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## ***The Wars of Independence in Spanish America as a Point of Inflection***

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Research on Latin America has generated numerous critical-juncture wannabes, and potentially too many transitions can be viewed as major points of inflection. Analysts need to focus on a smaller subset of candidates for critical-juncture status, and a valuable place to look is shocks that, in their origin, were entirely external to the region. The worldwide depression of the 1930s, the North Atlantic industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century that first lifted the demand for Latin America's commodities, and the Iberian conquest in the sixteenth century exemplify such exogenous shocks. These events

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have led to excellent work in the social sciences and the emergence of a remarkable historiography.

### **A Common Exogenous Shock, Contrasting Responses**

One exogenous shock was distinctive, however, because a single process triggered it over a relatively short period of time. In 1807, the Portuguese monarchs had fled to Brazil just ahead of the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal. In April 1808, King Charles IV and his son Ferdinand abdicated the Spanish Crown in favor of Napoleon, and by early 1810, French troops occupied nearly the entire Iberian Peninsula. Spain's peninsular and overseas subjects knew that they were living in the midst of a critical juncture. Thus, anticipating the question Lenin made famous a century later: when our world has collapsed, what is to be done? There was a range of choice for individual and collective response, but the polar alternatives were *Insurrection or Loyalty*.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike other exogenous shocks, 1808-1810 generated a vast historiography but little work in the social sciences. The work of historians on this period has been excellent; their un-

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<sup>1</sup> Domínguez 1980.

derstandable focus has been to account for the specific outcome of independence. For the social sciences, however, a more interesting challenge was to evaluate the relative effectiveness of various plausible explanations by focusing on a stark contrast: why some chose insurrection while others remained loyal to the Crown, notwithstanding the same international context.

This reframed focus deploys comparative methods to assess the outcomes. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, Spanish rule on mainland America had ended. Yet that uniformity of outcomes resulted from variation in process. South America's most powerful state, the Viceroyalty of Peru, had to be forced to be free (to borrow from Rousseau), invaded by armies from north and south. Peru's first independent presidents became traitors in their new state, defecting to Spain even as the empire was reaching its end. Cuba, southernmost Chile, and western Venezuela remained bastions of Spanish rule until the very end. Viceregal Mexico City in the north and viceregal Lima in the south remained command posts for the defense of Spanish rule, Lima more impressively so.

### **Explaining Contrasting Responses**

The historiography produced an array of potential explanations for these contrasts. These encompassed the ideas of the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions, the economic pressures from domestic circumstances and international war, the delayed effects of slow-moving imperial policies that were seeking to turn "co-kingdoms" into "colonies," thereby constraining the range of autonomy of American-born Creoles, and so forth.

To assess such varied explanations, in *Insurrection or Loyalty* I chose to study four dependencies. From those at the vortex of inter-imperial conflict, I chose Cuba, whose affairs were most often discussed by imperial authorities in Madrid; and also Chile, which, according to the record, seems never to have been discussed. I also chose New Spain (which encompassed today's Mexico), the viceroyalty that had been Spain's principal source of American revenue. If Cuba and New Spain were central, I added the non-central case of Venezuela to compare with Chile. Overall, these cases included dependencies with a range of agricultural, mining, and industrial production as well as representation of the major population groups. These four dependencies featured a range of insurrectionary and loyalist behavior. Cuban elites pledged allegiance to Spain's Bourbon King and Council and never wavered in their loyalty, even during the Napoleonic years when this required a powerful and imaginative faith. In contrast, civil war broke out in Chile, New Spain, and Venezuela; in all three, loyalist forces defeated the insurrections by the mid-1810s. Independence was not a foregone conclusion. It had to be problematized.

One task was to set aside plausible but ineffective explanations, that is, those that did not sort out the choice between insurrection and loyalty. Among these are social and economic factors. Levels of literacy, media exposure, and urbanization were too low to explain the choice of one path versus another. Spain's restrictions on international trade were often resented,

yet significant elite factions in Chile and Mexico City opposed freer trade, but they would in the end support independence; Madrid in turn accommodated the loyal Cuban elites' preference for freer trade. In material terms, Cuba did not rebel even though the value of its foreign trade had declined before 1810, and New Spain was not immune to rebellion even though the value of its exports had been increasing before 1810. Economic growth had not disrupted Chile, which did revolt, and it had disrupted Cuba, which did not.

Ideological and political factors likewise do not align with the outcomes. "Modern" intellectual ideas had spread everywhere and did not sort out the rebels from the loyalists. Dislike of Spaniards was as keen in Coro, Maracaibo, and Cuba, which did not rebel, as it was in rebellious entities. Formation of national consciousness was in evidence in Cuba and Chile but not in New Spain, thereby not sorting outcomes well. Inter-elite competition was also pervasive across types of dependencies. The empire did not collapse because it was rigid; impressive innovations had been adopted and skillful accommodation of demands, from masses as well as elites, was commonplace, including social mobility for many blacks (manumission, purchases of patents of whiteness, etc.). "Precursor" events that occurred before 1810 likewise do not explain the cases; the empire had dealt effectively with protests through repression or accommodation. Institutionalized safety valves had also been in place across the empire, for example, enabling well-off black freedmen to purchase a patent of whiteness (*gracias al sacar*) and to join the military establishment.

