the period. Of course, as is the case with any other process of considerable bibliographic productivity, academic quality varies greatly. Yet, in the Spanish-speaking academic world, the last three decades have seen numerous remarkable contributions.

The fields of political and intellectual history have seen great changes in the study of the *revoluciones hispánicas*. Today, political history is much more complex than it was in Latin American academia less than forty years ago. In addition, approaches in intellectual history, like those in the history of political languages and conceptual history, have deeply transformed the study of the Spanish-speaking world between 1780 and 1830. In Latin American academia, it can be said, political history is now much more “social” and intellectual history much more “contextual.”⁴⁶ The result is a less nationalistic, more diverse, more methodologically cautious, and more interdisciplinary historiography.

At this point, it is necessary to call attention to a rarely discussed but, in my view, fundamental issue regarding contemporary Western accounts of the Spanish American independence period: the global hegemony of the English language in scholarship. This hegemony in contemporary academia is so pervasive and apparently inescapable that very few scholars consider it a problem, much less a big problem. After studying the early decades of the nineteenth century in the *mundo hispánico* for almost thirty years, I am convinced that some of the best books and articles written about this period were written not in English but in Spanish. Yet, what do we most often find when we go to the bibliography of anglophone historians who study the Spanish American independence movements? Bibliographies that are 80 percent, 90 percent, or sometimes close to 100 percent in English. Given that a considerable number of the best texts on the period are in Spanish,

anglophone historians who are considered and consider themselves experts on the period face a serious intellectual challenge.⁴⁷

From an intellectual perspective, the English-language hegemony implies that we are losing something regarding the study of Latin American history. At this time, a limited number of historians and an even more limited number of anglophone universities decide what is being studied, from what perspectives, with what type of hypotheses, and with what kind of terminology. From my point of view, this represents a serious academic problem. This problem is exacerbated when the same group of historians from the same group of universities, with their peculiar academic baggage and specific methodologies, decide which debates are valuable and who can participate in them—decisions coming from academically “legitimate” institutions, reviews, or publishing houses. This is an issue that currently affects all the social sciences and humanities, but especially the study of the history of certain regions.

Anglophone historians studying Latin American history are advised to read more in Spanish, cite more Spanish-language texts, interact with Spanish-speaking historians, and start paying attention to what is going on in Spanish-language academia on the topic; otherwise, they are condemning themselves to an intellectual provincialism that is a direct consequence of their linguistic provincialism. Needless to say, exceptions exist, for the historiography on Latin America in English is rich and diverse, particularly in the United States. Finally, if we add the central issue of primary sources, even more problems arise when trying to research Latin American history, Atlantic history, or global history in a single language and from a handful of anglophone universities. This surely is not the best way to go in academic and intellectual terms.

To conclude, I want to return to Latin America’s present, setting my academic cap aside and expressing myself more as a citizen than as an expert on a certain period of Spanish American history. Today, Latin America faces enormous challenges, in part because of our history. Some of these challenges are as old as the independence we have enjoyed for two hundred years now. Latin Americans have long lived under various kinds and degrees of what

could be considered “political fictions”: republican institutions, liberal freedoms and rights, democratic principles, rule of law; furthermore, at present almost all the countries of Latin America consider themselves to be liberal democracies.

The French political scientist Alain Rouquié wrote in an introductory book to contemporary Latin America that “the most surprising and meaningful feature of political life in Latin America is not the coups d’état and the recurring social uprisings, or the somber persistence of lifelong presidents, or the innumerable fraudulent practices to ‘correct’ electoral arithmetic, but, unquestionably, the theoretic, platonic, and omnipresent attachment to representative institutions.”⁴⁸ Indeed, few things are so deleterious as political fictions if what a society is trying to establish is a liberal democracy worthy of the name. While there is no such thing as a perfect liberal democracy, Latin American societies have been living under political fictions for so long that at this very moment, building a solid structure of liberal-democratic institutions is proving to be a Herculean task in many countries of the region.

The numerous times that the expression “rule of law” (*Estado de derecho*) appears in Latin American newspapers, in the media in general, in conversations, during academic events, and elsewhere speaks to what many societies in Latin America desperately lack. Considering the existing levels of impunity, insecurity, and violence, the power of drug cartels, the situation of women, the rise of populist leaders (left and right), and the trampling of individual rights, as well as the levels of poverty and inequality throughout Latin America, it comes as no surprise that *Estado de derecho* is, so to speak, “the talk of the town” in almost the whole region. Practices that have accompanied the political fictions mentioned above will prove extremely difficult to eradicate. If, as suggested earlier in this article, the “problem of persistence” remains an academic issue regarding Latin American history, it also remains a political and social issue that we Latin Americans must face with the utmost earnestness if we do not want to wait another two hundred years to solve or at least significantly reduce the enormous political challenges and social deficits Latin America currently faces.

The legacy of the independence period in Latin America is an ambiguous one, not only regarding some social discontents but also considering another influential historic factor: the very active role that the military played in political life throughout the nineteenth century and during a good part of the twentieth. Although this role is no longer an active factor, countless sociopolitical issues need to be addressed. *Nolens volens*, Latin Americans must stop looking back and contrive, and put into practice, new ideas in order to relegate the “problem of persistence” to the academic sphere. In other words, we, the citizens of Latin America, must think and act “unhistorically” if we are to find adequate answers to the problems that beleaguer us today and that have, under different guises, beleaguered us since we achieved independence two centuries ago.

Notes

1. One of the first authors to give importance to this issue was José Antonio Aguilar Rivera. See *En pos de la quimera: Reflexiones sobre el experimento constitucional atlántico* (Mexico: CIDE/FCE, 2000).
2. In Italian, the subtitle of the book is *1789–1989, un'altra storia* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2021)—that is, *1789-1989, a Different History*. There are English and Spanish translations. In both languages the title and subtitle differ from the Italian version: *Revolution: An Intellectual History* and *Revolución: Una historia intelectual*. On the referred exclusion, see pages 121, 136, and 334 of the Italian version. For another example of this exclusion, see Julia Gaffield's preface to a book she edited: *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context, and Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), vii.
3. The first Spanish liberal revolution of 1808–1814 had a brief “second chapter” between 1820 and 1823, when the Peninsular liberals were able to regain power. In October 1823, Fernando VII, with the diplomatic support and military aid of the Holy Alliance, reinstated absolutism in Spain and in what was left of the Spanish monarchy for a second time in less than ten years.
4. In fact, the complete title of the book is *Modernidad e independencias: Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* (Madrid: Mapfre, 1992). See also a book he coordinated three years later: *Revoluciones hispánicas: Independencias americanas y liberalismo español* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1995).

5. Regarding historical analogies, it is worth remembering what David Hackett Fisher wrote in his classic book on historical reasoning: "Any intelligent use of analogy must begin with a sense of its limits." See his *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 258.
6. *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 62.
7. Both quotations in *The End of Iberian Rule on the American Continent, 1770–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 11. This book is the best overview written in the last decades on the final phase of the Ibero-American empires (i.e., not only Spain and Spanish America but also Portugal and Brazil).
8. For a very recent example of this approach, which also includes Africa, see Patrick Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution: The Fall and Rise of a Connected World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 5.
9. One of the best and last examples of this level of connectedness, which explains the whole Age of Revolutions on the basis of Atlantic entanglements, is Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution*.
10. The same applies, of course, to all the other Atlantic revolutions. Maybe the best way to realize how the Atlantic revolutionary world went way beyond the four revolutions considered here is to glance at the indexes of the three volumes of *The Age of Atlantic Revolutions*, ed. Wim Klooster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). The first one is devoted to "The Enlightenment and the British Colonies," the second to "France, Europe, and Haiti," and the third to "The Iberian Empires." In all, we have close to two thousand pages, by more than seventy experts, on the revolutionary Atlantic during the second half of the eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth.
11. *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748–1789* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2024). This is not to say that in Spanish America there were no grievances against the Peninsular authorities as a reaction to the Bourbon reforms or that the insurrections in Upper Peru and other parts of the Spanish Empire in America at the beginning of 1780s were unimportant. However, the uprisings were put out very soon, and in the end, they reinforced the alliance between the Peninsular authorities and the Creole elites. In my view, the Tupac Amaru uprising in particular was not the "revolution" that Nathan Perl-Rosenthal pretends it to be in his recent book *Age of Revolutions: And the Generations Who Made It* (New York: Basic Books, 2024). He goes so far as making equivalent the aforementioned uprising with what happened in the Thirteen Colonies at that time (see, e.g., page 102).