Two explanations seemed persuasive. First, where there were credible fears of a mass uprising, as in Coro, Maracaibo, and Cuba, Creole elites did not rebel; Coro and Maracaibo had to be compelled to join independent Venezuela. Second, where a broadly-encompassing elite political coalition had been created (Spaniards and American-born Creoles, the local government, and even wealthy black freedmen), loyalty prevailed. The secondary comparisons pointed to these same conclusions. Brazil did not experience a war of independence and its politics aligned with these explanations; it would become independent peacefully through a dynastic separation. Lima remained the empire's strongest South American bastion, featuring also broad intra-elite consensus in its loyalty and fear of triggering the upheaval that had within memory led to the Túpac Amaru rebellion.

### **Consequences**

The continuity or transformation of political order may be traced to the experience of the critical juncture, namely, what did we do when Napoleon invaded Spain? The Cuban elite remained loyal and never ruptured; for decades it sustained dazzling prosperity and shameful albeit successful slave suppression. The Chilean central valley elite, crushed by Lima yet rescued by Buenos Aires, both times remained sufficiently cohesive to lead political reconstruction and build independent South America's first successful state.

Venezuela, torn through a race war that defeated the first attempt at independence, had to permit freedmen access to

power and promise slavery's abolition to accomplish independence. Yet Bolívar also set the foundations of the Republic on a racialized bedrock, that is, political organization by nonwhites on the basis of race was prohibited; and in October 1817, Bolívar had General Manuel Piar executed for the crime of seeking to represent Venezuelans of African descent. Independent Venezuela, poor, unequal, and authoritarian, endured for the balance of the century.

New Spain (then ranging from Costa Rica to northern California and encompassing all of today's Mexico) was born again as an independent empire under Emperor Agustín de Iturbide, committed to the establishment of Roman Catholicism and the protection of the existing property regime and other elite privileges, albeit conceding formal civil equality. Iturbide had sought to paper over the inherited cleavages; he lost his Crown, Mexico lost its empire (Central America seceded quickly, Texas did so later, and the United States seized half of an already rump Mexico), and it would become the first failed state in the Americas, wracked by civil war, economic decline, and eventual French conquest in the 1860s.

Within the present framework, Peru is a case of loyalty, yet this outcome was overridden by a different set of international factors. Peru seemed ripe for independent rebellion on many accounts. Yet, it was not. Economic decline and overbearing Spaniards were insufficient to yield insurrection. The Viceroy in Lima appointed Creoles to the presidency of Cusco and the intendency of La Paz, abolished the *mita* (coerced labor by indigenous peoples) and the capitation tax on indigenous peoples, and enlisted Peruvian Creoles on the militant mission to restore imperial order in South America. The viceroyalty reconquered Chile. It required a massive invasion from the north and a massive invasion from the south to defeat Peru—the last time in the past two centuries when the Peruvian state was so competent. As for the mass of Peruvians, as late as 1824 the pro-independence armies in Peru could still not recruit enough Peruvians to replace those killed in combat, that is, to the very end, troops had to be imported from outside Peru to make Peru “free.” The shattered Peruvian viceregal state had retained the loyalty of its people. Independent Peru was born to fail, bereft of state capacities, bereft of elite loyalties through defections to the Spanish side, even when that no longer seemed a “rational” act, and bereft of mass support.

### **Patterns and Legacies**

An exogenous shock shattered Spain's American empire in 1808-1810 and compelled decision-making across the now-acephalous empire. In the entities where local Spanish and American Creole elites had reason to fear the high risk of a mass uprising by subaltern peoples (Peru, Coro, Maracaibo, Cuba), such elites remained loyal to their idea of a Spanish empire. Where Madrid had long accommodated the local Creole political and economic demands, as in Cuba, the local elites remained loyal and united. Where such loyalty-inducing factors were absent, local rivalries would escalate to major disputes; notwithstanding impressive suppression of the first wave of efforts at independence in Chile, New Spain (Mexico),

and Venezuela, recomposed coalitions brought independence across these entities by the 1820s, while the pro-independence forces from Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile invaded and defeated South America's hitherto strongest state (Peru).

The specific historical events never recurred, but the patterns established during the critical juncture (the response to the Napoleonic invasion of Spain) shaped politics and the state through the aftermath, which would last for about a half century for all, and longer for Cuba and Chile. For most of the nineteenth century, Cuba and Chile became and remained strong elite-driven competent states, one a prosperous colony, the other South America's new main military power. The two viceroyalties long headquartered in Mexico City and Lima were dismembered and dramatically weakened. Through secession and defeat in international war, Mexico City had lost half of its former empire by mid-nineteenth century, and Peru would be thrice defeated militarily by Chile in the nineteenth century. Mexico and Peru found it difficult to reconstruct competent states; the Mexican state became stronger only during that century's last quarter while the Peruvian state took even longer. That critical juncture and its aftermath decisively shaped the collective histories of these peoples.

### **References**

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