12. Diplomatic recognitions by Spain, however, would take a rather long time, starting with Mexico in 1836.
13. See my detailed study: Roberto Breña, *El primer liberalismo español y los procesos de emancipación de América, 1808–1824: Una revisión historiográfica del liberalismo hispánico* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2006).
14. It should be added that in Spain and Spanish America many priests took the side of the revolutionaries. As shown later in this article, however, the case of New Spain (i.e., Mexico) was particular in this regard.
15. An excellent example is none other than Simón Bolívar. On his political thought and notable perspicuity, see Roberto Breña, “Simón Bolívar, agudo analista de los dilemas americanos,” in *Liberalismo e independencia en la era de las revoluciones* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2021), 157–202. There are other notable examples; among them José de San Martín and Andrés Bello come to mind. Regarding Bolívar, a much more complex figure than what conventional historiography has made us think for a very long time, one of the best books available in English is *Simón Bolívar: Essays on the Life and Legacy of the Liberator*, ed. David Bushnell and Lester D. Langley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
16. What Benedict Anderson wrote about Spanish America as the cradle of nationalism in one chapter of his famous book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1984) has been historiographically discredited. In that chapter (“Creole Pioneers,” 47–65), Anderson posed that “pilgrim creole functionaries” and “provincial creole printmen” of the eighteenth century represented a nationalism that, he argued, preceded any other in history. Now we know that was not the case. On this topic, see Claudio Lomnitz, “Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson’s Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America,” in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 329–60; and François-Xavier Guerra, “Forms of Communication, Political Spaces, and Cultural Identities in the Creation of Spanish American Nations,” in *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 3–32.
17. In fact, at least two other cases could be added to the list: Upper Peru and Montevideo with its surrounding area. In very important aspects, like the military perspective, from a certain moment onward the cases

- of Venezuela and New Granada could be considered a single process. The man responsible for these two regions merging into a single independence process was Simón Bolívar.
18. The complete text of this very important discourse is included in *La Constitución de Cádiz (1812)*, ed. Antonio Fernández García (Madrid: Castalia, 2002), 195–270.
 19. A process in which, by the way, Peninsular Spaniards and American Spaniards or Creoles (inhabitants of Spanish descent born in America) also played a significant role. Regarding slavery, it is worth noting that the Cádiz Constitution did not abolish it and that most of the new countries that emerged during the independence period would take some time before abolishing slavery (in general, this happened around 1850). Chile (1823), Central America (1824), and Mexico (1829) were the exceptions in this regard, but it is worth noting that these territories had a relatively low percentage of slaves.
 20. Considering here not only Toussaint's famous Constitution of 1801 but also the one that the emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines enacted in 1805.
 21. The complete title of the book is *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2020). I refer interested readers who can read Spanish to my detailed review of this book, which can be found in *Historia Mexicana* 74, no. 3/295 (January–March 2025), <https://doi.org/10.24201/hm.v74i3.4646>
 22. "The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840*, ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97.
 23. I developed this critique in a detailed double-review of two recent books published by American historians: Griffin's *The Age of Atlantic Revolution* and Perl-Rosenthal's *Age of Revolutions*. At the same time, the review is a historiographic essay. See Roberto Breña, "La Era de las Revoluciones bajo la lupa: Análisis crítico de dos libros recientes de la historiografía estadounidense," which originally appeared in the Mexican academic review *Foro Internacional* 64, no. 4/258 (October–December 2024): 965–1014, <https://forointernacional.colmex.mx/index.php/fi/article/view/3112/3198>. A revised version, in English, will appear online very soon at <https://ageofrevolutions.com>
 24. E.g., the idea of consent, in the case of the revolution of the Thirteen Colonies, and the concept of nation, which played such a decisive role in the French Revolution. One good example in the case of the Spanish American revolutions regards not so much "the people" (*el pueblo*) as "the peoples" (*los pueblos*), something the French revolutionaries would

- have theoretically despised and would literally have fought against, as they in fact did against those who disagreed with the republican motto *la république, une et indivisible*.
25. *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 7.
 26. The subtitle of this notable book is *Riding to Liberty in Post-Napoleonic Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi (the italics in both quotations are mine).
 27. Whereas María Teresa García Godoy identifies thirty-three documents in her book *Las Cortes de Cádiz y América: El primer vocabulario liberal español y mejicano, 1810–1814* (Seville: Diputación de Sevilla, 1998), 26–27, other authors talk of more than fifty (without listing them). In the preamble to *Las asambleas constituyentes de la Independencia: Actas de Cundinamarca y Antioquia, 1811–1812* (Bogota: Corte Constitucional de Colombia / Universidad Externado, 2010), compiled by Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila, Mauricio González Cuervo mentions twenty-three *leyes superiores* (superior laws) drafted in Spanish America between 1811 and 1815 (eighteen of them in New Granada). The number given by García Godoy differs because she also includes constitutional projects.
 28. “The Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Politics in Spanish America: A Case for the History of Ideas,” *Latin American Research Review* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 65. In Spanish, this seminal article is included in *El pensamiento político en México y Latinoamérica: Artículos y escritos breves*, ed. Josefina Z. Vázquez and Gabriel Torres Puga (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 2010), 362.
 29. *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment in 19th-Century Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 181. The Spanish version is *Repúblicas del Nuevo Mundo* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2021); the quotation is on page 204.
 30. For a very recent example of this approach, see the chapter “The Constitutions Promulgated,” in Perl-Rosenthal, *The Age of Revolutions*, 405–26.
 31. This is exactly what John Lynch and Timothy Anna stated in their books, which were highly influential in Latin America for a very long time. See John Lynch, *Las revoluciones hispanoamericanas 1808–1826* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1989), 39 and 134; and Timothy Anna, *España y la independencia de América* (Mexico: FCE, 1983), 97 and 147.
 32. *Gobernar la revolución: Poderes en disputa en el Río de la Plata 1810–1816* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2007), 261n198 (my translation).

33. On this topic, see *La guerra de la pluma: Estudios de la prensa de Cádiz en el tiempo de las Cortes 1810–1814*, 3 vols, ed. Fernando Durán López et al. (Cadiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 2008).
34. In *Las asambleas constituyentes de la Independencia* (cited in note 27), Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila mentions that four of the American constitutional documents preceded the promulgation of the Cádiz Constitution of March 1812, but he also mentions that the Cádiz Cortes gathered first, in September 1810 (30). Irrespective of these chronologic issues, the Cádiz Constitution was the only one that was drafted during this period that aimed to govern the whole monarchy.
35. Interested readers can go to my essay “Las conmemoraciones de los bicentenarios y el liberalismo hispánico: ¿Historia intelectual o historia intelectualizada?,” in *Las revoluciones hispánicas y la historiografía contemporánea: Historia de las ideas, liberalismo e ilustración en el mundo hispánico durante la Era de las revoluciones* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2021), 49–78.
36. *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 286 (my translation). The expression Chartier uses in French is “la radicalité de l’événement” (293).
37. To give readers an idea of this issue: besides the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the Cádiz Constitution was partially applied in the Captaincy General of Guatemala, in the Viceroyalty of Peru, in a few cities in the Captaincy General of Venezuela, in a few cities in the Viceroyalty of New Granada, and in the city of Montevideo, in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate.
38. Readers interested in this historiographic debate who can read Spanish can go to a brief critical essay I wrote regarding this issue: “Hidalgo de cuerpo entero,” *Nexos*, no. 436 (April 2014), <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=19987>.
39. On this constitutional document, see *La insurgencia novohispana y la Constitución de Apatzingán*, coord. Ana Carolina Ibarra et al. (Mexico: UNAM, 2014). It should be added that other constitutional documents were also produced by the Mexican insurgents, notably the *Elementos constitucionales: Constitutional elements*, by Ignacio López Rayón, written in 1812.
40. Iturbide’s change of sides is unintelligible without the return of liberalism in Spain in 1820. Among the measures that members of the Cortes of Madrid were discussing, approving, and starting to apply were several that went against the interests of the Catholic Church, the

- army, and the landowners. Iturbide identified with these three groups. In this context, his change of heart is much less difficult to understand. It should be added, however, that another motive that weighed in his decision was the instability of Spain's political situation, an instability that was confirmed three years later when, in 1823, the Holy Alliance reinstated Fernando VII to the throne of Spain. In any case, the *consumación* of Mexico's independence (1820–1821) is another clear sample of the extent to which events in Spain played a decisive role in parts of Spanish America until the very end of the period under study. The best interpretation of this period, one that does not coincide with mine in several aspects, is Rodrigo Moreno's *La trigarancia: Fuerzas armadas en la consumación de la independencia: Nueva España, 1820–1821* (Mexico: UNAM / Fideicomiso Teixidor, 2016).
41. *Decreto Constitucional para la Libertad de la América Mexicana: Sancionado en Apatzingán el 22 de octubre de 1814* (Morelia, Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 1964), 57–58.
 42. As mentioned, this role often went hand in hand with republican principles. In my view, it is only by exclusively centering our attention on concepts such as patriotism and civic virtue that significant contrasts between liberalism and republicanism arise. These contrasts, however, do not affect the numerous institutional and constitutional aspects that both ideologies shared during the Age of Revolutions. This, among many other things, explains that some of the most important political leaders and thinkers of the Spanish American independence period can be considered liberals and republicans at the same time without any contradiction whatsoever (Bolívar, Mier, Rocafuerte, Vidaurre, and Bello are five among many other possible examples).
 43. This political and ideological revolution, as already suggested, did not have a “social revolutionary” correspondence. I will return to this issue at the end of this article. Although it is a counterfactual proposition, it may be argued that the pervasive poverty and inequality that prevail in most Latin American societies today have one of their origins in the political and social priorities of the leaders of the independence movements (with very few exceptions, of which José María Morelos in New Spain [Mexico] and José Gervasio Artigas in Banda Oriental [Uruguay] may be the most notable).
 44. On the different types of “modernities” or “modernizations” during this period in Spanish America and their contrasting tempos, see Eric Van Young, “Conclusion: Was There an Age of Revolution in Spanish America?,” in *State and Society in Spanish America during the Age of*

- Revolution*, ed. Víctor M. Uribe-Uran (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2001), 219–46.
45. On the topic of persistence in Latin America as a historiographic issue, see *Colonial Legacies: The Problem of Persistence in Latin American History*, ed. Jeremy Adelman (New York: Routledge, 1999).
 46. On this last topic, see Roberto Breña, “Tensions and Challenges of Intellectual History in Contemporary Latin America,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 16, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 89–115.
 47. I have dealt with this issue in both English and Spanish. The English version is “*Revoluciones hispánicas* and Atlantic History: A Spanish-Language Interpretation and Bibliography,” in *Age of Revolutions* (an open access, peer-reviewed academic journal), May 2021, <https://ageofrevolutions.com/2021/05/10/revoluciones-hispanicas-and-atlantic-history-a-spanish-language-historiographical-interpretation-and-bibliography/>. The Spanish version, reviewed and enlarged, is “*Revoluciones hispánicas e historia atlántica en español: Ensayo crítico-bibliográfico sobre un menosprecio lingüístico injustificable*,” *Wirapuru (Revista latinoamericana de historia de las ideas)* 4, no. 7 (2023): 1, <http://www.wirapuru.cl/images/pdf/2023/7/brena.pdf>
 48. *Amérique latine: Introduction à l'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 307 (my translation). The Spanish version is *América Latina: Introducción al Extremo-Occidente* (Mexico: FCE, 1989).

